HAUNTING REALITIES
STUDIES IN AMERICAN LITERARY REALISM AND NATURALISM

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HAUNTING REALITIES

NATURALIST GOTHIC and AMERICAN REALISM

EDITED BY MONIKA ELBERT & WENDY RYDEN

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HAUNTING
REALITIES
“It has begun: a slowly gathering, ghostly darkness . . .”

This quintessentially Gothic sentiment might easily have been expressed over a century ago to describe a generation’s fears of impending modernity. But it is a statement made in 2013 by E. L. Doctorow to characterize the digital turn in the twenty-first century—what he dubbed “our virtual hell” (4). He is not alone in finding the Gothic’s enduring utility and appeal to evoke and confront the anxieties of an age. From Henry Giroux’s “zombie politics” and Wall Street’s vampires to Arundhati Roy’s *Capitalism: A Ghost Story* to the perennial popularity of horror genres in a social, economic, and environmental landscape of diminishing possibilities, Gothic tropes come readily to the fore in our current cultural crises just as they did in the late nineteenth century for American authors confounded by the horror of the real. The crises of global capital, labor, technology, and climate catastrophe confronting us today echo the crises from a century past that spawned a renewed literary reliance on the Gothic even as that discourse sought to repudiate Romantic sentimentality and legitimate itself through the scientific ethos of Naturalism. It is the paradox of that cultural moment that our volume seeks to elucidate, for indeed the crisis of progress that undergirds it is a continued, relevant concern. Then as now, Gothic strategies of representation arise concomitant with scientific discourses shaped by the current capitalist moment. Just as some in a previous century naturalized the inequities of labor by invoking survival of the fittest, so today we see the status quo explained through appeals to evolutionary psychology and social biology.

Thus our current Gothic crisis mirrors the late nineteenth century’s confrontations with the “invisible hand” haunting capitalism, the perceived horrors of mechanization, and a growing and urbanized consumer culture with
its associated fluctuations in social class, racialization, and gender. Despite Adam Smith’s ghoulish metaphor of the phantom-like hand that moves the zombified subject “to promote an end which was no part of his intention,” capitalism for Smith was soothing lifeblood (Policante 7). In the nineteenth century, Marx, by contrast, sees the vampire as the correct image to describe the problem of growth and the relation of capital to labor.² We see in the literature a preoccupation with these concerns as early as Herman Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener: A Tale of Wall Street” (1853), a proto-Naturalist work that uses Gothic rendering to defy (rather than fulfill) Romantic expectations, as Melville provides a glimpse into a nihilistic world in which options for fulfillment and meaningful existence are few and workers are described as ghoulishly mechanical, or downright spectral. Similarly, Melville’s “The Paradise of Bachelors and the Tartarus of Maids” (1855) and Rebecca Harding Davis’s Life in the Iron Mills (1861) show early images of ghostly workers who recede into the anonymous backdrop of the factory or succumb to an untimely death.

_Haunting Realities_ focuses on such incarnations of the Gothic that permeated cultural representation following the Civil War through the Progressive Era in the American Realist tradition. We define this tradition to include Naturalism, a trend that, in the inadequacy of William Dean Howells’s call for “the truthful treatment of material,” sought to depict an ultrareality, one perhaps not always so acceptable for the audience of young ladies over whose sensibilities Howells fretted as he contemplated the suitability of Realism’s subject matter.³ In following this impulse to go beyond the limitations of Howellsian Realism, these Naturalistically inclined writers frequently and ironically rely on the same Gothic wellspring as Romanticism in their attempts to disrupt the “firmly middle-class” predilections of Realism (Pizer, _Cambridge_ 7) and shake what Charles Crow calls “bourgeois complacency” to reveal “a universe of vast forces that can overwhelm and terrify the individual” (American [2009] 103). While some have seen the Gothic as politically ambiguous, supporting both progressive and conservative/reactionary ideologies (Edwards xix), the alignment of disruption with terror allows Crow to deploy the oxymoronic concept that serves as the premise for our current inquiry: Naturalist Gothic (“London’s” 123).⁴ It is an idea that Eric Sundquist identified as early as 1982 in his description of Naturalism and its “gothic intensification of detail”: “Revelling in the extraordinary, the excessive, and the grotesque in order to reveal the immutable bestiality of Man in Nature, naturalism dramatizes the loss of individuality at a physiological level by making a Calvinism without God its determining order and violent death its utopia. . . . The characters inhabit alien landscapes filled with inflated symbols, and they die not in bed, at
Situated in a context of reaction to humanism’s rationality, the Gothic features many of the attributes of extremity associated with genres such as horror, the supernatural, or the fantastic. But perhaps what persistently marks it is the appearance of the uncanny in recognition of those psychological and cultural forces that cannot be accounted for strictly and safely through rational order and that point to a comingling of fear and nostalgia for the emergent past. Much ink has been spilled over whether Gothicism and Naturalism constitute genres or modes, the former category being given particular attention from genre theorists who have seen the term used too loosely and therefore unprofitably, or whether these terms are meaningful at all. Many have argued that the Gothic can only properly be called a mode, and June Howard most recently recounts the difficulties of establishing “a stable boundary between naturalism and other genres” (92). Andrew Hebard observes that neither Frank Norris nor Jack London would have considered Naturalism a genre given their interest in “life” rather than intertextuality in the production of literature. According to Hebard, such “writers ask not, ‘What kind of literature is this?’ But rather, ‘What worldview does literature create and what does it make intelligible?’” (78). It is in this vein that we bring together in this collection the Gothic and the Naturalist, not to add yet another classificatory term for its own sake, but in order to better understand what reality certain late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century American authors perceived and, inevitably, themselves helped to create and constitute through their work.

The break from Romanticism has become the traditional means of situating the phenomenon of American Realism and thus, by extension, Naturalism, although the terms and their relations continue to be contested as Norris himself conflated romance and Romanticism and argued against their sentimental, exotic, and anachronistic associations (“Plea”), ultimately declaring that Naturalism was “but a form of romanticism after all” (“Zola,” Literary 71). Regardless, it is hard to imagine that particular “form” coming into existence without the precedent of Realism, and so it is that trajectory that we follow here. As Donald Pizer puts it, the practitioner of Realism “was to reject the romantic material and formulas of earlier fiction, as these derived from the limited beliefs and social life of their moment of origin, in favor of a realistic aesthetic which demanded that the subject matter of contemporary life be objectively depicted, no matter how ‘unliterary’ the product of the aesthetic might seem to be” (Cambridge 6, our emphasis). But it is precisely in the aestheticization of this aesthetically suspect “real”
that the Gothic inevitably finds its way in as writers confront the confining strictures of Howells’s “teacup” tragedies and the “harsh, loveless, colourless, blunt tool called Realism” that “stultifies itself” (Norris, “Plea” 214–15).

When Henry James discusses his rendering of the ghosts in his 1908 prologue to The Turn of the Screw, he points out that in order to craft a “good” and “dreadful” story, he needed to depart from the scientific depiction of apparitions in the “copious psychical record” and return to “pure romance” because “good ghosts . . . make poor subjects” (230–31) in a fiction of action.

Thus as Naturalist and proto-Naturalist writers face the failures of progress and the onslaught of capitalism’s tragedies—the economic ventures and materialist ambitions, as well as the excess and Malthusian scarcity that typify capitalism and therefore Naturalism—reality becomes a Gothic ruin inflected through Darwinian science and Spencerian philosophy that can only be rendered as horrific or ghostly in human apprehension. Indeed, the language we use here to describe the very phenomenon we are after relies on Gothic and Naturalist tropes: the inevitability of reverting to the lost language of Romantic devices. And while some horrors, such as urbanization and class struggle, are often consciously engaged, others, such as gender and race, are sometimes only obliquely, even inadvertently, revealed in this fiction. Our efforts bring us to the heart of the paradox: the ultra-Realism that impelled the Naturalistic school of American literature relied enormously on Gothic representation. While Realism strives to distinguish itself from the vacuous sentimentality and excessive feeling of the Romantic Gothic, Naturalism reinvigorates the Realist impulse through a Gothic conception that anticipates even as it forestalls the nihilism of literary Modernism. According to Eric Carl Link, Naturalism is best contextualized through Norris’s and other late nineteenth-century critics’ formulations of the romance—as Realism returned to, or inspired by, “the ‘imaginary’ (be it the fantastic, the symbolic, or the uncanny)” (Vast 37).

It is perhaps possible to say that the Gothic impulse often “saves” Naturalism from its own didactic excesses and anthropological trajectory, “the tyranny of the actual” (Gross 51), or what Keith Newlin calls, in distinguishing Naturalism from Realism, its apt alignment with “melodrama,” and returns Naturalist argument to the realm of literary art that exceeds conscious “propaganda” or specific agendas (Introduction 10). For example, Newlin’s convincing analysis of the final scene in Norris’s McTeague (1899), in which McTeague argues that to see the ending as flawed Naturalism is to miss Naturalism’s appropriate reliance on melodrama, is deficient in only one respect. Rather than a “tableau” of “stasis,” which provides for the reader “the signs, for . . . the abstractions of greed, jealousy, moral imprisonment,
and fate in a final resolution” (11), the true horror of the scene comes for the reader in the projected aftermath of the chained, rotting corpses that will eventually become the skeletons of Gothic nightmare, a vision so astonishingly dreadful as to drive away any thought of ideology even as it perhaps reinforces the moral view that Newlin identifies. Marcus Schouler’s final act may be a melodramatic gesture, but the Gothic horror that thrills the reader impels the narrative beyond pat conclusions and Naturalism’s rationalist doctrines to the realm of the abject, the uncanny, and the ineffable, what Crow refers to in another context as “awe, revulsion, and dread” (American [2009] 106). Just as the Progressive Era’s “search for order . . . failed to control fully the torrent of changes that buffeted Americans during this time” (Marten 2), so too did Naturalist experiments evaporate, perhaps happily, into the uncontrolled realm of the Gothic.

_McTeague_ provides further examples of this monstrously real in the mingling of eroticized capitalism with the grotesque detail of Trina’s amputated fingers, a consequence of McTeague’s brutish and bizarre behavior that involves biting Trina’s fingers as their marriage deteriorates, and her fetishistic insistence on continuing to paint the animal figurines that provide her an income. While the ersatz figurines (labeled as “Made in France”) crafted to delight the children of the Gilded Age and the industrial detail of a piece worker poisoned with lead expose the inauthentic and destructive nature of capitalism that consumes labor, the amputations resonate as Gothic images precisely because they cannot be contained as either a didactic illustration of the perils of modern work and commodified labor or the mere animalistic nature of McTeague but instead manifest as the development of a bizarre psychosexual dynamic best rendered through the Gothic.

The representation of perverse sexuality is further revealed in Trina’s response, both at once maternal and erotic, to her stolen hoard: she mourns her “empty bag” that is “hollow” the way “women weep over a dead baby’s shoe.” The loss of money for her is sentimentalized and feminized as in an earlier Romantic tradition, and, abandoned and childless, she seeks to fill her “empty bag” by liquidating her capital. When she withdraws her prize money so that it can no longer function as an interest-bearing investment, she violates the rules of the capitalist game in order to satisfy what has become her peculiar erotic nature: like the slumbering dragon guarding a hoard, she lies down with what is by capitalist standards “dead money,” which has been removed from circulation and fetishized, or, as Malthus would have it, “the avaricious . . . locks up his wealth in a chest and sets in motion no labour of any kind, either productive or unproductive” (Malthus, chapter 15). Norris’s “lesson” of the corrupting effect of capitalism finds expression in
the eerie image of Trina’s desire: “She entered her little room over the kindergarten, bolted the door with shaking fingers, and emptied a heavy canvas sack upon the middle of her bed. Then she opened her trunk, and taking thence the brass match-box and chamois-skin bag added their contents to the pile. Next she laid herself upon the bed and gathered the gleaming heaps of gold pieces to her with both arms, burying her face in them with long sighs of unspeakable delight” (McTeague, Signet 282–83).

Trina’s painted animals become Gothic figurines as they mirror, as commodities and uncanny manikins, the many references to animals in McTeague that so typify the Naturalist text and provide fertile ground for Naturalism’s intersection with Gothic depictions of nature’s perceived brutality. Such references are clear responses to, and reworkings of, Darwin that express a post-Romantic relationship of human beings to animals and a random, natural world. For many, Darwin’s argument against design appears to be moralized into indifference and malevolent chaos and hence Gothic images of horror as animals, and thus humans, too, become monsters in an unfeeling world of winners and losers. The science of Darwin was never completely removable from the social and political milieu of the nineteenth century, and Darwin himself “was quite aware of the entwined nature of scientific and social theory that greeted the reception of his ideas in the public realm” (Gianquitto and Fisher 3). While a natural world based on evolution’s narrative of “contingency and uncertainty” harbored for some the potential of “liberation” and “options for moving beyond entrenched institutions and doctrines that defined the Victorian era” (7), for many Naturalist writers, human kinship with other animals suggested a pessimistic turn antithetical to social progress and implied the potential for regression and atavism in a world of scarce resources.

This Gothic notion of the past intruding and determining the present human condition becomes the Naturalist doctrine of biological determinism, which portrays the inescapable, animalistic nature of people as tragic, thus returning to a Romantic posture that falls short of Modernist existential irony. From this determinist perspective, Gothic tropes involving savagery and degeneracy become apt vehicles for the expression of such cultural anxiety. In a terrain of shifting ontologies with regard to race and gender, the concern with biology and embodiment takes on particular significance here and lends itself to Gothic idiom as physical bodies become foundational representations of horror and “disability functions as the trope and embodiment of true physical difference.” Thus in Naturalist works the body becomes the site of abjection in which “fantasies of identification [of normality] are haunted by disability” (Samuels 3).
In addition to Darwin, the catastrophe of the American Civil War, with its revelation of the injured, disabled body, marks a break with Romantic tendencies in American literature and haunts the narratives of later writers with a sense of lost innocence, whether it be the question of race prejudice and the aftermath of slavery or the sobering violence and ruin of the conflict itself. Burned into the American collective consciousness through Mathew Brady's explicit photographs of killing fields and corpses and the display of maimed bodies, memory of the war casts an extended pall, and Brady’s efforts to chronicle the war in this photojournalistic way (as do Jacob Riis's later use of images of the urban poor) exemplify the fusion of Gothic horror with Naturalistic documentation. The causes and the devastation of the war lurk as an ongoing crisis of meaning in Naturalist and proto-Naturalist works that parallels Modernist alienation and despair, and thus we include in *Haunting Realities* earlier fiction that anticipates Naturalist concerns as sensational Gothicism threatens to leave the lingering Romantic tradition behind. This rings particularly true for works steeped in Gothic domestic narratives that seem no longer containable in Romantic paradigms and threaten to burst out of their enclosure much as Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s narrator threatens to escape from the wallpaper pattern that imprisons the agentive self. Furthermore, the subjectivities of authors, as is always the case in literary studies, come under consideration here, as our contributors explore the ways in which women and African American writers have expanded our evolving understanding of Gothic and Naturalist traditions. African American authors used Gothic tropes to subvert or, as Maisha Wester says, “scream back” to dominant paradigms of racialized hierarchies. Donna M. Campbell shows how female authors, historically regarded merely as regionalist or “local colorists,” were shaping the Naturalist landscape in important ways.

Although female Realists were traditionally often relegated to the camp of local colorists, they did indeed share much with the male Naturalists who were also disdained by some of the Realist writers. Julia Bader notes that female local colorists like Sarah Orne Jewett, Mary Wilkins Freeman, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman create pauses in their narratives “to suggest that an external reality hitherto objectively perceived and transparently visible can blur and dissolve, that the firm, knowable texture of a familiar world can be shaken and lost” (176). Bader even uses Gothic terminology to describe their departure from the school of Realists. Their “real” landscapes, representing stability and order, often dissolve into chaotic, frightening, and alienating landscapes: “a curious series of phantasmagoric ghost towns, unnaturally vivid bits of flora and fauna, and portentously placed form-
less shapes which reflect deracination, loneliness, and fear” (176). Curiously, Bader actually places female local colorists with contemporary male local colorists (in contradistinction to Realists, but whom we would describe as Naturalists) to show that they both share a sense of the “incomprehensible and disordered,” which she links to a “ghostly presence,” however “faint” it may be in the male writings. Donna M. Campbell has ventured even further to show how the “gender-linked oppositions between naturalism and local color” (5) put women’s local color writing at a disadvantage, though there is an overlap in the type of chaos and fragmentation both male and female Naturalist practitioners display in their fiction. Although Jeffrey Weinstock does not distinguish between Realist, Naturalist, and local color American Gothic women writers in his discussion about supernatural fiction by American women writers, he does show how “ghosts and capitalism are entwined” in their works (82). Certainly female Naturalist writers like Davis, Spofford, Stoddard, Jewett, Freeman, and Wharton enter the dialogue with male Naturalist writers about the horrifying and haunting “invisible hand” of economics and its repercussions for men and women in and out of the labor force.

At least since Teresa Goddu’s insightful analysis regarding the primacy of slavery to the American Gothic, we have understood the enormity of this legacy to the undertakings of American authors, especially in the African American tradition of “haunting back” inverted Gothic tropes of monstrosity and horror. This persistent presence of slavery and its consequences takes on added significance with regard to the Naturalist Gothic, especially given recent historical interest in the connection between capital and slavery. Previously regarded as outside and antithetical to capitalist expansion, the role of non-waged labor is reenvisioned to cast the institution of slavery as pivotal to the growth of global capitalism. The fugitive slave John Brown observed that “when the price [of cotton] rises in the English market . . . the poor slave immediately feels the effects, for they are harder driven, and the whip is kept more constantly going” (qtd in Beckert 110).

The Romantic struggle to break free of the past as depicted in Frederick Douglass’s autobiographies, for example, contrasts bitterly with Charles Chesnutt’s ontology, in which the Progressive Era falls into post-Reconstruction morass, and the present is determined by the legacy of the antebellum past. Despite slight critical attention paid to African American authors in the Naturalist movement, “few readers or writers,” argues John Dudley, “had more at stake regarding . . . issues” of free will and determinism and scientific discourses of eugenics “than did African Americans” (258–59). The African American writers discussed in Haunting Realities, W. E. B. Du Bois, Charles W. Chesnutt, Pauline Hopkins, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, “par-
ticipated,” according to Dudley, “in the creation of seminal naturalist texts that responded to immanent social and political conditions” (259).

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In “Imprisoning Genders,” the first part of this book, these ideas are at play in essays that examine the work of Elizabeth Stoddard, Charles W. Chesnutt, Elizabeth Robins, Frank Norris, and Stephen Crane. Stephen Arch, in “Seeing Gothically: Elizabeth Stoddard’s The Morgesons,” identifies Stoddard as one of a handful of female writers who, just prior to and through the Civil War, productively engaged and extended the purposes of the domestic Gothic to resist sentimentality and defy constructions of femininity as she anticipates Naturalist trends. Likewise, Wendy Ryden’s “Matrimonial Abjections: The Slave Marriage and Charles W. Chesnutt’s Legal Gothic” explores the way Chesnutt’s short fiction, in its consideration of the legal ambiguity of slave marriages, uses the Gothic to complicate notions of progress associated with Realism in relation to the domestic sphere and racialized masculinity. David Greven considers Gothic patterns in “Iterated Horrors: ‘The Monster’ and Manhood” as he analyzes Crane’s depiction of shattered black masculinity in the enigmatic story “The Monster” in the context of the Spanish–American War and the rife violence against African American men in the post-Reconstruction period. Comparing Norris’s Naturalistic “The Third Circle” and Elizabeth Robins’s white slave novel My Little Sister, Donna M. Campbell, in “The Victim as Vampire: Gothic Naturalism in the White Slave Narrative,” argues for the significance of the vampire figure that Gothically doubles as victim in Naturalist renderings of the prostitute to reveal cultural anxieties regarding white slavery and urban decay.

The next part, “Horrors of the Civil War and Its Aftermath,” emphasizes the convergence of the Gothic and emerging Naturalist tendencies in the depiction of war and its devastating consequences. This section begins with Monika Elbert’s discussion in “Domestic Gothic in the Civil War Fiction of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (Ward) and Ambrose Bierce,” in which Elbert demonstrates the parallels between Phelps’s and Bierce’s responses to the war in Gothic narratives that evince longing for the elusive stability of home and the secure past represented in the figure of a suffering woman. She argues that in the deterministic world in which Naturalism eroded the possibilities of sentimentalism, vestiges of maternal sentimentality are found in texts caught in the crossroads between the two movements. Agnieszka Sołtysik Monnet’s “‘His Face Ceased Instantly to Be a Face’: Gothicism in Stephen Crane” shows how Crane’s Naturalism is indebted
to numerous Gothic tropes, in particular the uncanny rendering of faceless humans in both “The Monster” and *The Red Badge of Courage*. She concludes that Crane’s fiction is ultimately more complicit with the push for a more militarized America at the turn of the century than has been hitherto acknowledged. In “Unmasking the Lynching Subject: Thomas Nelson Page, Paul Laurence Dunbar, and the Specters of American Race,” Steve Marsden examines the Gothic in Plantation Tradition authors through Dunbar’s subversive reworking of Page’s Naturalist racial mythologizing in Dunbar’s “Lynching of Jube Benson.”

Part III, “Wicked Money, Haunted Objects,” focuses on Naturalism’s reliance on the Gothic to expose the effects of capitalism and materialism. In “Dangerous Houses in the Uncanny Tales of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary E. Wilkins,” Dara Downey explores how the haunted house motif is at work in late nineteenth-century women’s writing: the inhabitants are compelled to abandon their homes and possessions—or worse, themselves become victims of the economic forces assailing them. A close engagement with the material and social structures that determine the terrors narrated in ghost stories by Gilman and Wilkins (Freeman) is central to an understanding of the Naturalist underpinnings of these works. In “Haunted Economies: Race, Retribution, and Money in Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* and W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece*,” Christine A. Wooley explores the connection between the economic lives of African Americans at the turn of the twentieth century and the past exploitations that in part determine those lives, focusing particularly on how money moves from white to black individuals in the work of Hopkins and Du Bois. Patricia Ludecke, in “Housing Crisis and Gothic Gambling in Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier*,” considers the idea of the home in Naturalist ruin in Dreiser’s depiction of displacement as a Gothic rupturing of the reasoned self and its relationship to the unpredictability of the market.

Part IV, “Paranormal Longings and Warnings,” elucidates the paradox of a scientific Naturalism fascinated by the occult and other Gothic structures. Dennis Berthold explores the significance of this in “The Haunted Narrators of Clovernook: Alice Cary’s Village Gothic.” He argues that the Gothicism of Cary’s regional Realism is best understood through Freud’s concept of the unheimlich and that in Cary’s work, numerous Gothic motifs and conventions simultaneously advance Realism and the uncanny. Lisa A. Long’s contribution, “The Ghosts of Medical and Domestic Violence in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s *The Gates Between*,” examines the Naturalist force of patriarchal medical authority and allies it with abusive husbands. Daniel Mrozowski’s “The Spirit of Revolt: Hamlin Garland’s Paranormal Writing” explores Garland’s populist ethics as they emerged out of his paranormal re-
search with mediums and supernatural phenomena and how this methodology helped Garland pose related questions about authenticity, documentation, class anxiety, and gender economy through representations of both the lives of Midwest farmers and the careers of California spirit mediums.


It is fitting that the book concludes with a discussion of Wharton because “although usually considered a feminist realist writer, Wharton and her oeuvre do not rest comfortably in those bounds” (Haytock 1). Likewise, many of the authors’ works under study in Haunting Realities resist easy classification. In this volume, our purpose is twofold: we seek to reexamine and reinvigorate our understandings of those authors and those works traditionally categorized under Realism and Naturalism through an attention to the Gothic vision in this literature and its departure from Romantic sentimentality. We also seek to expand the reach of the Naturalist Gothic to works hitherto not so regarded in order to connect these authors to the gathering momentum of this impulse that characterized the latter part of the nineteenth century. In doing so, we hope to provide fresh insights into
both the literature and the cultural moment that paved the path to Modernism, but we also inevitably begin to raise questions about the Gothic mode and American Naturalism itself, an aesthetic phenomenon as distrustful of the past as of its present and whose literature is as equally difficult to pigeonhole. Mark Twain’s own philosophical growth from *The Gilded Age* (1873) to *The Mysterious Stranger* (1916, published posthumously) parallels the movement of the Naturalist Gothic toward Modernist Gothic, in which there is a more introverted sense of doom. In the latter work, Twain suggests that the solipsism of the demonic mysterious stranger, with no sense of connection, is a Modernist type of hell. The horrors of the Gilded Age business ethic are finally not as frightening or all-encompassing as the threat of the godless inscrutable and alienated self within all of humanity.

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Editors’ Note on the Cover

This book’s cover design features a close-up of the facade of the Alwyn Court building at the corner of Fifty-Eighth Street and Seventh Avenue in New York, which was opened in 1910. The early history of the Alwyn Court building typifies the boom-and-bust cycle that so many Naturalist writers chronicled in their depictions of capitalism during this era. Alwyn Ball Jr., taking advantage of a real estate boom and renewed interest in co-ops for the elite, developed the building, designed by Harde and Short as a luxury residence featuring spacious apartments, such as a duplex unit boasting as many as thirty-two rooms. While praised at the time for its craftsmanship and charm, the elaborate Gothic facade was nonetheless invidiously compared to something “made by a pastry cook” (qtd in Gray). Residents included Jacob Wertheim, president of United Cigar Stores, and Frederick Steinway, member of the Steinway piano family. Shortly after its completion, Alwyn Court was the site of a spectacular fire, lighting up the quarter and demonstrating the inadequacy of the structure’s fire protection. Repairs were made and the building was occupied, but by the 1930s, Seventh Avenue was no longer a fashionable neighborhood, and by 1937, the building was empty. It was foreclosed on the following year and eventually turned into a seventy-five unit building from the original twenty-four (Gray). The Gothic dragon-like detail pictured is a crowned salamander (emblem of King François I of France) and was part of the original facade. (New York Architecture). The building inspired the setting for Ira Levin’s 1967 horror novel *Rosemary’s Baby* (Wade).
Notes


2. See Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, chap. 10 (342). For a discussion of earlier linkages of vampires with capital, see Marilyn Michaud: Voltaire “forges a relationship between vampires and money speculators: the corrupt business class sucks the life blood in pursuit of its own aristocratic pretensions” (63).


4. In this essay, Crow uses the term “Gothic Naturalism” (123). Christophe Den Tandt uses the term “naturalist gothic” in his extensive discussion of what he terms Naturalist authors’ representation of the “urban sublime” (9). Also, Link uses the same term in 2004 (*Våst*). Davis Gross refers to “gothic naturalism,” what he defines as “a naturalism of uncertainty and ambiguity instead of determinism, a gothic with its roots in the real” (51).

5. Rather than an extension of Realism, Naturalism for Link is best understood as part of the new romance of the late nineteenth century. He discusses at length the history of criticism relating and distinguishing the terms “romance,” “romantic,” “novel,” and “realism” and observes that in late nineteenth-century criticism, there “is the attempt to integrate into the novel/romance distinction the tensions arising from the realism/romanticism debate that heated up after the Civil War” (*Våst* 34).

6. Newlin’s description resonates with Sundquist’s notion that Naturalism engages allegory: “The ease with which naturalism verges upon parody, especially in Crane and Norris, thus results in part from a Gothic intensification of detail that approaches the allegorical without finding release into or through it” (13).

7. See Marten: “Commercially made toys, books, and magazines published for children and youth filled the nurseries and bedrooms” (7).
I

Imprisoning Genders
I
Seeing Gothically

Elizabeth Stoddard’s *The Morgesons*

*Stephen Arch*

In 1865 a young Henry James wrote a negative review of Elizabeth Stoddard’s second novel, *Two Men*, for the *North American Review*. The editors chose not to publish James’s review, even though they did publish six other reviews by him that year. Perhaps they did not agree with James’s assessment; despite the relatively poor sales of her first two novels, Stoddard had her defenders among the literary elite. James, however, was unsparing in his criticism of Stoddard’s artistry, and he was particularly savage in his estimation of her first novel, *The Morgesons* (1862). James gave it minimal praise, admitting that Stoddard’s sketches of “seaside scenery” in that novel were well done. He acknowledged that Stoddard could induce a sense of dreaming in the reader but reported that those dreams were all unfortunately “disagreeable.” *The Morgesons* “was a thoroughly bad novel,” he wrote. It “possessed not even the slightest mechanical coherency. It was a long tedious record of incoherent dialogue between persons irresponsible in their sayings and doings even to the verge of insanity. Of narrative, of exposition, of statement, there was not a page in the book. . . . She had perhaps wished us to study [her characters] exclusively in their utterances, as we study the characters of a play” (270). In a comment that might seem ironic to readers of James’s later work, he concluded the review by stating that “Mrs. Stoddard’s notion is to get all the work done by the reader while she amuses herself in talking what we feel bound to call nonsense” (273).

Though I think James’s overall assessment is entirely mistaken, his criticisms are nevertheless insightful. Stoddard’s first novel is short on exposition and long on elliptical dialogue between persons who do not understand each other. Stoddard *does* demand that readers do a lot of work. She sees
her characters like the characters in a play, not the melodrama of the ante-
bellum stage but the stage Realism of Ibsen, a nearly exact contemporary
of hers. In effect, James understood what Stoddard was doing in The Morge-
sons, but he could not comprehend it. In this chapter, I wish to reframe the
kinds of insights that James articulated through the lens of Naturalism and
in particular through several themes also taken up by Ibsen, including the
powerful and repressive hold of culture upon human behavior, the disinte-
gration of the family, and changing conceptions of women/femininity.

One particular mistake James made was to attribute the “mechanical” in-
coherence of The Morgesons to the author’s lack of artistry. He read the nar-
rative’s ellipticism, sparseness of detail, and abrupt shifts in focus as symp-
toms of the author’s poor execution rather than as the strategic choices of
a protagonist/narrator constrained by gender expectations and traditional
narrative strategies. He is not alone in equating the author and the nar-
rator. For example, in a more positive light, Jessica Feldman argues that
Stoddard’s prose tracks by analogy the author’s own position and journey
as a writer. In effect, Feldman reads the novel as Stoddard’s autobiography.
In contrast, my view is that we should think of Cassandra as the writer/
narrator of her experiences and thus of the formal problems that she might
face in trying to comprehend those experiences. In this way we can con-
sider the logic of a first-person narrator who is writing her story for “us” in
something of a confessional mode, but doing so as a woman who can see
the world only through the lenses available to her and as a woman writer
who can only articulate those experiences through narrative devices that
may not be entirely accommodating to those experiences.

In my extended reading of the novel, the Gothic plays an important
role precisely because, Stoddard tells us, it was one of the narrative devices
available to nineteenth-century women like Cassandra Morgeson to both
imagine and write about experiences. Emily Dickinson, another of Stod-
dard’s contemporaries, also sometimes imagines her protagonists as female
characters for whom the Gothic is a means of comprehending a stifling
or constricting reality.1 Memory for the narrator in Dickinson’s #1234 is a
house with a garret (“For Refuse and the Mouse”) and a deep, dark cellar
into which you hope you are not pursued. In #1529, the narrator imagines
her fiancé as an “eye” that “Where e’er I ply Is pushing close behind,” like
the male villain pursuing a heroine through the haunted spaces of a house.
Her “I do” in the first line of that poem (“All that I do”) ironically recog-
nizes that there is no “Port” in marriage where she can hide nor “flight” she
can take to escape his “enamored mind.” Very much like Dickinson, how-
ever, Stoddard understands that the Gothic cannot ultimately be a freeing
strategy for a protagonist. As the lesson of Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The
Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892) would later demonstrate, to inhabit the Gothic entirely is perhaps to disappear into its darkness. For Stoddard and Dickin-
son, the female Gothic is an effective strategy for negotiating reality, but to be successful within prevailing norms the narrator must also write beyond the Gothic. For Stoddard, this means creating a narrator who takes posses-
sion of the house, reconstructs the family, and makes the family house hers; and who narrates this adventure in a voice that is hers, one that will nec-
essarily sound less familiar to those accustomed both to the Realist novel and to the Gothic mode.

The short opening chapter of the novel provides remarkable insight into the narrator. The chapter begins not with the I/eye of autobiography, but with an external view of Cassandr a: “‘That child,’ said my Aunt Mercy, looking at me with indigo-colored eyes, ‘is possessed’” (5). Immediately, Cassandr a then shifts the point of view to herself, but this shifting point of view, and especially Cassandr a’s ability/concern to “see” herself from another’s point of view, establishes two fundamental features of the novel: from a young age, Cassandr a is attuned to how others perceive her; and her narration is marked by sudden shifts of point of view, tone, style, and focus, a style often described as “elliptical.”

When her aunt says this, the ten-year-old Cassandr a is climbing a chest of drawers in order to reach a book about polar explorations. The older Cassandr a repeatedly uses books and narratives to mark her development; this particular book indicates that at ten she already aspires to be a climber and explorer. While her own explorations will eventually be bounded by gendered domestic spaces that contain chests of drawers, bookshelves, and fences, within those confines she continually provokes startled reactions from the people around her: at the end of this scene, her aunt gives “a shriek” when she sees Cassandr a climbing a gatepost. Cassandr a’s mother has use only for religious books, like Richard Baxter’s The Saints Everlasting Rest (1650), and she asks Cassandr a in this opening scene why she wastes her “time on unprofitable stories.” Cassandr a responds by saying that she hates all “good stories” for children, although one “good story,” Hannah More’s The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain (1792), made her “hungry to read about the roasted potatoes the shepherd had for breakfast and supper” (6). Her mother reads for the moral or the truth behind a story, not for aesthetics or for plea-

ure. Cassandr a reads for sensual and visceral delight. She dislikes “profit-
able” stories precisely because their message is didactic; she likes (part of) More’s story because it is enjoyable, because it provokes in her a hunger. It
is good but not necessarily good for her, or at least “good” in the way the author and her mother intended.

On her way out of the room, Cassandra is reprimanded by her aunt for a blithe comment she made about a sacred hymn. She covers her ears defiantly, and the older narrator then startles readers by pulling us out of the deep well of time into the narrative present, a temporal shock when, for the first time in the novel, we realize that the narrator herself, like the aunt in the opening sentence, is viewing these events from outside young Cassandra’s point of view: “I put my hands over my ears, and looked defiantly round the room. Its walls are no longer standing, and the hands of its builders have crumbled to dust. Some mental accident impressed this picture on the purblind memory of childhood” (6). Elliptically, the narrator then immediately returns us to the scene itself, recounting her desire “to escape the oppressive atmosphere of [that] room.” She bounds away, headed for the outdoors and stopping only to ask her great-grandfather’s wife to show her a picture of Ruth and Boaz in the family Bible. “Did Ruth love Boaz dreadfully much?” she whispers, but her great-grandfather sends her away (7).

Cassandra appreciates the story of Ruth and Boaz. Whatever biblical truth or moral there is to Ruth’s story, the basic narrative of exile, love, and fidelity seems to touch her, a young girl with few examples in life or in books about the power of love. To Cassandra, the story of Ruth and Boaz is a good story, as opposed to Hannah More’s didactic tale. More’s story is about a frugal, honest shepherd who lives in a tiny hovel with his wife and eight children. He is content with the lot God gave him, despite and perhaps because of his lack of possessions and creature comforts. More’s story is allegorical; its meaning is symbolic and spiritual. In contrast, the story of Ruth and Boaz presents a different kind of family, one that even at the age of ten Cassandra implicitly recognizes as different: Ruth leaves her own people (the Moabites) to accept the God of the Israelites; after the death of her first husband, Ruth leaves her birth family to cling to Naomi, her mother-in-law. Later, at the instigation of Naomi, Ruth then marries Boaz after they overcome the obstacle of another relative having a stronger claim to marrying her. When Cassandra asks whether Ruth loved Boaz, then, she is looking for the aesthetic, felt experience that is the kernel of a story that is good, perhaps the romance, perhaps the friendship of two female relatives, perhaps the disintegration and reconstitution of family. In the contrast between these two stories, Cassandra points to two options: in the shepherd’s story, a religious, happy, and husband-dominated family content with a life of denial; in the Book of Ruth, an unusual, political, and woman-centered family determined to succeed. The first is a fantasy belied by every marriage Cassandra encounters: her parents’, Charles and Alice’s,
the Somers’s, Ben and Veronica’s. The second, however, approximates the family that Cassandra assembles at the end of her story, after she learns to possess herself and soften her satiric stance toward the world around her.

This opening chapter is a remarkably compact and revealing tableau. In it, Cassandra the writer establishes herself as able and willing to shift temporal perspectives and subject positions, elements of the elliptical or epigrammatic style that defines her voice. She identifies domestic space, figurative limits, gender constraints, and inherited religious conventions as the boundaries of her world, demonstrating how the repressive circle of female domestic space works to confine her. And she foreshadows her struggle to find herself in stories, the “good” ones of her religious inheritance containing no lived, felt experience and offering no clear path to achieve her desire to escape boundaries in order to “realize” liberty (248).

Cassandra structures her autobiography around three trips: during the first, to visit her maternal grandfather, she confronts a powerful male figure of her mother’s and her culture’s past; during the second, to visit her attractive male cousin, she confronts a figure of prohibited sexual desire; during the third, to visit her friend Ben Somers, she confronts a powerful female figure who threatens to keep her from the eligible man she desires to marry. Each trip is urged and planned by someone else, ostensibly for Cassandra’s good, and each trip sadistically subjects her to physical, mental, and emotional suffering. The three visits hint that her narrative is really an occluded fairy tale, an idea that Cassandra calls attention to when she recounts a conversation with Ben about their favorite fairy stories, focusing on Bluebeard (184).

In chapters 7–10, Cassandra is sent by her mother to live for one year in her childhood home in Barmouth, in order that Cassandra might “learn some of the lessons [her mother] had been taught” (27). Her grandfather’s house is constructed crazily: “The house had many rooms, all more or less dark and irregularly shaped. The construction of the chambers was involved, I could not get out of one without going into another. Some of the ceilings slanted suddenly, and some so gradually that where I could stand erect, and where I must stoop, I never remembered, until my head was unpleasantly grazed” (29). These are features that Shirley Jackson later employed to much greater effect in another domestic fiction, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959): the house is at odds with this inhabitant, its spaces irregular and surprising, its effect disorienting. In the cellar, Cassandra discovers that the house is built on a “great granite bed,” “smooth and round, like the bald head of some old Titan” (32). Her grandfather is that Titan, “aboriginal in char-
acter, not to be moved by antecedent or changed by innovation—a Puritan, without gentleness or tenderness” (28). Like Puritanism itself by that time (the 1830s), the house is “not unpicturesque” from the outside, but its interiors are “dark and irregular,” the foundation hidden, solid, featureless, fearsome. Inside the house, her grandfather and aunt “repress” each other. Her aunt wears a “mask before her father”; her grandfather does not permit play, demonstrations of emotion, or thought. When Cassandra one day notices “beautiful pigeons” roosting on the roof, her grandfather promptly shoots them. “‘Why did you ask him not to shoot the pigeons?’ said Aunt Mercy. ‘If you had said nothing, he would not have done it’” (44).

What Cassandra learns in this stifling, cruel atmosphere is how her mother had been “trampled upon” (31). She ponders in these chapters the idea that chamomile purportedly grows faster for being trampled upon, but in fact these scenes in Barmouth demonstrate to her that the Puritan past simply crushed her mother. She was at the mercy of social forces too large to comprehend and her only “escape” was into a marriage that trampled her further. Though Cassandra is only eleven, she gains a glimpse into her parents’ buried lives. At school, for example, some girls allude to rumors that her mother “was in love, poor thing” (40), before she married Cassandra’s father. Cassandra had earlier referred to her parents’ contested marriage, obliquely assigning the family’s resistance to her mother’s lack of connections. But if she hints here that her mother may have fallen in love with the “wrong” man, only to be “saved” by a hasty marriage to Cassandra’s father, she also discovers at the same time that her father has a separate life from his family. He takes Cassandra on a business trip to a nearby town and leaves her briefly with a woman at an inn who shares an “unwarrantable familiarity” with him. Strangely, and suggestively, the woman “‘never knew that he had a daughter,’” or any children. While Cassandra is waiting for her father, this woman gives her a Gothic novel to read: “‘There is a horrid monk in it’; but she gave it to me. . . . I devoured its pages, and . . . forgot my own wants and woes” (39).

Perhaps because of that book, Cassandra reconstructs her year with her grandfather as a mildly Gothic tale: she is confined in a dark and repressive space; she is emotionally abused; secrets are hinted at but never fully revealed. Her time in Barmouth revolves around figures of freedom being curtailed: clipping a young girl’s wings (38); keeping provocative things “cut off, and kept out of sight” (31); crushing, trampling, and silencing. Cassandra reads the environment in Barmouth as a Gothic space, not unpicturesque from the outside but stifling and sadistic on the inside. The pigeons are shot. The prayers are painfully long. Her grandfather “was sociable to those who visited the house, but never with those abiding in his family” (43). There
is, of course, something sadistic in her own mother’s wish that Cassandra should relive these experiences: she knows in advance that Cassandra will be subjected to pain and unhappiness.

For that reason alone, perhaps, Cassandra is compelled to extract a meaning from the year-long episode, though it is hardly the pithy moral of didactic stories like More’s. She asserts that her life would not be “conducted on Nature’s plan, who shows us the beautiful, while she conceals the interior” (50). Personifying Nature, she grants it a powerful agency that dictates the behavior of most characters she encounters. Nature “hides from us her skeletons,” she says (45). We sometimes have to remind ourselves when reading *The Morgesons* that Cassandra is the narrator, writing her story long after these early events have taken place. The world she describes is always constructed in and through language, and its spare discursive qualities sometimes lull us into thinking that the narrator is omniscient. When she says, “We do not see the roots of [Nature’s] roses, and she hides from us her skeletons,” she is in fact telling us that she herself sees and experiences what not everyone sees: the hidden and the buried. Her grandfather is moved by hereditary and social forces he does not understand; Charles is moved by sexual and sensual desires he cannot fully understand. But Cassandra does see beyond the beautiful and into those deeper forces, and she does so by seeing Gothically. After that particular comment about nature, she then describes a young woman whom her grandfather (a tailor) hires and upon whom “his eye had no disturbing effect” (45). The man who repressed his daughters and who disturbed and tormented his granddaughter made no impression on this woman. Obliquely, Cassandra registers her understanding that if her grandfather’s house is a Gothic interior and he is a “Titan” who must be overthrown, then that construction belongs to her. It is the way she comprehends.

The Gothic in this sense is a mode of cognition that Cassandra uses to negotiate reality. Her sister Veronica, as critics have ably expounded, negotiates reality through illness, seclusion, and masochism. The young woman hired by her grandfather negotiates reality through blithe, upbeat optimism. Cassandra reports that that young woman soon married a poor young minister, moved west to Ohio, and returned “ten years afterward, a gaunt, hollow-eyed woman, of forbidding manners, and an implacable faith in no rewards or punishments this side of the grave” (46). In a novel filled with reflections on how women negotiated the repression and restrictions of mid-nineteenth-century America, Cassandra’s strategy is the most successful, both because the Gothic in some of its forms offers the female victim some agency and because through it Cassandra is able eventually to reconstruct her house with enough light and openness to grow. She understands that
the Gothic is not true; it is merely a way of negotiating a social world that has little or no regard for her as an individual.

Figuring her repetition of her mother’s childhood experiences in mildly Gothic terms, Cassandra is thus able to accommodate unsettling hints about her mother and her father. With a greater threat in the middle of the novel, however, she figures events more persistently and darkly through a Gothic lens. The deep mutual attraction between her and her cousin Charles, who is older and married, severely threatens her culture’s notions of propriety, and thus it is no surprise that the entire eight-chapter sequence up to and including Charles’s funeral is imagined as a series of Gothicized night scenes: for example, Cassandra reading Byron all night after she arrives (chapter 14), Cassandra going with Charles on a dark night to resolve an employee’s complaint at Charles’s factory (chapter 16), and Charles entering Cassandra’s room in the middle of the night (chapter 18). Early in their acquaintance, Cassandra remarks that looking at Charles’s face “made [her] shiver” with desire and fear (69). No wonder she always imagines/remembers him in the dark.

The climax of this Gothic sequence occurs when Charles (possibly) enters her room in the middle of the night. Prompted by too much coffee, or perhaps by Charles’s comment that she “is never tempted, what she does, she does because she will,” Cassandra enters her room one night with a “nervous foreboding” (99). Twice during the night she lights a candle, and each time she looks under the bed. Later, when she wakes in the darkness, she feels a breath pass over her face; she reaches out in the dark to try to touch the ghostly presence. On waking in the morning, she finds her handkerchief on the floor with a dusty footprint on it. She learns that Charles never went to bed. Cassandra may have fantasized the entire episode; or Charles may have spied on her, like Porphyro in Keats’s poem “The Eve of St. Agnes,” but without touching or waking her. She does not know, and neither do we.

Torn by her desire for Charles and by the dual prohibition of incest and adultery, Cassandra uses the Gothic to comprehend this tension until the point at which she can will herself to a decision. The entire sequence involving Charles is prefaced by her comment that she now had a conscience: “When I felt an emotion without seeing the shadow of its edge turning toward me, I discovered my conscience, which hitherto had only been described to me” (74). This complicated figure suggests that for Cassandra conscience is the ability to see emotions and feelings “objectively”; looking at them, they do not disappear into shadow or darkness, but remain visible for inspection. Charles is correct to say that technically Cassandra is never tempted: after the visit to her grandfather in Barmouth, she sees clearly and
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will only choose with full knowledge what she wants. When she indicates to him that she will not choose him, he endangers them both in the reckless carriage ride.

There is, as it turns out, nothing under her bed that night, and her candle cannot illuminate the man in the shadows or the man in her dreams. But seeing Gothically permits Cassandra to interpret the “intangible, silent, magnetic feeling” (74) that existed between her and Charles. Despite the threats of incest and adultery, there is little shame in Cassandra’s account, in part because the Gothic is one way she can drain the incident of guilt: imagining herself as a female Gothic heroine, she is at the mercy of fate. “When in [Charles’s] presence,” she writes, “I moved as if under a pivot” (74). Magnetism, mechanical power (“pivots”), and diabolism are all figures through which Cassandra can safely express her desire for the threatening, dangerous male figure. This entire sequence involving Charles begins with an apparent exaggeration: Cassandra says that on her first night at Charles’s house she read Don Juan straight “through, and began Childe Harold.” When her candle finally sputtered out, she “struck out [her] hands through the palpable darkness” to find the bed (70). This reading of Byron and her reaching out in the darkness prefigures the later scene, when she reaches out to touch her own real or imagined Byronic hero. Cassandra understands in this sense that she needs a narrative lens to account for her and Charles’s feelings. They are wrong; the Gothic can explain them. The “sooner I cured myself of my vice the better,” she writes just before Charles dies (112). Part of the process of this “cure” is precisely to read Charles as a Gothic figure, perhaps Rochester, perhaps the “horrid monk” Ambrosio, until she can manage her feelings and reject his advances. When she finally manages to assert her independence from him, she feels an immediate release: “That night I ceased to dream of him” (115).

Cassandra’s third trip is to visit her friend Ben Somers, whose old New England family in Belem is distantly and obscurely related to the Morgesons. The family is controlled by the mother, an aristocratic and domineering woman who makes Cassandra’s “flesh creep” (168) the first time she meets her. Ben’s father married her “for her money, [and thus] married his master, and was endowed only with the privilege of settling her taxes” (169). A figure of emasculation, he typically remains in his room with gout. One daughter, Adelaide, is brilliant but distant and cruel; two older sons, Ben and Desmond, are alcoholics. The family inheritance from their grandfather is to “be divided among them when the youngest son should arrive at the age of twenty-one,” a fact complicated by the recent birth of another brother, delaying the distribution of wealth. Desmond and yet another (unnamed) older brother meanwhile “made havoc with the income” from the
investments. The “great fortunes of Belem are divided; the race of millionaires is decaying” (174), Adelaide tells Cassandra, but the Somers estate is still intact because the mother wills it. Julia Sterne notes that “Mrs. Somers’s reproductive powers quite literally blight the psychological independence and economic autonomy of Ben and Desmond, neither of whom has been educated for professions” (119). Adelaide, we learn proleptically, marries an Englishman and never returns to Belem. The father is bed-ridden. The baby is apparently unnamed. The sons drink and wander aimlessly through life.

Cassandra notes during her first tea at the house that Mrs. Somers serves her from a “spider-shaped” tea set, a small detail that suggests the mother’s dark power. The house contains an “oppressive” atmosphere (165), horrible and warped. The facade is uncheerful and “gloomy” (162); the inside is disturbing if not terrifying. Twice during her visit, Cassandra confronts Mrs. Somers in this Gothic space, and both confrontations are figured as battles between light and darkness, openness and secrecy. In the first scene, Cassandra returns from a party at which, we soon learn, she fell in love with Desmond. Desiring to look at herself in a mirror, she creeps downstairs to the parlor looking for a fire at which she can light a candle. Desmond is in front of the fire, but in a moment his mother also enters the room and speaks “harshly” in questioning Cassandra’s right to be in the darkened room. Twice in this desperate scene, Cassandra refers to her as an animal: “she snapped [at Cassandra’s touch] like a wolf” (186). Mrs. Somers then makes “an insulting gesture,” and Cassandra in turn channels her anger into a sardonic comment about Mrs. Somers’s lack of “womanly impulses,” which puts Desmond in the position of trying to keep the two women apart. He tells his mother to leave; she says no. Cassandra is caught between two characters who seem “exactly alike.” Hoping to have looked at herself in the mirror, Cassandra instead finds her lover looking at “himself” in a kind of mirror, and seeing a version of himself that is repressive and destructive.

A week later Cassandra is on the verge of departing when she is confronted by Mrs. Somers in her bedroom. Again the scene is lit by candles. In one of the elliptical exchanges that mark Cassandra’s style, the short scene begins:

Out of breath, she began haughtily:
“What do you mean?”
A lethargic feeling crept over me; my thoughts wandered; I never spoke nor stirred till she pulled my sleeve violently.
“If you touch me it will rouse me. Did a child of yours ever inflict a blow upon you?” (193)
They argue briefly, trading short verbal punches. When the mother says that Desmond “plays with toys” like her, Cassandra jabs back that “he is [then] hereditarily cruel.” Cassandra uses her scars from the carriage accident with Charles as a weapon: “I am already scarred, you see.” She is not afraid of a struggle. The mother responds with words so horrid that Cassandra “will not repeat” them. They are interrupted by Ben who is appalled by the scene but not surprised: you may call “me cruel for subjecting you to these ordeals,” he tells Cassandra, but I “knew how it would be with mother” (194).

Ben had asked Cassandra to visit his family home in the hope that she “might understand the results of [his] associations” (180), that is, that she might understand why he and his siblings are rootless, alcoholic, and stunted. Their brief, almost cryptic reference to Bluebeard, mentioned earlier, is suggestive of how Cassandra constructs these scenes, writing stories that are good (not necessarily good for you) to make sense of her experiences. In the Gothic space of the Somers ancient house, the mother wields the tyrannical power of Bluebeard, “murdering” her own husband and holding her children hostage. She promises retribution for the transgressive woman who goes against her wishes and opens the wrong door. Cassandra, unlike Bluebeard’s wife, has no Sister Anne or brothers who can help her. She has to confront him herself. However, while she cannot cut off Bluebeard’s head and end his reign, she is able to stand up to him and eventually to free at least one of the sons from the mother’s power. Like Ruth, Desmond will leave his family to cling to another.4

Cassandra uses the Gothic as a strategy for making sense of experience. She discovers the terror of the familiar in spaces she constructs as Gothic; she investigates her emerging sexuality in them; she is tempted by a hero-villain (Charles) who is cruel and sadistic; she is challenged by a powerful witch who, like Bluebeard, snuffs the life out of her victims. But while the Gothic is the kind of story that enables the younger Cassandra to forget her “wants and woes,” and a narrative mode through which the older writer can structure her experiences, it does not itself offer her a positive model of female independence within domestic space. For that, Cassandra turns to her friend, Helen Perkins.

Helen is Cassandra’s only close female confidant. They meet in school while Cassandra is living in Charles Morgeson’s home. Her father is a Greek professor, and she is engaged to a sailor. One of the most remarkable things about her is that she has a tattoo. When she reveals it to Cassandra, she does
so in a scene in which she, Ben Somers, and Cassandra are being “confidential,” that is, sharing secrets. Because Cassandra is not interested in Ben, she feels no shyness or agitation; she is not marketing herself as a possible wife and so she can speak frankly. Her frankness about her past then leads Helen to reveal that she is tattooed with “a bracelet, printed in ink on her arm, with the initials, ‘L. N.’ Those of her cousin, she said; he was a sailor, and some time, she supposed, they would marry” (97).

Jennifer Putzi writes insightfully about the tattooed (female) body in *The Morgenses*. She argues that Helen’s tattoo marks and reveals the corporeal body, working against the deeply held belief in and after the Victorian period that women are spiritual beings whose physical nature needed to be hidden. Even Cassandra at first responds to Helen’s revelation with shock: “How could you consent to have your arm so defaced”? Yet when Ben adds the idea that “we may all be tattooed” (97), Cassandra agrees, and she eventually chooses (Putzi argues) to read her own scars from the carriage accident with Charles as a “tattoo”: a story inscribed on the body about her own experiences, signaling the shocking visual reminder of a past sexual experience. Putzi weaves the theme of tattooing into the larger argument that critics have made since the beginning of the Stoddard revival: Cassandra is one of the few female characters in nineteenth-century American literature whose sexuality is affirmed by the narrative (see Weir and Harris).

Yet it is curious that Helen’s casually mentioned fiancé/husband never appears in the narrative. During a later visit to the Morgenses in Surrey, Helen’s “enlivening gayety” does much to lighten the gloom and oppressiveness of Cassandra’s family home, and near the end of her visit she and Cassandra share a revelatory exchange in which Helen, unlike Ben earlier, urges her not to reveal too much to her, Cassandra’s best friend: “If we keep on we may tell secrets that had better not be revealed.” Cassandra’s own “proclivities were for speaking what [she] felt” (151), but Helen keeps secrets best not revealed to others. Even when Helen visits to attend Veronica’s wedding, she brings her baby but no husband. Is there a secret there that is better not revealed?

Helen’s tattoo is “a bracelet, printed in ink on her arm, with the initials ‘L. N.’” Ostensibly it represents the name of her fiancé and cousin, who remains otherwise unnamed. However, when pronounced aloud, “L. N.” also represents Helen’s own name. The occluded sign of Helen’s name is written on her skin. In this sense, her tattoo inscribes not simply her experience and history, but also her very identity, her “name.” Helen’s tattoo operates on three levels: in deference to propriety, it is hidden from the public underneath her clothing; it is revealed and “explained” to very close friends; and its deepest, truest meaning is cleverly withheld from even those friends,
accessible only to her as a private, secret, and secretive self. Helen's deepest self is a secret withheld from everyone; it is the image in the mirror that Cassandra was seeking during her confrontation with Mrs. Somers. We infer from Helen's tattoo not a specific trait or fact (unwed mother, incestuous relationship with her father or cousin), but only the dark, private space of the self, a Gothic interior of secrets that is withheld from the public, from acquaintances, and even from one's best friends. When Ben returns in chapter 26, Cassandra remarks to him that she is “tattooed still,” and immediately describes herself as others see her, as she had done in the first line of the novel: my “air impressed with a sense of mystery . . . [and] both [Ben and Veronica] would have annihilated my personality if possible, for the sake of comprehending me” (156). Others cannot understand her. Previously legible, she now keeps hidden from others the deepest parts of her self.

Cassandra comes to possess a self, in other words, that is too deeply private to be shared with anyone. Before she learns to veil her deepest self, she “concealed nothing; the desires and emotions which are usually kept as a private fund I displayed and exhausted. My audacity shocked those who possessed this fund” (58). By the end of the novel, she lives in a well-lit domestic space that she possesses, “every door and window . . . open” (249). She no longer reads her experiences in the Gothic mode. At the same time, she now puts the Gothic to a different use, as a concept that enables her to see herself as a private self with a deep interiority not accessible to everyone. Some secrets belong to her and only to her. Stoddard is not prefiguring Freud in this formulation: Cassandra is inscrutable and unknowable only to others, not to herself. She is in fact often intensely aware of the deep desires that animate her, and learns only at the end to prevent disclosure to others.

The novel’s persistent return to the metaphor of “possession” figures this idea. Her aunt refers to her as “possessed” in the first chapter, the first of a series of references to possession of self, of property, by demons, by men, by marriage, by desire. At the end, Cassandra possesses her house, her experiences, her self. She cannot escape at mid-century the constraints of domesticity, but neither is she crushed like her mother by the repressive past, like Charles by overpowering sexual desire, like her father by the inexorable logic of the marketplace. Cassandra accepts the bounded walls of her world, as she must in order to survive; she becomes a wife and caregiver. But within that space she gains “an absolute self-possession” (248; cf. Keck). She exorcises the various ghosts that haunt the houses of the Morgesons. Cassandra gives her husband, Desmond, the last word in her story, but clearly she does not share his observation. Immediately after watching Ben suddenly die in delirium tremens, Desmond cries out: “God is the Ruler. . . . Otherwise let this mad world crush us now” (253). Cassandra’s own story tells us both
that religion is as oppressive as other institutions and that the mad world has not crushed her, even if she did not, like chamomile, grow faster for it. In Cassandra Morgeson, Stoddard imagines avant la lettre a version of the New Woman for whom the Gothic merely served as a means of freeing herself from the Puritan past, prohibited sexual desire, and the power of money and status. It is no wonder that the creator of ambivalent female characters like Daisy Miller and Isabel Archer should have responded so viscerally to her achievement. Even in the 1860s, her explorations in the confined space of “womanhood” were shocking.

Notes

1. See, for example, Wardrop.
2. Harris uses the word “elliptical” (286), for example. Sterne refers to Stoddard’s “epigrammatic style” (109).
3. See Ryan and Sterne.
4. The word “clung” (Ruth 1:16) is echoed in the penultimate paragraph of The Morgesons: Cassandra and Desmond “clung together with faint hearts” (253). See Stockton, who argues convincingly that Cassandra’s marriage to Desmond is not a capitulation to the prevailing culture. It is a radical choice, in part because in the context of nineteenth-century laws concerning married women’s property rights, Cassandra is exercising considerable autonomy in owning her own house and in opening it to receive Desmond, who in effect leaves his own family to marry Cassandra.
Much of the American Gothic mode has been famously understood as a discursive response to the unresolvable legacy of American slavery, a palimpsest that bleeds through emerging modern America as the uncanny reminder of an original sin continuing to stain the current landscape. Furthermore, the Gothic has functioned as a process of racialized abjection, whereby representations of African Americans serve as repository for a monstrous otherness that defines the fears of white America. As distinct from white authors whose works are haunted by the intruding past, African American authors have demonstrated, according to Maisha Wester, a more subversive engagement with the Gothic trope to assert their claim on the American ethos and challenge the master narrative of progress by “screaming back” at those Gothic texts that demonize and discount the African American presence (30). Thus for the African American writer, the Gothic becomes a transcultural process of intervention into metropolitan representations of the self and an important resource in identity formation and redefinition.

Such a perspective has been ascribed to Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman* (1899) tales and other stories that exceed their surface appearance of quaint lore and local color by positioning the character Uncle Julius as a trickster figure in relation to the Northerner John, who has acquired a plantation postbellum and is now entertained and advised by the former slave regarding property history and management. From John’s viewpoint, Julius is often an amusing remnant guided by superstition antithetical to John’s Northern progressive perspective. Through John’s underestimation of Julius, the latter often succeeds in trumping the new “master” and impugning John’s authority as an objective narrator and the morality and contra-
dictions of the rational order he represents (see, for example, Goldner). To the extent that Chesnutt’s work is connected with the Gothic, these tales are typically invoked, steeped in fantastic elements and the lingering legacy of the past persisting in the decayed Southern estate. Other works, such as the 1901 Marrow of Tradition (see Wester), the posthumously published Mandy Oxendine (see Cooper), and even “The Sheriff’s Children” (1889), a tale identified by Crow as “squarely in the mode of realism” (“Upas” 261), have been discussed as Gothic, in relation to the “return of the repressed” typical of passing literature (Cooper 120), or inversion of the racial monstrosity trope (Wester 86), as well as the element of the “inappropriate family unit” (Crow, “Upas” 268), in which white characters confront hidden African American kinship.

These texts do indeed seem to be haunting, or as Wester would have it, “screaming back” Gothic representations of African Americans to appropriate and revise tropes of abjection—but not in unproblematic ways. As Joanna Penn Cooper says about Mandy Oxendine, Chesnutt’s text “mirrors” as much as it “defamiliarizes the horror of post Reconstruction era racism” (120). Here I expand what “counts” as Gothic Chesnutt, to include consideration of what Duncan has identified as one of Chesnutt’s “best realistic fictions” (290), “The Wife of His Youth” (1898) included in the collection The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color Line (1899). I argue that seeing beyond the Realist conventions of the story to understand it as both Gothic and Naturalist accesses its full complexity, a complexity in which Chesnutt’s narrative, in an ontological exploration of identity and determinism, is appropriated by as much as it appropriates dominant discourse. While we have precedent for seeing Gothic gestures in Chesnutt’s work extending back to Hemenway’s 1974 discussion of “Gothic Sociology,” in which he ultimately declares the Gothic unsuitable to Chesnutt’s purpose, as well as critics who have perceived Naturalist impulses in his subject matter,1 I am interested in how the intersection of these modes produce Chesnutt as a psychological Realist and emerging Modernist. I also include in this discussion “Uncle Wellington’s Wives,” another tale from the Wife of His Youth collection that invites comparison with the eponymous story both through its subject matter as well as its determinist trajectory.

Like all the other stories in The Wife of His Youth, these two are, as the subtitle of the collection indicates, “stories of the colorline,” in which Chesnutt not only interrogates the constructed and performative nature of racialization but uses race to explore existential questions of universal implication, a rhetorical move that seems to validate Chesnutt’s understanding of himself as a universalist thinker who wrote “from a subject position that he perceived as outside of race” (Wilson xvii). But these two stories have a
more specific similarity. They both concern the role, validity, and, more specifically, the legality of the “slave marriage” as a complication to the idea of progress and self-fashioning, and—to the extent that both feature male protagonists who struggle with the question—African American masculinity, in a period when the hope promised through emancipation and enfranchisement is rapidly deteriorating in a post-Reconstruction nightmare (Wilson xi). Both stories rely on wife figures serving as realistic interruptions of and corrections to ironically romanticized narratives of progress. The male protagonists are thwarted in their aspirations and recalled to pasts by claims to their slave wives. As such, the stories replace Realist notions of progress and success with Romantic failures. The question that hovers over both tales is whether in Chesnutt’s fictive moral universe the claims to (and made by) the slave unions are redemptive or tragic; that is to say, whether his vision intervenes in or is controlled by a collision of Gothic and Naturalist conventions that produce an emergent Modernism in which “dreams will always be squashed by social and political realities” (Simmons 6).

In “The Wife of His Youth,” Mr. Ryder is the unofficial leader of the “Blue Veins”—an elitist, “talented tenth” group of light-skinned African Americans. We encounter Mr. Ryder at a momentous time in his life: he is preparing to cement his position as guardian of racial progress by proposing to a wealthy widow, but unexpectedly Mr. Ryder’s long absent slave wife makes an appearance, telling him she is looking for her husband from years past, Sam Taylor, which was Ryder’s former name as a free black man married to the enslaved ‘Liza Jane. She does not recognize Mr. Ryder, but after some soul searching, he decides, even though he is not legally bound to do so, to acknowledge her publicly as his first wife. In “Uncle Wellington’s Wives,” Chesnutt gives the theme a different twist and has the character Uncle Wellington, who discovers from a lawyer that his slave marriage is not legally binding, leave his current wife to seek better prospects in the North, in particular a white wife who represents for him the ultimate prize of freedom and prosperity. He does indeed marry a white woman, but after a series of misfortunes she leaves him, and he returns destitute to his first “wife,” Aunt Milly. In a voyeuristic scene in which he overhears Aunt Milly suggest to the minister who is now courting her that she would forgive and take back Uncle Wellington, he brazenly and unexpectedly, after his long absence, presents himself to her and her would-be suitor, upon which note the story concludes.

In each case, good arguments have been made for the case of the protagonists’ redemptions. Chesnutt, after all, pronounced his intentions to create didactic fiction that would educate a white audience (Wilson xiv). From this standpoint, it is easy to see Chesnutt as a “moral realist” (McEl-
rath 91) and read both stories as “fables” of the color line (Bryant), in which both male characters, confronted with the ethical dilemma of honoring or discarding their slave unions, ultimately make “right moral choices” (Andrews 76) (i.e., to return to their forgotten wives). Such readings would place Chesnutt's work firmly in the didactic strain that Keith Newlin (Introduction) sees separating Naturalism from Realism and be consistent with, for example, Ian Marshall’s view that depicts Ryder’s slave wife ‘Liza Jane as a noble figure whose humble dignity and unpretentious dialect save Ryder and the Blue Veins from their ambition of whiteness and repudiation of the mother tongue (Ryden and Marshall 59–67). Similarly, John Dudley reads ‘Liza Jane as “authentic” (261), and Catherine Keyser argues that here Chesnutt seeks to unsettle “the self-delusion of the Blue Veins’ selectivity” (214). Bryant contends that both stories affirm Chesnutt’s stand on “racial fidelity” (48).

Such readings rely on assumptions that are quite plausible but far from foregone. The author’s vision may very well have been influenced by nineteenth-century feminist discourse that positioned the slave marriage as “an ideal . . . union of souls that transcended the earthly concerns upon which legal marriage was based” (Chakkalakal 6) and as such could survive the trials and transitions of emancipation and Reconstruction into the Progressive Era. However, in both instances, Chesnutt ends the narratives before any actual unions between estranged partners take place. Chesnutt has Ryder complete his address to the Blue Veins by presenting ‘Liza Jane as the wife of his youth (my emphasis) not present; similarly, by giving Uncle Wellington the last word, the author leaves unresolved the future of Wellington and Aunt Milly. Wellington’s audacious hope, after all, is pinned on Milly’s overheard utterance: “I’m feared I’d be foolish ernuff an’ weak ernuff to forgive ’im an’ take ’im back ag’in” (238, my emphasis). In neither instance does the reader know what the future holds. Such inconclusiveness invites speculation about these stories as Realist fiction affirming progressive values through a romanticized marriage plot. Tess Chakkalakal, for example, suggests that rather than affirm the bond from the past, these stories present legal marriage “as a way of breaking free of those [slave] relations, of forming new relations that eschew the racial principles that made it impossible for former slaves and their descendants to marry according to self-interest and personal desire” (13). Reading the stories through a Naturalist Gothic lens reveals complicated ambiguities and shows that Chesnutt was not just responding to the material realities of slavery’s legacy and Jim Crow racism but also used these conditions and his keen insight into them to pose humanist questions about the nature of human freedom, individualism, and responsibility.
Redemptive readings that resist the pessimistic closure of Naturalism (Budd 43) rely on a sentimentality that positions both 'Liza Jane and Aunt Milly as long suffering heroines whose steadfastness is eventually rewarded. While this aspect of the domestic plot is present, the relationship of the wives to their husbands and, consequently, the way the reader is asked to view the women is not simplistic. In particular, both women arguably pose significant threats to the men’s sense of masculinity and autonomy. In the case of 'Liza Jane, she refers to Sam Taylor, the name Ryder used to go by when he was 'Liza Jane’s free husband, as the most trifling hand on the plantation. To Ryder’s suggestion that her husband from twenty-five years ago might have moved on, “outgrown” (108) her, she scoffs and offers the emasculating observation that such a possibility is unimaginable and that no doubt she will have to take care of the ineffectual Sam when she finds him because he could not have amounted to much. The irony that Ryder’s personality traits and skills ill equipped him as Sam Taylor for the manual labor of a Southern plantation economy but appear to serve him well as a prospering railroad clerk in the Reconstruction-era North seems to be an important but unremarked part of this story about identity reinvention.

This comic dimension of “The Wife of His Youth” that contrasts with the otherwise melodramatic tone of the story is echoed more strongly in “Uncle Wellington’s Wives,” which relies on the comic picaresque as the reader follows the unsophisticated Uncle Wellington through his Northern mishaps and adventures. Part of his impetus for leaving appears to stem from his resentment over Aunt Milly’s chastisement of his trifling ways. When he arrives in Groveland, he is called for the first time “Mr.” instead of the condescending avuncular appellation. The women in each story effectively hold the men back, yoking them to stifling traditions under which neither man is able to prosper or individuate but is instead dependent on the slave wife and her admirable but limiting pragmatism. In the case of Aunt Milly, she actively opposes any notion of progress or adventure by insisting that she and Wellington should stick with what they know. Before abandoning her, Wellington attempts to recruit her for the adventure North to the promised land. She replies: “I dunno nuffin’ ’bout Norf . . . It’s hard ’nuff ter git erlong heah, whar we knows all erbout it” (209). Wellington hints that she might use the money she has saved to take them both North. When she refuses, he robs her of half her savings to finance his flight.

Wellington’s obsession with Milly’s stash that she keeps under lock and key is reminiscent of Frank Norris’s *McTeague* (1899), in which the title character is doomed by the hoard of wealth that Trina obsessively accumulates. Just as McTeague sees his wife’s thrift as a taunt of his masculinity that ultimately provokes him to the irremediable act of her murder,
Wellington feels provoked and justified by Milly’s parsimony that excludes and rebukes him. While the Chesnutt story is a comparatively light-hearted treatment of this theme, the hoarded wealth is in each case the catalyst for betrayal and self-destruction. For the primitivized McTeague, there is no return possible to civilization after the brutal murder of Trina. Since Wellington is only guilty, at most, of theft (his guilt or innocence seems to be tied to the ambiguity of his married state), his return is not precluded, despite his long descent quickly summarized by Chesnutt, where he appears to spend time in jail and becomes finally nothing but an “old brown tramp” (235). While Aunt Milly may take Wellington back into her home, we are left to speculate whether Wellington is the chastened “prodigal son” (see Bryant) or whether he will once again come to resent Aunt Milly’s pious industriousness and thrift, a living strategy that, since they are without a child who might inherit the money—their dead child is referred to only once in the Gothic detail of the cemetery where she is buried—seems unjustifiable. However, we can imagine that Wellington’s theft and abandonment has provided Aunt Milly with the moral high ground to make any ensuing life for him almost unbearable within the union. Thus the Naturalist decline of Wellington verges on a Modernist existence of futile entrapment and self-estrangement.9

Wellington’s trip North self-consciously mirrors a previous generation’s escape to freedom but here ironically leads to, as the Northern lawyer Mr. Brown points out, his virtual reenslavement as waged worker whose status is further compromised through racialization: “You weren’t content with being a slave to the white folks once, but you must try it again. Some people never know when they’ve got enough” (231). Thus Chesnutt, through Naturalist creed, turns the antebellum Romantic trope—the flight to freedom—on its head to pose a direct challenge to progress so that Wellington’s only available recourse is to revert to the traditional life allotted him as represented by Aunt Milly. He exchanges one laundress wife for another—and then back again. The ending thus defies the closure of a nineteenth-century text of progress and points to a Modernist no-man’s land for Wellington.

To the extent that Wellington is an ironic trickster figure, Chesnutt implies a solution of liminality,10 in which Wellington’s dissatisfaction will continue to impel him toward futile actions. For by the very end of the story, Wellington is far less the repentant prodigal and far more the unabashed trickster exploiting with bravado Aunt Milly’s emotional weakness. Upon hearing Aunt Milly confess to the minister, her would-be suitor (and Wellington’s rival), that she might take Wellington back, he seizes the opportunity to enter the house and audaciously reproach the shocked minister.
“who had started from his seat with surprise,” with the impertinent question, “W’at’s yo’ hurry? Won’t you stay an’ hab some supper wid us?” (238).

Chesnutt seems to invoke the genre of the dirty joke here by having the long-absent Uncle Wellington disrupt the intimacy and trump the minister with mirthful sprezzatura as he reclaims his hearth from the interloper. Wellington's lack of contrition parodies domestic sentimentality and mimics the indefatigable energy of the perennial trickster, or what Jackson Lears, in his critique of Progressive Era capitalist ethos, disparagingly refers to as the celebration of “an endlessly renewable vitality” (30). If Uncle Wellington was sent North by Chesnutt to learn the limits of progress, it is not clear if Wellington has sufficiently absorbed the lesson despite his defeat. His playful revitalization at story’s end suggests a triumph over rather than capitulation to the bourgeois discipline of marital convention.11

For both Ryder and Wellington experience their unions with their slave wives as burdens even if the wives themselves can hardly be seen as culpable for the past they metonymically represent.12 To see either story as a simple realignment of a moral compass is to ignore that Chesnutt here devotes little attention to the plight of the wives themselves, instead using them as pawns in a game of masculine self-definition. Their sympathetic rendering is necessary to raise the stakes for the protagonists. And these stories are no less complicated if we accept that the couples reunite. For while Wellington comes to regret his actions, these feelings of remorse follow his failure rather than success in the North. One crucial mistake made by Wellington seems to set off a Naturalist chain reaction that ends in his failed marriage and financial ruin. When Wellington, or Mr. Braboy, as he is known in Groveland, marries Mrs. Flannigan, he does not foresee that only one of them will be allowed to continue in service to their wealthy employer. The loss of Mrs. Flannigan’s position and her ensuing idleness precipitate their lowered status and incompatibility. This situation is exacerbated by the social intolerance of their mixed race union as well as Mrs. Flannigan’s own inconsistent racism. Redemptive readings of this story will focus on Wellington’s character flaws and superficial aspirations, but for a brief time he does indeed prosper as the married, employed carriage man living in the North. Just as McTeague’s life is suddenly and inalterably changed by the arbitrary, bureaucratic prohibition of his dentistry practice through state regulation, so too are sinister outside societal forces at the base of Wellington's unraveling. Institutionalized legal marriage has not served Uncle Wellington well, and we are left unsure exactly what his legal status is: whether his legal Northern wife abandoned him, leaving him still officially wed to her and therefore subjecting him to bigamy laws should he at-
tempt a legal marriage with Milly, or whether Mrs. Flannigan was indeed still married at the time of their union, nullifying Uncle Wellington’s marriage to her. This confusion suggests ambivalence about the advantageous role of marriage in self-definition and whether, in the case of former slaves, legal marriage is progressive or regressive. Are either Uncle Wellington or Aunt Milly better off with the more fluid terms of the slave union that defy the normalizing discipline of bourgeois matrimony?13

Likewise with Mr. Ryder, whatever his feelings of obligation, gratitude, or tenderness toward the enduring ’Liza Jane, it is nearly impossible to imagine a future for Ryder in which he does not resent the claims she makes upon him, for unlike Wellington, Ryder has prospered outside of the slave union. If there is a moral lack in the invention of Mr. Ryder, there is something equally problematic in the identity of Sam Taylor that ’Liza Jane insists is inviolate. In both cases, Wellington and Ryder are helpless to reinvent themselves in the face of inexorable forces. Mr. Braboy and Mr. Ryder revert in the course of the narratives to Uncle Wellington and Sam Taylor, respectively, their former identities atavistically surfacing in their refashioned lives. Both ’Liza Jane and Aunt Milly serve to exclude Ryder/Taylor and Braboy/Wellington from the greater cultural narrative of progress. In the case of ’Liza Jane, she is distinctly Gothic abjection, but both women function to reflect the fatalist fears of two male characters excluded from a progressive social system and doomed to an existence in which the legacy of slavery proves insurmountable. Additionally for Uncle Wellington, the promise of Mrs. Flannigan to integrate him into the American societal structure deteriorates into the Gothic horror “of the red-faced Irish woman” as she becomes a perverse drunken mockery of his hopes and an inversion of the trope that located the monstrous in blackness.14 Her uncontained physicality and lax work ethic contrast with the prim industriousness of Aunt Milly and connect her with the loose morals of profligate sexuality. The complicated relationship of emancipated African Americans to the institution of marriage, which often did not benefit them once they were granted the right to legally wed, makes the subject an ideal vehicle for Chesnutt to explore the themes of autonomy and choice for marginalized subjects who seek claim to full citizenship.15

In “The Wife of His Youth,” ’Liza Jane’s uncanny presence, created “by the wave of a magician’s wand,” interrupts the Realist narration of Mr. Ryder’s story of bourgeois progress. Keyser has aligned her with the “fantastic romance” (211) that William Dean Howells repudiates in his prescription of Realism and describes her as a “ghost of the plantation past [that] knocks on . . . Scrooge’s door” as well as Ryder’s “fairy-godmother” (217). While Keyser identifies ’Liza Jane as the romantic past salubriously intrud-
ing on an anemic, progressive present, it is equally plausible to see her as the past’s Gothic nightmare, a haunting spectral presence, that reminds Mr. Ryder of his true, but stigmatized and hidden, identity as Sam Taylor. In bitter Gothic irony, free man Sam Taylor has lived like a fugitive slave for twenty-five years submerged in the remade identity of Mr. Ryder. Dramatically, 'Liza Jane has hunted him down just when he verges on casting off “triflin’” Sam Taylor forever in his merging with Mrs. Dixon. The description of 'Liza Jane is worth quoting in full: “Although she stood erect, and looked around her with very bright and restless eyes, she seemed quite old; for her face was crossed and recrossed with a hundred wrinkles, and around the edges of her bonnet could be seen protruding here and there a tuft of short gray wool. She wore a blue calico gown of ancient cut, a little red shawl fastened around her shoulders with an old-fashioned brass brooch, and a large bonnet profusely ornamented with faded red and yellow artificial flowers. And she was very black,—so black that her toothless gums, revealed when she opened her mouth to speak, were not red, but blue” (105).

This description is both intensely Realist in its piling on of detail (indeed, she is the most completely physically rendered character in the story) as well as mythic, and it is this combination that allows for competing interpretations of 'Liza Jane’s significance, for certainly there is something awe-inspiring in the evocation of the timeless crone who appears in “ancient” garb, a feminized senex with her “bright” wrinkle-encased eyes that suggest wisdom. (Indeed, it is only when she is presented to the Blue Veins at the end of the story that the narrative provides any independent confirmation that she is more than just an archetypal figment of Ryder’s burdened imagination—her ghostly possibilities materialize when the rest of the group “witnesses” her.) Just as her unruly hair refuses to be contained by her bonnet, so does her presence “protrude” in the orderly life that Ryder has erected. But despite the unsophisticated attire that might mark her as harmless, like a disguised, vengeful goddess, she evokes the fear “of the image of this bygone period” that appears to Ryder, as he tells us later, “in his dreams” (111).

The toothless, Medusan mouth threatens to swallow Ryder whole into his escaped past and suggests a return to the primitive in an inevitable Naturalist degeneracy, in this case played out through the fiction of racialized femininity. Arguably, 'Liza Jane’s effect in the narrative is maternal here, a “hellish” intrusion into the paternal order that Ryder has created (see Jaraway 67): she is much older than he and has always assumed a caregiver role. Likewise, the sacrifices she makes for him seem motherly. Additionally, Ryder, until the arrival of Mrs. Dixon, appears to have the status of “confirmed bachelor,” having waited twenty-five years to marry as though un-
able to break the maternal hold she has over him. Alternately, her primitiveness is the repository of his sexuality since Mr. Ryder appears to have lived a chaste life in the intervening twenty-five years. The sensuous description of 'Liza Jane's mouth contrasts markedly with the bourgeois chastity of the widow Dixon.

'Liza Jane's primordial blue-black mouth is more than a match for the pale pretensions of the Blue Veins' imagined pedigree, and, indeed, it reverses the signification of blue so that it is a marker of blackness rather than whiteness and a reminder that despite their pale skin, the essential blood in their veins is connected to the inescapable past that 'Liza represents. From a eugenics standpoint, 'Liza Jane is the black that cannot be bred out through socialization and represents the negotiation of “the overlapping discourses of eugenics and authenticity” featured in African American Naturalism (Dudley 259). The effect of 'Liza Jane’s appearance is heightened by its contrast with Tennyson’s description of Guinevere, as read by Ryder immediately preceding 'Liza Jane’s appearance. While beautiful Guinevere and her perfidy is the stuff of seductive dreams, 'Liza Jane is that of repressed nightmares. Ryder’s preamble to presenting 'Liza Jane to the Blue Veins is very telling of his ambivalence and anxiety:

Suppose that he [Ryder/Sam Taylor] was young, and she much older than he; that he was light, and she was black; that their marriage was a slave marriage, and legally binding only if they chose to make it so after the war. Suppose, too, that he made his way to the North, as some of us have done, and there, where he had larger opportunities, had improved them, and in the course of all those years grown to be as different from the ignorant boy who ran away from fear of slavery as the day is from the night. Suppose, even, that he had qualified himself, by industry, by thrift, and by study, to win the friendship and be considered worthy the society of such people as these I see around me tonight, gracing my board and filling my heart with gladness. . . . Suppose, too, that, as the years went by, this man’s memory of the past grew more and more indistinct. . . . And then suppose that accident should bring to his knowledge the fact that the wife of his youth, the wife he had left behind him,—not one who had walked by his side and kept pace with him in his upward struggle, but one upon whom advancing years and a laborious life had set their mark,—was alive and seeking him. (iii)

The story is conspicuously absent in providing any commentary from Ryder about his earlier marriage to 'Liza Jane. While she claims they were
happy, we get no such confirmation from him despite ample opportunity. The reader is left without insight into how the union between the two came about and how it was advantageous to Sam. For presumably it was so, since he, a free man, entered into it without coercion. We perhaps can infer that it was calculated on his part; that he took advantage of 'Liza Jane's strength and competence to nurture him through the dark days of menial slavery (despite his status as a free man), as such unions purportedly did, and the call for payback he has been dreading (and yet perhaps expecting) is now here. The wily trickster 'Liza Jane in the guise of country cousin arrives not only to cash in on the investment she made in Sam years ago (see Wachtell) but also to dash the pretensions of reinvention he has entertained; to mock the alias “Mr. Ryder” and his attempts to free himself of the past; to remind him he is the inadequate ne'er-do-well Sam Taylor, now as then. His future is engulfed in the blue-black void of a past that cannot be transcended despite all his efforts to play by the rules. The projection here is both psychological and sociological; Mr. Ryder doubts his own self-worth just as the larger American society will be intent on marginalizing him through Jim Crow exclusion, despite his best efforts to “uplift the race.” 'Liza Jane mocks him and assures him of the futility of his attempts when she declares that they will be “as happy in freedom as . . . in de ole days befo’ de wah” (107), for surely Sam Taylor’s “happiness” then was a qualified one at best.

‘Liza Jane’s words here perform an uncanny parody of nostalgia and shackle Mr. Ryder to the identity of Sam Taylor. This is indeed the “darker moments, the shadow hanging over” (110). And in a story rife with irony, the words of the ball’s toastmaster, who naively believes he is speaking of Mrs. Dixon, have the potency of a Greek oracle when he predicts that Ryder will “yield entire subjection” to one of the ladies present that evening, for it appears that the invented subjectivity of Mr. Ryder will be vacated by the undeniability of 'Liza Jane and the past. 'Liza Jane takes no prisoners—or rather, she does—that is, as the abject past she represents. In Gothic doubling, 'Liza Jane invokes Ryder’s doppelgänger in the figure of Sam Taylor, whom she conjures through the power of her story, thus placing the narrative firmly in the realm of the uncanny, in which Ryder faces “the fiction of the stable self” (Edwards xxv). The doubling here shows that Ryder is haunted not just by his obligations to 'Liza Jane but by the spectral presence of the past self, Sam Taylor. For “The Wife of His Youth” is another kind of passing story, premised on the suppression of the disadvantageous self never completely contained, and, as with all passing narratives, it “relies on the unveiling of a ‘true’ identity even as it exposes the fictions of an authentic conception of self” (Edwards xxviii). In this case, the instability read through discourses of degeneracy is not agentive but rather paralytic
an example of the Gothic “turn that entails both the loss of a coherent self and the fracturing of a transparent, clearly referential lexicon of the self, a turn that marks loss as terrible” (Savoy 12).

Instability mingles with discourses of degeneracy here to produce an anxiety appropriate to the coming age. The injection of the Gothic in both these stories moves them beyond the moral didacticism assumed by many readers and that perhaps even their author intended. For it is precisely the nature of the Gothic to render events and understanding outside of the controlled and circumscribed; Chesnutt’s stories far exceed the simplicity of morality tales as the Gothic elements break through their Naturalist containment. As Chesnutt’s liminal subject position allowed him to explore and reveal the constructed, political, and sometimes arbitrary nature of racialization with its devastating consequences, so too did the social and economic convention of marriage afford him the opportunity to expose and critique the constructed nature of that institution and in turn its effect on the meaning of citizenship and progress. The slave union and its implicit destabilization of the normativity of marriage allow Chesnutt, in his practice of Naturalism, to anticipate a Modernist defamiliarization of bourgeois culture.

Notes

1. See Dudley’s discussion of the African American Naturalist tradition. Simmons, in his discussion of Chesnutt’s Realism, makes reference to Chesnutt’s “characters’ incapacity to transcend their social milieu” (16). However, while acknowledging that Chesnutt’s “priority . . . was to show how individual behavior was environmentally driven (16),” Simmons ultimately concludes that, since the terms romance, Realism, and Naturalism are porous, “whether Chesnutt is associated with one set or another is of little consequence itself” (19). Also, see Edwards, who discusses Chesnutt’s novels in terms of a Realism that avoids the fatalism of Naturalism (31–44). Both Render and Andrews identified Chesnutt with Naturalism. While Andrews observed that Chesnutt eschewed a belief in “the principle of survival of the fittest” (85) and was not concerned with “the scientific detail of Dreiser or Norris” (98), he notes that Chesnutt seemed interested in “using some of the principles of naturalism” (99). Render describes “characters doomed to fail because of forces such as race and class prejudice” as “Naturalistic” (123).

2. See Edwards’s observation: “It is possible to read Chesnutt’s oeuvre as a confirmation of David Punter’s arguments that the “site” of the Gothic is obsessed with the law, with its operations, justifications, limits” (105).


4. See Simmons’s discussion of this quote in relation to Chesnutt’s The Colonel’s Dream. For Simmons, following Alfred Habeger, Realism implies a reliance on the
belief in human agency but serves as a middle ground between the idealism of romance and the nihilism of Modernism. Simmons sees both tendencies in Chesnutt's work.

5. According to Franke, marriage laws governing the unions of former slaves "required newly married couples to file a marriage license with the county circuit court, a bureaucratic detail that carried a prohibitively high price for many freed people. In every state with such laws, failure to comply with these requirements while continuing to cohabit would render the offenders subject to criminal prosecution for adultery and fornication. North Carolina gave the freed people just under six months to register their marriages with the county clerk. Each month they failed to do so constituted a distinct and separately prosecutable criminal offense" (13–14). This difficulty was excluded from Chesnutt’s portrayal since there is no indication that Uncle Wellington and Aunt Milly are in danger of prosecution. But, importantly, it is Uncle Wellington’s concern about the legality of marriage that propels his misadventure and points to the vexed status of the institution for emancipated people and thus its significance as a haunting, Gothic trope.

6. In his review of the collection, Howells specifies that the stories are “new and fresh and strong, as life always is, and fable never is” (700, my emphasis), a contrast perhaps with Chesnutt’s own conscious understanding of his work: in an interview, Chesnutt compared the stories to “sermons” (Andrews 76n.4).

7. See Newlin’s discussion, in which he non-pejoratively compares Naturalism to melodrama, making the case that unlike Realism, Naturalism attempts “to promote the acceptance of a thesis” (5) and is “essentially didactic literature” (6).

8. See also Wood’s discussion of Chesnutt’s recuperation of dialect to counter demeaning minstrelsy and to use Realism to intervene in such representation (197–98).

9. Wood also connects Chesnutt’s work with Modernism. She argues that he “anticipates . . . modernism’s questioning of the ‘real’” (198) and “straddles the line between literary realism and modernism” (206).

10. Critics have noted Chesnutt’s own liminal subject position in relation to racialized American society (see Cooper 121).

11. Franke writes, “Legal and political recognition [of marriage] were used by the state as instruments for new forms of regulation and subordination” that normalized hitherto more fluid marital relations for former slaves: “African Americans emerged out of slavery accustomed to forming a spectrum of culturally sanctioned intimate adult relationships” (12).

12. Certainly the horror that ‘Liza Jane endured for Ryder’s sake makes her a Gothic victim rather than any kind of perpetrator.

13. See Franke’s discussion of the legal difficulties that accompanied the transition from slave unions to legal marriage as a means of disciplining and punishing a newly freed population: “The ‘right to marry,’ so celebrated in many quarters, was experienced by many African Americans of this [Reconstruction] era as an unwelcome and punitive responsibility that resulted in the incarceration of many people” (19). It is worth noting in this context that, while Aunt Milly does not seem to be Chesnutt’s focus, the story implicitly comments on her status. Under the terms of
the slave marriage, Wellington may be seen as having stolen her property, but this would not have been so had they been legally married. What protection, then, does matrimony offer her?

14. As a member of a marginalized and ostracized group that struggled for inclusion, Mrs. Flannigan functions as a figure of abjection. See Hurd’s discussion of Chesnutt’s portrayal of the relationship between African Americans and Irish immigrants in this story.

15. “Marriage laws were expressly deployed by the larger culture to discipline African Americans who failed to ‘act like citizens’” (Franke 27).

16. See Simmons’s discussion of Realism in Chesnutt’s novels, in which he quotes Amy Kaplan’s explanation of the work of Realism. Kaplan’s observation suggests that what I am calling ‘Liza Jane’s mythic quality here makes her ripe for Realism’s project: “The weightiness of descriptive detail—one of the most common features of the realist text—often appears in inverse proportion to a sense of insubstantiality, as though description could pin down the objects of an unfamiliar world to make it real” (qtd in Simmons 4).

17. In his discussion of Rena in The House behind the Cedars, Edwards points out “wooly hair” was “often cited as proof of an African’s animalistic degeneracy” by “racial ‘scientists’” (103).

18. An alternate reading of ‘Liza Jane through Cooper’s analysis of Chesnutt’s use of the Gothic might suggest that she is a manifestation of Ryder’s guilt or fear of becoming white rather than a fear of haunting blackness: “The possibilities of racial uplift, passing, or the eventual ‘absorption’ into whiteness that Chesnutt speaks of in ‘The Future American’ carry with them a lingering unspoken trauma” (137).

19. Chakkalakal, referencing Emily West, states, “According to historical accounts, marriage between slaves ‘served as a means of resistance against oppression’ and ‘was an anchor and a positive reference point for the enslaved, ultimately enabling them to survive the regime’” (4).

20. See also Cooper’s discussion of Chesnutt’s use of the doppelgänger to represent Du Boisian double consciousness: Chesnutt’s “plots suggest that the self-elevating African American will remain haunted by unresolved ideological traumas associated with slavery and racial oppression. In Chesnutt’s fiction, double consciousness becomes the gothic specter of the shadow, the doppelgänger, or the uncannily shattered psyche” (126).
Stephen Crane’s 1898 novella “The Monster” foregrounds images of a once beautiful masculinity now in ruins. Crane sets his short story in a prosperous upstate New York suburb he calls Whilomville, a fictionalized version of Crane’s hometown of Port Jervis, New York. Dr. Trescott, in some ways the story’s protagonist, employs a black man named Henry Johnson as his horse-groomer. When a fire breaks out in Dr. Trescott’s home one night, with his little son Jimmy inside, Johnson braves the fire. He saves Jimmie but literally loses his face to the flames. Deeply grateful, Dr. Trescott insists that Johnson be kept alive and vows to care for the afflicted hero. Johnson regains consciousness but is now a lumbering and incoherent figure, most likely brain-damaged; the very sight of him incites fear. He exposes his faceless face to a little white girl, Sadie Winter, at a birthday party, leaving her irreparably traumatized. Notably, however, he makes a similar impact on other black townspeople, such as his ex-fiancée (Bella Farragut) and her family, as well as the Williams family, who were hired by Dr. Trescott to care for Johnson. Johnson’s threatening visage, in the terror it produces, cuts across color lines. The townspeople now enraged at him, Dr. Trescott begins to lose all of his clients. Despite the clamorous demands to remove the faceless man from public view, Dr. Trescott staunchly refuses to do so. The story ends with Dr. Trescott comforting his aggrieved wife, who has been socially ostracized by the town’s women.

Written and published in 1898—the year Crane volunteered for the Spanish–American War, was rejected due to his unstable health, and was then hired as a war correspondent by Joseph Pulitzer—“The Monster” is indeed a controversial work. Its irreconcilable ambiguities charge its racial politics with a particular significance and give the work its power. I argue
that a considerable amount of the tale’s haunting resonance stems from a distinctive aesthetic strategy used by Crane: the trope of iteration, which ironizes the work’s racial themes and makes them more difficult to interpret in political terms. This work reflects tensions specific to its era, such as the Spanish–American War, with its new emphasis on an imperialist United States, and Reconstruction-era violence against African Americans. In more recent times, the tale has been read as indicative of late nineteenth-century discourses of disability, organized around the era’s “ugly laws.” While not my focus here, the issue of disability certainly saliently speaks to the tale’s preoccupations with the social implications of nonnormative bodies and psyches. My focus is, first, on the gender and sexual politics of the racism Crane foregrounds, enacts, and critiques, with a particular interest in the sexual implications of Crane’s depiction of Johnson’s dandiacal masculinity before his accident. Second, I strive to reinsert the tale into its social and political context.

Michael North observes in *The Dialect of Modernism* that “no way around confusion [exists] when the face itself is a mask, when mystery resides right at the surface in the color of the skin. It is no wonder that Conrad was haunted by [“The Monster”]. . . . When the skin itself is a mask, there can be no unmasking; underneath the veil is another surface even more opaque” (39). There is, indeed, no way around confusion in “The Monster.” The state of confusion is established not in Johnson’s effacing, however, but in the very first line: “Little Jim was, for the time, engine Number 36, and he was making the run between Syracuse and Rochester” (391). Right from the story’s start, a person does not merely swap identities with a thing but becomes one, the industrial object engine Number 36. The thematic of reification, as Bill Brown notes, was common to Realism and Naturalism. Extending this thematic, Crane deploys iteration as a device that binds the characters, their speech and actions, to the fixed and inescapable pattern and events of the narrative. Johnson’s black hole of a face metaphorizes the tale’s nihilistic atmosphere of powerlessness, conveying Crane’s sense of social and perhaps also aesthetic nullity.

The ironizing aspects of the work are apparent in its mock-epic style (the story is divided into twenty-four sections, as is *The Iliad*). The opening section with little Jimmie, Dr. Tescott’s son, playing in his father’s garden, is a model of iterative enclosure. Jimmie transfigures himself into a nameless machine other: “He was fourteen minutes behind time, and the throttle was wide open” (391). The “he” signifying Jimmie is now verbally fused to the thing he has become, tardily frantic and present in the sentence without having yet been identified, either as engine or thing. In the next sentence, the boy-engine swings “around the curve at the flower-bed,”
destroying a peony. “Number 36 slowed down at once and looked guiltily
at his father,” who is mowing the lawn as the Jimmie-thing now signified
as simply Number 36 wreaks havoc in the garden (391).

Aggrieved at the desecration of one of his father’s prized plants, the boy-
engine, shamefully regressing to mere boy form, confronts his father with
the harrowing evidence of his destructive mistake, and it is precisely at this
point, when communication between boyish thing/thingish boy and looming
father must occur, that the story’s iterative system locks into place, resolu-
lutely stymieing communication. “In a low voice, Jim said ‘Pa!’”

The doctor was shaving his lawn as if it were a priest’s chin. . . . Jim
raised his voice a trifle. “Pa!”

The doctor paused, and with the howl of the machine no longer
occupying the sense, one could hear the robins in the cherry trees
arranging their affairs. . . . Again [Jim] said, “Pa!” . . . “What is it, Jimmie?” “Pa!” repeated the child at length. Then he raised his finger
and pointed at the flower-bed. “There!”

“What?” said the doctor . . . “What is it Jim?” . . . he raised his
finger and repeated his former word— “There!” . . . “I don’t understand
what you mean, Jimmie,” he said.

(391–92)

Examining the fallen flower, the doctor asks Jimmie for an explanation, and
both reiterate questions and responses: “Jimmie, how did it happen?”; . . .
I was playin’ train . . . “; “You were doing what?”; “I was playin’ train” (392).
The doctor’s concluding two sentences cancel each other out: “I guess you
had better not play train any more to-day. Do you think you had better?"

A state of iterative futility hangs over the mock-epic situation—the en-
tire order of the doctor’s house hinges on this flower’s fate. The staccato re-
itration of the child’s “There!”s and the father’s “What?”s indicate not only
a failure to communicate but the inability to do so. We are left to wonder
why this intergenerational pair of male characters finds mutual intelligen-
tility so elusive.

Frank Norris’s Naturalist novel McTeague (1899) is extremely relevant
to “The Monster,” given Norris’s preoccupation with the monstrous mas-
culinity of its titular protagonist, an ogre-sized, mentally stunted dentist
who ends up murdering his skinflint wife, Trina. As Bill Brown notes in
the context of Norris’s novel, “The iterative mode helps to stage the con-
frontation between the habits that constitute our daily lives and the hab-
its that threaten to destroy them, between the routinization . . . on the one
hand, and, on the other, the bad habits that defy any happy habituation to modern life” (56). A pattern of miscommunication and of person-as-thing emerges as a routinized dimension of life in Whilomville, as the Trescotts’ interactions suggest. Johnson’s effacing shatters routine, habit, complacency. But perhaps what is most horrific about the monster that Johnson will become is his very habitude, his incessant and almost instinctive desire to return to his old routines with his new monster identity.

Section II opens with Jimmie’s “desire to efface himself” (392). Quiet and chastened, Jimmie broods while Henry Johnson, the “negro who cared for the doctor’s horses,” renders the doctor’s buggy immaculate. “These two were pals,” we are told, “and on all points of conduct as related to the doctor” — “their moon” — “they were in complete but unexpressed understanding” (392–93). Crane has prepared us for this intimacy between child and black man, both of whom are in positions of marginalized subservience to the looming doctor. That Jimmie can metamorphose at will into an engine anticipates Johnson’s transformation into the monster, linking the two thing-characters, engine-boy, Johnson-Monster.

We are told that Johnson is “a very handsome negro . . . a light, a weight . . . an eminence,” albeit in the town’s black enclave (393). This intelligence regarding Johnson’s appeal, gleaned from his own words, is “vaguely” appreciated by Jimmie, who pays Johnson “deference . . . mainly because Henry appreciated it and deferred to himself” (393). While iteration is significant here, the lack of words signifies the real bond between Johnson and Jimmie: “These two would commune subtly and without words concerning their moon [the doctor] sympathetically as people who had committed singular treasons” (393). The doctor catalyzes the bond between these marginal “pals,” who don’t need words to communicate.

The special rapport between Johnson and Jimmie is disrupted when Johnson, reiterating the doctor’s words, bullies Jimmie “most virtuously, preaching with assurance the precepts of the doctor’s creed, and pointing out to Jimmie all his abominations” (393). When words, especially reiterated words, appear, they contaminate and weaken these male bonds. And by reiterating the doctor’s words, Johnson effectively becomes or substitutes for the doctor. Jimmie, properly humbled subject, conciliates to maintain Johnson’s affection, earning the “felicity” of helping to clean the buggy “even when Jimmie was still gory from unspeakable deeds” (393). Jimmie’s metaphysical goriness anticipates the literal goriness of Johnson’s accident and loss of face.

One of the story’s most effectively handled themes is the liquid nature of identity, underscored by the technique of iteration. In section III, Johnson, about to call on his fiancée Miss Bella Farragut, discards his horse-groomer identity in favor of the man-about-town persona he dons in the
evenings: “As he emerged from his room and sauntered down the carriage drive, no one would have suspected him of ever having washed a buggy. It was not altogether a matter of the lavender trousers, nor yet the straw hat with its bright silk band. The change was somewhere far in the interior of Henry. . . . He was simply a quiet, well-bred gentleman of position and wealth . . . he had never washed a wagon in his life” (395). “No one ever suspected him of ever having washed a buggy,” because “he had never washed a wagon in his life”: the bookend iteration of ideas compresses Johnson’s transformation from buggy-washer to debonair gentleman. Both ideas and subjectivities gain authenticity if their qualities are repeated often enough.

Johnson’s transformation is not only a lexical feat, but also a physical one: he really does look different. He is the type of man that I identified in Men beyond Desire as inviolate, inciting yet refusing or unable to satisfy the desire of both women and other men. When, preening, he strolls through town on his evening walk to call on Miss Farragut, the proud dandy inspires a series of responses that seem to stem from his own narcissistic fantasies. To begin with, he encounters a quite interesting, specific group of “young men of the town,” “gathered” in “distinctive groups” that “expressed various shades and lines of chumship,” “discussed everything with critical insight,” and subjected “the whole town [to] review as it swarmed in the street” (395).

The narrator then identifies these throngs of young men as “profane groups.” They would appear to be socially disaffected young men who mock those who pass before them, a not-at-all uncommon type of group male identity. When Johnson walks past one of these groups, they taunt him with racist mock-salutations: “Hello, Henry! Going to walk for a cake tonight?” (396). That these taunts have a racist edge stems from their basis in the complex plantation and minstrel show iconography of the cakewalk. The “cakewalk had a descriptive character, purporting to depict a slow, high-kicking improvisatory black dance, done by couples competing for a prize cake”; though associated with the plantation, the cakewalk became known to later audiences primarily through stage representations that originated with Ned Harrigan and Tony Hart’s 1877 “Walking for Dat Cake” (Jasen 197). This plantation dance was a complex relay of power negotiations: the slaves mocked the dancing of their white masters and mistresses, who viewed the slaves’ mock-performance as an entertainment, one that met with their amused approval. For his part, “Henry was not ruffled in any way by these quiet admonitions and compliments” (396).

That these hooligans mock Johnson has led some critics to view the entire sequence of his walk through the town to visit his fiancée as one of derision toward him. Yet the subsequent depiction of male reaction to the sexual spectacle he offers would certainly appear to complicate that read-
“Wow, you ought to see the coon that’s coming!” cries Young Griscom, a lawyer, as he walks out of a barbershop (396). A multitonal chorus of male appreciation ensues. “Chee!” the German barber Reifsnyder (if his name indicates his national origin) exclaims. While racialized identity chiefly informs this scene and story, both class and ethnic identity do so as well: Reifsnyder represents the same class-based immigrant experience Crane so laboriously portrays in his 1893 novella *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*. “Ain’t he a taisy?” the barber marvels. Somewhat obscure, the term “taisy” would appear to be Crane’s attempt to convey Reifsnyder’s pronunciation of the contemporary slang term “daisy,” which “in the late 19th century was a common slang term for ‘the best in its class.’ So for ‘daisy’ just substitute ‘the best’ and you’ll have it. It was a short-lived idiom and doesn’t seem to be popular much after 1890” (“Daisy”). The argument that ensues among Reifsnyder and his customers stems from the barber’s resolute contention that the wondrously attired man has been wrongly identified: “I bait you any money that vas not Henry John so n!” (396). Instead, it must be “a Pullman-car porter or something” (397). One of the barber’s customers, however, insists that it is him, and as proof offers, “Didn’t I give him those lavender trousers?” The surprising contentiousness of this debate is conveyed through Crane’s choice of verb: the customer “roars” this intelligence at Reifsnyder. Reifsnyder’s line—“How could that be Henry Johnson? . . . You vas crazy”—carries obviously foreboding resonances. From another customer, a man whose mouth was “made timid by adjacent lather,” comes further confirmation: “That was Henry Johnson all right. Why, he always dresses like that when he wants to make a front! He’s the biggest dude in town—anybody knows that” (397). As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes in *Between Men*, “In any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures for maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence” (25). In Crane, differences in class (lawyers and barbers), ethnicity (Germans speaking accented English), and race (the cakewalking John son) flatten out into a kind of consensus in regards to the spectacle of Johnson’s dandiacal body.

For his part, “Henry was not at all oblivious of the wake of wondering ejaculation that streamed out behind him” (397). This palpably sexual line, which reinforces the suggestive image of “lather” in one male customer’s mouth, is implicitly homoerotic. The admiring barbershop men spurt over Johnson, joining Johnson in his narcissistic reverie. Homosocial homoeroticism intersects with a racist but also indeterminate atmosphere of male appreciation for preening male sexual display; while the unfixed nature of Johnson’s identity fuddles and riles the men, it also galvanizes their re-
sponse. Reinforcing the theme of pliant identity, Crane depicts Bella Farragut as a front-stoop gossip who, upon first glimpse of Johnson, sprints into her house, “galloping like a horse,” and then, “scrambling into her best gown,” morphs into her new role as Johnson’s belle (397). Johnson, the maestro of identity, and “simply perfect,” witnesses all of this and only nods approvingly, not put off by Bella’s strenuous metamorphosis.⁴

My close focus on the early sections of the story is meant to elucidate the meticulous manner in which Crane establishes that Johnson rivets the town’s attentions as a visual object well before his hideous defacement. Once Johnson is burned, Crane shifts the focus from Johnson’s liquid selfhood to the townspeople’s hardening collective identity. Both considerations rely on iteration for symbolic power. The iterative design of the work incorporates the affirmative apprehension and the revulsion that Johnson elicits as dandy and monster, respectively. Johnson’s battle with the fire imbues the remaining sections of the novella with a lost, disoriented quality as it retroactively suffuses the early ones with an air of ineluctable doom.

Crane’s depiction of the fire focuses on the visual, as if to wrest narrative from its iterative lexical preoccupations, which continue to dominate. The festive mood of the crowd listening to music in the park is disrupted by the “great hoarse roar” of a factory whistle—in other words, the cry of “Fire!”—the reiteration of which seals the town’s destiny. The second roar signals that the fire is in the second district, Dr. Trescott’s district. The hectic efforts at meaningful exchange are iteratively parodied: “What district?” / “Second.” / “What district?” / “Second” (400). And then later, by the exchange between son and mother, in which he pleads “Can I go, ma?” six times and she refuses him three times (401).

“For Crane,” writes Chester L. Wolford in The Anger of Stephen Crane, linking Crane’s art to epic narrative and intentions, “small towns in America, like civilizations anywhere, exist in order to mediate between the individual and chaos. Ordered society blocks our reality and grants to the individual a sense of security, order, and intelligibility. . . . The first scene of The Monster demonstrates what happens when civilization, fragile as a flower, is threatened by reality. Society cannot tolerate such intrusions” (88–89).

As portended by that oddly tense first scene, the society of Whilomville is prone to split-second disorder. The fire in Dr. Trescott’s house voraciously spreads to his laboratory, his realm of rationalism; the fire devours order and sets society ablaze. The faceless Johnson emerges from this inferno as the grisly emblem of a destroyed social stability.

In section VII, Crane depicts the fire and Johnson's battle with it in now-familiar mock-epic style. A would-be Hercules, Jason, or Perseus, Johnson clutches groggy, terrified Jimmie as he heroically darts and swerves past the
fire, which proves too cunning for him. “He was submitting, submitting because of his fathers, bending his mind in a most perfect slavery to this conflagration” (405). The flames become Johnson’s masters, and his twice-reported submission to them seems to seal his doom. But then, “he was no longer creature to the flames,” and, in a moment which revitalizes him, “he cried out again in the negro wail that had in it the sadness of the swamps” (406). Crane makes the thudding race-essentialist point that only by reverting to his primordial, “swampy” old negro self—iteration backward—does Johnson regain his prowess.

The flames metamorphose into animals, adding an obvious extension of race-essentialism to a metaphorical register that Crane also complicates. (One is reminded of Schoolteacher in Toni Morrison’s 1987 novel Beloved, who instructs his young nephews to write down a division of the slaves’ human characteristics on one side and their animal ones on the other.) “An orange-colored flame leaped like a panther at the lavender trousers. This animal bit deeply into John.” Given the earlier suggestions of Johnson’s sexual appeal to other men, it is difficult to read this line without an awareness of a homoerotic potentiality that is also inextricable from a homophobic defensiveness. The violent encounter between this animal flame and Johnson’s pants suggests castration and intimate contact at once.

The anthropomorphic/animal flames reach their metaphoric zenith in the “delicate, trembling sapphire shape like a fairy lady. With a quiet smile she blocked his path and doomed him and Jimmie. . . . [Johnson tried] to pass. . . . But she was swifter than eagles, and her talons caught in him as he plunged past her” (406). Reinforcing the castration metaphor, Crane depicts Johnson as overpowered and incapacitated by this now overtly feminine and feminizing beautiful monster. Jimmie manages to scurry to the lab’s window to be rescued by his father. Immobilized, Johnson awaits the kiss of a “ruby-red snakelike thing [that] pours its thick length” over Johnson’s face (406).

The mutability of the flames is significant. As their deliberately metaphorical agency suggests, the flames function not only as volatile elements of natural catastrophe but also as symbolic indications of mutable identity. Searing conveyors of social change, they enforce identity makeovers not just on Johnson, the doctor, and his family, but on the whole town of Whilomville. Their interspecies transitions particularize the flames, giving them “identity” and motivation ranging from animal bloodlust to the sadism of the femme fatale, as their pointed mythologization links them to forces both ancient and eternal. The unmistakable sexual images of the flames—not only the “panther” who bites into Johnson’s trousers and the delicate yet formidable and inescapable sapphire lady but also the phallic snake-like rope of ruby-red flame—reinforce the idea that Johnson in-
cites both female and male sexual attention. And these amorous interests are given a parodic and horrifying license to possess the once inviolate, now utterly dominated body—and face—of Johnson. The dandiacal raced body transforms into the damaged raced body, a transformation that results from this body’s proximity to a range of erotically charged forces with a range of gendered attributes. Johnson's violation and mutilation by these forces and the range of these forces all suggest an allegory of sexual consumerism fueled by both male and female desires and organized around the black male body. Further, the flames, beyond their importance as an allegorical register for Crane’s self-conscious literariness, correspond to real-world American concerns—the burning of the Reconstruction-era nation.5

No community exists for those in Whilomville outside of Whilomville. For these townspeople the imagined community begins and ends with Whilomville and any outside influence is regarded as a contamination or, like the fire, an annihilating interruption. This strange yet representative town's isolationism signifies the small-town American narrowness that Crane, who died at twenty-nine, spent his vivid brief life defying. He knew from small towns, having grown up in one. “Crane was born into a straitened world,” that of Newark, New Jersey, in 1871 (Benfey 39). “How did [this author] . . . have those parents, who seem to have stepped from the pages of a novel: the minister opposed to dancing; and his wife, the lecturer and pamphleteer for the [Women's Christian Temperance Union]?” (Benfey 21). That “straitened world” seems to have profoundly affected Crane’s art and life. In Crane’s home, Benfey reports, “words were spoken and read several times a day in reverence. He heard familiar passages over and over again, at home and at church . . . . It would be hard to overestimate the importance of this ritual—the book, the words [on Crane]. In this world, words were powerful, utterly serious” (40).

It is likely that Crane’s powerful use of iteration, in which he had been schooled since childhood, was a way of linking himself with incantatory biblical as well as classical rhetoric; his use of mock-epic style expresses his proto-Modernist anxieties about tradition, its persistence, relevance, and in-escapability. For Crane, the utter seriousness of words impressed itself on him from the beginning. It’s no surprise, then, that when rejected for participation in the Spanish–American War by the Navy in 1898, Crane immediately sought and secured employment as a war correspondent for Pulitzer, for whom Crane delivered “first rate dispatches” (Knapp ix). If he couldn’t volunteer his flesh and blood, he would offer his words, making, in the Walter Benn Michaels’s sense, words the thing, mediums for acts of public patriotism (74–75).

Which is not to say that for Crane writing “The Monster” was a patri-
otic act. Writing the story deeply intersected with Crane’s own response to and participation in patriotism and its complexities. In 1898, both Crane and the nation were at a dramatic crossroads. Crane, famous for *The Red Badge of Courage* (in which he hypnotically imagined battle scenes he himself never participated in) and in ill health, appears to have been on his own odyssey—furiously fleeing his immanent death from tuberculosis in 1900, and frenziedly documenting his personal America that was embodied by the Whilomville stories and infused his war reportage. Crane wrote “The Monster” “before his departure for Cuba” (Benfey 258). His eager desire to enlist for and serve in the war, and his restless passion to report it (fired by Pulitzer, he immediately got rehired by Hearst), signaled a deep link between the young writer and the fate of the nation.

Crane wrote “The Monster” in the chaotic atmosphere of post-Reconstruction America, verging on a new era of imperialism at the fin de siècle. The relay that develops between the faceless Henry Johnson, lumbering and disoriented, and the bewildered, terrified, and callously unsympathetic Whilomville residents channels the anxieties and the confusions of a beleaguered and also murderously indifferent nation. Crane’s work unmistakably evokes the racial politics of the Jim Crow era and its agonizing struggles over race relations, apotheosized by the frequency of lynchings of black men especially. This period was further marked by the struggles over women’s suffrage as well as black suffrage; the Depression of 1890; rising unemployment and rising immigration; and the grandiose anxieties of a newly established superpower determined to display its imperial might on the world stage.

Responding to the “exceedingly clamorous” “expansionist rhetoric” of the late 1890s, the United States joined England and Germany in their imperialist zeal, thereby “emerging from the chrysalis of isolation” (Painter 142). The Spanish treatment of Cuba, characterized by human rights atrocities, initially provided ethical as well as financial imperatives for American intervention in the strife. Not that expansionists needed those expensive morals: “An overseas empire seemed to admit the United States to an elite club of powerful, advanced, and civilized nations” (Painter 149). After the highs achieved by the “brief and glorious war” with Spain, “the realities of conquest turned out to be less glorious than the rhetoric” (154). As the glory faded, America delved into a new war with the Filipinos, who resisted American domination as ardently as they did that of the Spanish. “Hundreds of thousands of Filipinos died in battle,” and 42,000 Americans, black and white, lost their lives to this conquest, compared to the 460 lost American lives of the Spanish–American War (155).

“The Monster” is a difficult work, especially in terms of Crane’s deeply
ambiguous and no doubt ambivalent representation of race, which contains both anti-racist and racist elements. Nevertheless, the tale continues to fascinate because of its acute responsiveness to the violence, terror, and sheer incoherence of its national era’s unresolved racial crisis and also essential uncertainty. As Ralph Ellison poignantly and penetratingly noted, “The Monster’ places us in an atmosphere like that of the post–Civil War America, and there is no question as to the Negro’s position in it, nor to the fact that the issues go much deeper than the question of race. Indeed, the work is so fresh that the daily paper tells us all we need to know of its background and the timeliness of its implications” (88).

Section IX opens with a series of multiple cheers from the crowd as spectators watch the battle between fire and men. These cheers, in their iteration, signify, of course, the hollow vacuity of the crowd, their interest in theatrical spectacle rather than in the human tragedy they are witnessing. (Under-scoring this point, the crowd disdains fire chief John Shipley, “a quiet man” [409]. His quiet conflicts with their thunderous, meaningless cacophony.) The crowd is riveted by the sight of the “flags of fire which waved joyfully against the black sky,” and with the “red glare upon the sky, which seemed utterly foreign” (410). One of the harbingers of fiery tragedy is the burning of an effigy of the “Signing the Declaration” (section VI), one of the first things to go (403). Crane depicts an American populace eager for sensational display but who can only enjoy this display at a remove.

Taken together, these details connote the larger consumption of the nation by the flames of social and political change and indict this crowd’s voyeurism for its pernicious passivity. There was a real scorch of flag-waving politics, in 1898, against the dark sky of national racism in this era of lynchings and Plessy v. Ferguson (1896), the infamous Supreme Court decision to uphold legalized racial segregation through the doctrine of “separate but equal.” Nell Irvin Painter observes: “During the summer of the war violence against blacks at home recurred. In July 1898 a black newspaper in Richmond, Virginia, listed a dozen lynchings of blacks since the declaration of war three months earlier. . . . Once again, the shedding of black blood distressed only blacks. . . . Blacks wondered why the United States could go to war to save Cubans but not Americans in the South” (165).

One of the most disturbing aspects of Crane’s treatment of the contrast between theatricality and impassivity concerns his depictions of the effect Johnson has on his former beloved, Miss Bella Farragut, and her family. In his depiction of such encounters, Crane, I argue, makes a political point out of the nineteenth century’s recurring interest in male sexual inviolability. The unthinkable of faceless Johnson as a suitor suggests a crisis in gender and sexual roles linked to the ongoing, indeed intensifying, hysteria over
black male sexuality that marked the postbellum period, as scholars such as Robyn Wiegman, Gregory Jay, and many others have extensively shown.

Bella’s mother, upon sight of Johnson, hoists her large, generally inactive chassis up and over a fence, with “great speed and agility.” When the faceless Johnson, now the monster, calls on Bella, he reduces her to a heap of quivers and tears, iterating all of his old love calls, raising a “deprecatory claw,” asking her to dance, and for the “magnificent gratitude of you’ company” (429). Bella can only “cast a miserable glance behind her” and “crawl away.” With no idea that he is no longer an elegant and debonair ladies’ man, lost in reveries of his old identity, the monster reiterates its old salutations, its previous, now grotesque charms, unaware of the unspeakable horror it provokes. Given the strong motif of sexual ambivalence that runs through the story, Bella’s terrified rejection of Johnson takes on a further resonance, as does his performance of heterosexual courtship that, first, is hopelessly ineffective, and, second, cannot be authenticated given his mental state.

Here and throughout the story, Crane’s distanced, withering tone makes it impossible to feel along with any of the other characters, with the exception, perhaps, of the agonized Dr. Trescott. Clearly, we are meant to be stricken by the image of Dr. Trescott, all but annihilated by the aftermath of Johnson’s return from near-death, counting out his wife’s teacups and cake slices at the close of the story. Iteration offers one of the subtlest and most chilling moments in the story, suggesting Trescott’s entrapment in an endless maze of bewilderment, at the conclusion of the work: “Trescott mechanically counted the [unused cups]. There were fifteen of them. . . . Trescott found himself occasionally trying to count the cups. There were fifteen of them” (447–48).

Any wounds of grief that the story inflicts on the reader in response to Johnson’s plight are always already cauterized by Crane’s tone. Crane takes the ironic detachment in the classic Gothic works by Hawthorne, Poe, and Melville to a further distancing extreme, deriving, as these antebellum writers did, bleak, bitter humor from the juxtaposition of outlandish situations and ironic treatment. (And clearly, though this intertextual connection demands a discrete treatment, Crane is reimagining Hawthorne’s indelible 1836 Gothic tale “The Minister’s Black Veil” as a racial allegory here.) Just about everyone in Whilomville who encounters Johnson shrieks in response, and the effect achieved by this generic terror is that of uniform banality. This banality, as Painter shows, pervaded the America of 1898. The crowd shows Johnson no compassion whatsoever. They gape and shriek at him when he gets too close but have no trouble watching Dr. Trescott’s house going up in flames, an appetite for detached spectacle that suggests the American public’s fascinated yet impassive reaction to spectacles of col-
lective violence such as lynching. Crane died soon after the publication of “The Monster,” and America lurched into the twentieth century with its three-year war with the Philippines (1899–1902).

Notes

I dedicate this chapter to my beloved mentor and friend Michael T. Gilmore, who passed away in 2014.

1. All references to “The Monster” are from Crane: Prose and Poetry.

2. As Susan Schweik writes, “Two years before Crane wrote The Monster, a charity reformer named Charles Kellogg produced what he called a ‘crude suggested draft’ of a version for New York City of a municipal law that was sweeping the country. The ordinance, now known as the ‘ugly law,’ prohibited ‘any person who is diseased, maimed, or deformed in any way, so as to be an unsightly or disgusting object’ from ‘expos[ing] himself to public view’” (Schweik 221).

The issue of disability, foreground in the ugly laws, cannot be overlooked. As Schweik notes, “In Crane’s hometown of Port Jervis, New York (which Crane fictionalized as Whilomville), his niece Edna Crane Sidbury testified that the prototype for Henry Johnson was not burned at all but a survivor of facial cancer, a man named Levi Hume who hauled ashes in Port Jervis and whose appearance terrified Port Jervis children” (218). Schweik challenges the argument made by Price McMurray that the inspiration for Johnson’s story was the lynching of a black man named Robert Lewis in Port Jervis in 1891, who was “accused of raping a white woman” and “dragged out of a police wagon and hanged in front of the home of Stephen’s brother, Judge William Howe Crane. William Crane attempted to prevent the lynching and testified, futilely, against the mob of his neighbors at an inquest a week later” (219). Schweik, critiquing McMurray, writes, “In this formulation, the story of a lynching is politics; the story of a face cancer is biology. And the lynching was what hurt; it alone was (sufficient) history. Here, then, is my first countersuggestion. Face cancer does have a politics” (220). While Schweik’s work on this topic is both admirable and provocative, she deemphasizes the issue of race in order to make her case. My essay attempts to show that the issue of race in the tale is far from settled.

Other commentators have extended Schweik’s revelatory investigation. Ellen Samuels alerts us to “the supplementary role of disability in precisely those cases that seem to be ‘just’ about race or gender. In each case, identity is structured by intersecting vectors of power: not only disability, race, and gender, but also economic status, geopolitical location, sexuality, medicalization, and enslavement” (16–17).

3. For example, Jeanne Campbell Reesman describes the men at the barbershop as “laughing” at Johnson, but this is clearly not exactly the case (281). She also does not note his encounter with the “profane” young men, which is the one detail that evinces genuine and racist derision. For Reesman, Crane offers a “humorous stereotype of Johnson” in these scenes of him “dressing for evening” and walking to the unfortunately named Watermelon Alley to call on Bella Farragut (281). While
she is right to call attention to the minstrel-show origins of the cakewalk motifs throughout this scene and to the slippery and suspect racist overtures detectable in the work and in others by the author, I would nevertheless argue that the joke here, and there is one, is not on Johnson but rather on the male onlookers whose fascination with him arrests them so.

4. In his reading of Crane’s thematization of issues of masculinity here, which he extensively links to Theodore Roosevelt’s self-created cult of “strenuous manhood,” William Morgan in his Questionable Charity discusses Johnson’s stroll and the male reactions to his presence, but he makes no mention of the homoeroticism. For Morgan, the tale attempts to negotiate a “hypermusculine” model of masculinity and a more maternal, communal one, the latter embodied by Dr. Trescott’s efforts to care for and protect Johnson after his accident (93).

5. Michael Cunningham devises remarkably similar archetypal effects in his depiction of a horrific fire in the section of his three-part work Specimen Days called “In the Machine,” which is set in roughly the same era as “The Monster” and expresses similar deep-seated anxieties about the industrial revolution and its mechanization of humans caught in the gears of the titular machine.
The Victim as Vampire

Gothic Naturalism in the White Slave Narrative

Donna M. Campbell

Bedraggled, forlorn, and sometimes defiant, the figure of the prostitute or street girl pervades 1890s Naturalism. Stephen Crane’s *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, for example, was remarkable less for making Maggie Johnson the subject of the narrative than for the sympathy with which she was treated.1 Yet by the early years of the Progressive Era, the “girl of the painted cohorts” trailing down city streets (Crane 70) had been supplanted by another figure altogether: the “white slave” who, lured from her home in the country and forced into prostitution, implores passersby to free her from behind the barred windows of a brothel where she has been imprisoned. Evocative of the Gothic heroine imprisoned by forces beyond her control, the “white slave” became the face of prostitution and the target of organized reform efforts during the years 1910–1914. The white slave panic revealed the fears of the nation, from xenophobia driven by the rising tide of immigrants from Eastern Europe to fears about the New Woman’s travel to urban centers outside the social control of the domestic sphere. With the advent of the white slave narrative, which depicted the enslavement of middle-class and rural young women in prostitution, the 1890s “girl who goes wrong” narrative that presented the regrettable but understandable fall of a working-class girl became the Progressive Era’s alarm over the abduction of middle-class American women.

Enshrined in sociological studies, sensational novels, and film, the “white slave” was portrayed both as a victim, stolen from rural innocence by foreign procurers and imprisoned in a brothel, and as a vampire, a *prostitute fatale* spreading contagion as part of a more general scene of urban chaos and decay.2 As a victim, she embodied national anxieties about racial purity and supposed contamination of American womanhood; as a vampire spreading
contagion in the form of moral evil and sexually transmitted diseases, she posed a threat to American manhood. According to Amanda Anderson, the “rhetoric of fallenness” carries with it fears of contamination and the transformation of victim into perpetrator: “The pervasive trope of metalepsis [in which an effect is transformed into a cause] reflects just how contaminating fallenness was perceived to be: any distanced view of the fallen woman as victim could easily transmute itself into an anxious apprehension that she would communicate her condition to others” (16).

The white slave threatened citizenship and the republic, signifying larger corruption in the body politic by her transgression of national boundaries through sexual contact with a foreign Other. Two white slave narratives, Elizabeth Robins’s novel *My Little Sister* (1913) and Frank Norris’s precursor text “The Third Circle” (1897), exemplify the overlap between the Gothic and Naturalism, including doubling of the victim and vampire figure, distorted narrative time and space, the characters’ imprisonment or entombment, and the symbolic use of interpretive symbols—totemic emblems, unreadable spaces, and symbolic songs—as illustrative of a lost order signifying rationality. Robins’s and Norris’s shared obsession with the body of the violated woman represents concerns over a larger corruption of the social order, one blamed on contact with racial others but ultimately the work of corrupt, arrogant white individuals and institutions.

**White Slavery**

The classic “white slave” narrative involves an innocent young white woman, either an immigrant or a rural girl, who abandons her home when lured to the city with false promises of employment or marriage. The white slave was stripped of her street clothes and her identity, locked in a room, raped, sometimes beaten or drugged, and supplied with inadequate clothing and a new name. Reports such as Clifford G. Roe’s *The Great War on White Slavery* (1911), Jane Addams’s *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil* (1912), and Paul Elliot’s *White Slavery and What it Is* (1910) raised additional concerns about the easy mobility of the trafficked women between countries, something that both Robins and Norris address. The men who seduced or abducted the “white slaves” were almost always characterized as urban and foreign, ethnically Other and not American. In *The Great War on White Slavery*, for example, Clifford G. Roe confidently asserts that “the French cadets [pimps] and the negro cadets are without doubt by far the cruelest” (248). Yet as Ruth Rosen points out, “of men convicted under the Mann Act, 72.5 percent were native-born Americans, 11.5 percent were Italians, and 3.5 percent were Russians” (119).
Despite the dubious evidence for some claims, the white slave panic undoubtedly reflected the fears of the nation. As young women sought work in urban centers, their economic autonomy and sexual freedom caused an outcry over the nation’s loss of control over its primary resource, young women as the future producers of the nation’s citizens. As Katie N. Johnson points out, “Prostitution thus became a framework to analyze mass production, modern technology, and the entry of women into the urban workforce—the prostitute becoming the personification of these changes” (11). White slave novels, films, documentary reports, and memoirs vary in their accounts of the procurement methods and treatment of women, but all agree that without a corrupt police force and government, neither prostitution nor white slavery could function. White slave fiction emphasized not only the corruption of young girls but the corrupt institutional structures designed to protect those who engaged in the traffic.

White slave fiction incorporates features of Naturalism and the Gothic, including the melodramatic elements and rhetorical excesses common to both. Like the Gothic, Naturalism explores the dark underside of the human psyche, and its interest in the thin membrane between civilized behavior and desire mirrors the Gothic’s exploration of the divide between rationality and madness. Invested, like the Gothic, in exploring the space between life and death, Naturalism focuses on the excesses of the flesh, including desire and decay, much as excesses of the spirit and violent emotion pervade the Gothic text. The result is that the containment of excess creates a distortion or lack of balance in ordinary reality, a reality elusive both in Naturalism, with its extreme states of being, and in the Gothic, touched by the supernatural. Part of this containment of excess, in both Naturalism and the Gothic, resides in the realistic detail that masks the perceptual and cognitive distortions of time, of space, and of states of being. As one key to understanding these distortions, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick usefully identifies the spatializing of the self as a key to the Gothic, with the self being “massively blocked off from something to which it ought normally to have access,” such as “its own past, the details of its family history” (Gothic Conventions 12). Forced apart, the self and its missing counterpart “continue separately, becoming counterparts rather than partners” (13) in lives that run in parallel rather than in tandem.4

In addition to the spatialized self resulting in a divided consciousness, Naturalist Gothic in the form of the white slave narrative employs the distortion of time and space as well as the failure of characters to behave within their social and institutional mandates. The distortion of time applies to the woman behind the barred windows of the brothel, watching the ordinary life of the streets move by at a tempo unavailable to her as she en-
dures her slow imprisonment. Naturalism’s distortions of exterior space in the wilderness, as in Jack London’s “To Build a Fire,” match those of the Gothic’s traditionally labyrinthine interiors in which rooms, doors, halls, windows, and other locked structures thwart the physical and metaphoric reunion of the divided self. The brothel intensifies the claustrophobic effect of the Gothic because it confirms that the constructions of human beings—governmental systems, institutions, houses—that are designed for their protection are actually capable of inflicting the most potent harm. As in the Gothic convent tale, the elegant house that seems a place of sanctuary becomes instead a brothel and a prison. Guarding these spaces are authority figures who should come to the victim’s aid but are complicit with the forces keeping her imprisoned. In Robins’s *My Little Sister* and Norris’s “The Third Circle,” the distortions of time and space combine with the failure of institutional guardians to prevent the violation of the white slave’s body, a failure that leaves her, and by extension the nation, helpless in the hands of foreign corruption.

**My Little Sister**

An American actress and women’s rights advocate, Elizabeth Robins (1862–1952) starred on the London stage in the plays of Shaw, Pinero, and her friend Henry James, becoming famous for her interpretation of Ibsen’s heroines in *A Doll’s House* and *Hedda Gabler* before turning to social problem fiction. First published in two parts in *McClure’s* in 1912 a few months after Jane Addams’s white slave exposé *A New Conscience and an Ancient Evil*, Robins’s *My Little Sister* “startled a continent,” arousing more discussion and stirring more consciences to action than any similar document of the last decade,” according to the publicity in *McClure’s* (qtd in John 185). Selling more than 1,000 copies a day at the height of its popularity, *My Little Sister* was based on an incident told to Robins in 1907 by a fellow feminist about “two innocent young Englishwomen enticed to a brothel” (John 185). As in many white slave tales, the genesis of *My Little Sister* has the flavor of an urban legend, but the documentary evidence of sociological reports, case studies, trial transcripts, and statistical surveys supports the novel’s report of its most agonizing sequence, the indifference of government bureaucracy and the city police to the abduction and rape of a young woman.

Like Jane Austen’s *Sense and Sensibility*, *My Little Sister* employs the device of two sisters: the older and wiser unnamed narrator and her younger sister, the innocent and impetuous Bettina. The pair live simply with their widowed mother in a country house and, despite their lack of means, become involved with their well-to-do neighbors, the Helmstones. The early
chapters unfold as in an Austen novel, but beneath the surface of their placid country life lie hints of a troubled past tinged with racial and sexual overtones. Growing up in India, the mother tells the narrator, she “had seen a great deal of evil” (Robins 115), a conflation of colonial oppression and sexual exploitation that culminates in the mother’s story of her grandfather, who had brought a young girl to live with him, a “sort of cousin” (114) who “ministered to his whims and perversities” (115). Robins’s biographer Angela V. John speculates that this background hints at incestuous sexual abuse, which Robins had learned was a primary factor in many young women’s descent into prostitution (188). Until she falls ill and is forced to accept help, the mother turns away visitors, refuses to let the girls visit their neighbors, and is happiest when locking the doors against any possible intruders. Shutting out the world means ignorance of its ways for the two girls and also an indifference to its sufferings: the mother shuts the window in the face of a starving, “haggard hop-picker” (43) who begs for money one day, saying that “infection” could contaminate the household, and she shows no mercy to a servant who becomes pregnant. She even forbids her daughters to use the village public telephone, the technology that enables contact with the external world, because she declares it to be “full of germs” (51), a fear that conflates social contagion and modern germ theory. Artificially compressing, and hence distorting, the time and space that the girls inhabit by forbidding them to use modern technology and to mingle in the public sphere, the mother unwittingly sets the conditions for their downfall.

Even life in a country village cannot prevent sexual threat and foreign contagion, a point that Robins makes plain by repeated references to the backdrop of imperial England and its colonies. The events of the novel are bookended with two specific references to colonial time and space: the mother’s past in India, a colonized space that the mother casts as a site of racial otherness and sexual perversity; and the upcoming coronation of King George V on 22 June 1911, signifying modernity and civilized order. The family reveres “the Army and the Royal Family” (24), and they even mark time by saying that Bettina was born in the same year (1894) as “the little Prince” who would be king (25). But the mother’s colonial past, like her fear of modernity and the outside world, taints all possibilities of her daughters’ acquisition of the modern knowledge they need to survive, since the elder, at least, wholeheartedly adopts her mother’s suspicions. So committed is the narrator to the hermetic existence in their country home that when her mother’s suitor, Colonel Dover, appears at their door in the midst of a driving rainstorm, she refuses to let him in. As he brandishes his metal-tipped umbrella, a phallic substitute for his sexual intrusion into their house and into their lives, lightning strikes the tip and electrocutes him, a supernatural
death that destroys the threat of masculine power and empire. Imperial and colonial references signify corruption again when the worldly Lady Helmstone, who wishes to skip “the Coronation fuss” (153), invites Bettina on a six-month cruise on her yacht, *The Nautch Girl*, a name referring to Indian dancing girls with overtones of sexuality. The mother rejects the invitation, saying that old families like the Helmstones display “a kind of treason” in refusing to attend the Coronation (153).

But knowledge of the abuses of empire confers only a generalized suspicion of foreigners, not the knowledge of contemporary urban life necessary to protect the girls. Relying on domestic ideology and rejecting Lady Helmstone’s advice that girls have their best chances in the marriage marketplace before the age of twenty (157), the mother weakly says that the girls’ husbands will take them traveling once they are equipped with social graces like playing music. Because their mother’s naive suspicion ill equips them to recognize danger, they fail to see it in the form of a French dressmaker, Madame Aurore, who has “scars on her neck and dead-looking yellow hair” (224) and who reeks of patchouli, the scent traditionally worn by prostitutes. Despite their mother’s distrust of foreigners, neither Aurore’s French nationality, her appearance, her theft of a picture of the wealthy aunt, Josephine Harborough, whom they are to visit, nor her pointed questions about their family’s jewels alarm the sisters. Aurore is a procurer who alerts the madam of a brothel to the sisters’ plans and sends the aunt’s picture ahead of her, but the sisters, never having been warned explicitly of sexual danger, fail to see the signs.

In the last third of the novel, when the sisters travel to London, they experience the separation and dissociative experiences associated with the Gothic. Beginning with the train journey, nothing is what it appears to be, from the people they meet to the social life of London. The false “aunt” who greets them at Victoria Station resembles her portrait only to Bettina’s careless eyes, for the woman who greets them, as the narrator notes, has an aquiline nose unlike the portrait of their Aunt Josephine, rapidly darting eyes, strong perfume, and a satanic “full yellow eye, the iris almost black” (257). At the aunt’s house, the narrator misinterprets all she sees as evidence of her aunt’s wealth, such as the house’s thick carpets, “immense mirrors separated by gilded columns” (256), a large bed “like an Oriental throne with rose-silk hangings” (257), and “pictures of women . . . in different stages of the bath” or “asleep in a strange position with nothing on” (261). To a more experienced observer, and to the readers of the novel, the mirrors, red hangings, and pictures of nude women establish it as a brothel, an impression confirmed by the barred windows that the narrator sees but does not understand. Of much more concern to her is that she and Bettina, accustomed
to sleeping in the same room, have been given separate rooms with large beds. The two sisters have always operated as a pair, with the elder narrator curbing Bettina’s superficial judgments and passionate nature. On the trip to London, for example, Bettina encouraged the stares of strange men and accused the narrator of wanting to be an old maid: “You are a sort of nun. You never feel as if all your blood had been whipped to a syllabub” (249). Now physically separated from the sister who acts as her wiser self, Bettina sees only the admiration she attracts and not the danger she courts by her failure to curb sexual desire. The separation of the sisters suggests Sedgwick’s conception of the Gothic separation of the self from something to which it normally has access: in Bettina’s case, the expression of her sexual desire now that her sister is not present to restrain her.

Determined to read events through the frame of family and proper social protocols, the narrator dangerously misinterprets the people she meets as well as her surroundings. In one room, the narrator sees a woman, clad in a “kimono of scarlet silk embroidered in silver” (262), a red kimono signifying prostitution. The woman addresses her in a non-European foreign language through Lamia-like “lips so brightly red, they looked bloody” (261), as if feasting on a victim’s blood, a vampire in all but name. Her “aunt” hurries down the hall dressed in “a gown all covered with little shining scales, like a snake’s skin” (262), a sign of her role as the Satanic serpent in this place. The narrator then sees a silent man ascending the stairs and wearing a hat in the house, like the physician in Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher,” whom Poe’s narrator sees on the stairs with a “countenance [wearing] a mingled expression of low cunning and perplexity” (317). Robins’s narrator is told that the man is the doctor, but this answer, like all those she receives at the house, obscures the issue. If he is the doctor and not merely one of the woman’s clients, his presence suggests the vampire’s capacity for contagion, for the woman who is “ill” but “not very” (265), as the narrator is told, may have sought treatment for a sexually transmitted disease or possibly an abortion. Physicians or scientists in Naturalism, like Dr. Mandelet of *The Awakening* or Dr. Ledsmar of *The Damnation of Theron Ware*, serve as truth-tellers against whom reality may be tested; in romances like Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “The Birthmark” or “Rappaccini’s Daughter,” their devotion to science warps their humanity; but in the Gothic setting of Poe’s story, as in the brothel of Robins’s *My Little Sister*, they confirm the corruption of the place by their complicity with the institutional structures that it contains, signifying a knowledge of evil that they both possess and suppress.

The deceptions culminate in a supposed society dinner party in which the sisters are introduced to a number of men. Clad in their new dresses, the narrator in white and Bettina in green, both colors of innocence, they de-
scend the staircase on their way to dinner and see themselves “going by in mirrors between the golden columns. The whole place was full of tall girls in white, and little girls in apple-green, wearing forget-me-not wreaths in their hair” (265). In addition to its allusion to the traditional mirrors of the brothel, the scene epitomizes the reflection and refraction of their previous selves, momentarily together yet fractured by the repeated images in the mirrors that ironically multiply the many “little sisters” who will “fill” the place that they currently hold in the immediate confines of the brothel and the larger world of white slavery. At the table, the conversation ostensibly centers on racehorses, but the men speak in double entendres about the women of the house, including the “foreign lady” upstairs (271). A crack in the facade appears when a man comes in and introduces himself as “Williams” when, as Bettina artlessly blurts out to the table, he is actually Guy Whitby-Dawson, a friend of the Helmstone family. He blandly denies his identity, knowing that in this place his false name will protect him and that he can easily shed it when he leaves the house. The girls, by contrast, will be forced into new names and identities that they can never shed and will never leave the house of their own volition.

Robins emphasizes the violation of the girls’ innocence through the narrator’s misreading of the attention that the men shower on Bettina: her visual pleasure at seeing Bettina the center of attention contrasts ironically with the erotic, near-pedophilic charge that an old roué, known as the Colonel, receives by encouraging Bettina to perform as a little girl, another instance of the corruption of British institutions and individuals. At their urging, Bettina, already trained to please men, sings songs of childhood, including “Where Are You Going To, My Pretty Maid?” (the song that gives the English edition of the novel its title), and she holds “her green skirt with both hands, like a child about to curtsey. . . . Such a baby she looked!” (301). The narrator’s fond musings are soon shattered, however, when the lone decent man in the group takes her aside and tells her that she is “in one of the most infamous houses in Europe” (286). Throughout the novel, social pressures have conspired to keep the narrator ignorant: her mother’s ominous hints about her Indian childhood notwithstanding, the narrator has been thwarted in her attempts to gain knowledge of the world, not only by being forced to abandon her medical education but also by being kept ignorant of the power of sexual desire. As Molly Hite suggests, the “overriding theme” of the novel “is that feminine innocence is sustained by a calculated withholding of exactly the information that might allow women to protect themselves” (528).

Now the narrator learns the dangers of male sexual desire and its connection with empire. Her informant tells her “women are needed” (295) in
prostitution because men’s nature demands them and explains that the British fleet is anchored off the Irish coast because more women, and implicitly women under colonial domination, are available there than at Malta. Men and their institutions—“the Army and the Royal Family” that the narrator had once revered—rationalize the exploitation of women in much the same way that their imperialist ideology justifies the subjugation of nonwhite sovereign nations. As he reveals these details to the narrator, her informant promises to help her escape, but she can pass unnoticed only if she leaves Bettina behind to distract the male customers. The narrator escapes, takes a cab to her real aunt’s house, and demands immediate rescue for Bettina, but she is conscious that her only hope of rescue has forced her to leave her sister behind, the sister who represents the most vulnerable part of herself.

But there is no help for her or for Bettina as one institution after another fails her. Naturalism and the Gothic depend on a revelation of a hidden, horrifying reality beneath a placid surface and the revelation of brutal truths without the individual’s ability to rectify them. The sense of inevitable events closing in sustains itself both psychologically and spatially, with characters trapped by walls, prisons, or institutions that thwart their attempts to escape a set of tragic consequences. In *My Little Sister*, the walls that surround Bettina are both literal, in the barred windows of the brothel, and figurative, in the indifference with which the police and other established institutions greet the news of Bettina’s disappearance. The real Aunt Josephine Harborough has been too entangled with the false values of society and the equally false values of theosophy to pay attention to her brother’s family; now, still invested in a sense of national superiority, she refuses to believe the narrator’s account because “it isn’t possible. This is England” (305). The police, who to the narrator’s surprise keep a list of brothels, are mildly interested to learn that Bettina is an upper-class girl but are indifferent to her abduction. The procurers “meet the trains,” a policeman tells her, but are “not allowed” to be arrested (325), protected by governmental institutions that proclaim a defense of women but refuse to enforce it. Only the narrator feels a sense of urgency to rescue Bettina before she is sexually abused and spirited overseas, but since she cannot remember the house number or street of the brothel, and the cabman, when found, does not recall the house, she is helpless to act. Ranny, Bettina’s suitor turned detective, traces Bettina to Paris but loses the trail. The horrifying reality of sexual abduction and the equally horrifying reality of institutional indifference the narrator encounters send her into a lengthy fever, like the brain fever of domestic fiction. She awakens to “a feeling quite safe and sure, at last, that Betty was free” (342) and a vision of “Betty leaning out of heaven” (344), from which she concludes with relief that Bettina is dead.
My Little Sister indicts prostitution as just one form of corruption in institutional structures built by and for men but upheld with the complicity of women. As suggested by the endless mirrors of the brothel, the marriage market and prostitution market mirror each other in the selling of girls prized for their youth and innocence. The same code that protects the men in the brothels with false identities endorses the exploitation of young women eroticized as victim or vampire: the near-pedophilia of Bettina's forced performance for the Colonel, and the brazen patchouli-and-red-kimono sexuality of the painted woman. The disreputable Madame Aurore, who scouts for the white slavers, and the madam who emphasizes Bettina's forced performance of innocence to increase anticipation in “the jaded” (296) are the mirror of women like the mercenary Lady Helmstone, who measures female flesh and marriage prospects in much the same way.

Nor does enclosing the domestic sphere, as the girls’ mother does, provide a solution. Like the girls’ aunt Mrs. Harborough, who refuses to believe that prostitution can touch middle- and upper-class women, the girls’ mother leaves them vulnerable to exploitation by failing to educate them. Domestic ideology and their overprotected country life, where windows had been shut abruptly against male intruders like the Colonel, are mimicked and doubled in the brothel’s closed and barred windows. But in this domestic space ruled by a dominant woman, male intruders are welcomed, not excluded or providentially struck by lightning bolts. The damage done by male institutions, including those that promote such destructive domestic ideologies as female ignorance of sex and desire, distrust of technology, culturally sanctioned narratives of female weakness, and a lack of geographical awareness of their surroundings, has rendered both Bettina’s fate and the narrator’s response to it a preventable tragedy.

“The Third Circle”

Like My Little Sister, Frank Norris’s “The Third Circle” uses Gothic Naturalism to explore the disappearance of middle-class women into forced prostitution, with similar underlying anxieties about ethnic Others gaining possession over white women’s bodies. First published in The Wave on 28 August 1897, the story, like My Little Sister with its references to the Coronation, authenticates its Gothic elements through contemporary references. “The Third Circle” takes place on San Francisco streets and alludes to real individuals and sensational events, such as the “murderers of Little Pete” (Fung Jing Toy), a Chinese leader killed on 23 January 1897, whose funeral Norris had covered for The Wave, and the See Yups, one of the Chinese as-
sociations or tongs. The title refers to the “three parts of Chinatown—the part the guides show you, the part the guides don’t show you, and the part that no one ever hears of” where a “strange, dreadful life . . . wallows . . . in the lowest ooze of the place” (Norris 103). As Karen Keely points out, Norris spares little concern for “yellow slavery” or the well-documented traffic in Chinese women that arose with the Chinese Exclusion Act, yet that, too, is a significant context because “The Third Circle” was “written after the ten-year extension of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1892” (Keely 144). Told by a narrator who hears the tale from others, the same retrospective narration as in *My Little Sister*, it tells of a young engaged couple who wander into “a See Yup restaurant on Waverly Place” (103) and find themselves enmeshed in the “third circle” of Chinatown, a Gothic plot that parallels that of *My Little Sister* in expressing anxieties about white women held in sexual slavery by racial Others.

The story is told in two parts. In the first, Miss Harriett “Harry” Ten Eyck and Tom Hillegas, her fiancé, are touring San Francisco. They are “from the east” and, like tourists everywhere, go out of their way to find unique spots unfrequented by other tourists like themselves. Charmed by the exotic nature of their surroundings, Hillegas pauses a moment to reflect on “Harry” Ten Eyck as a beauty of “unmixed American stock,” with her old Dutch name signifying the first settlers of New York. His reflection emphasizes the story’s obsession with racial purity, now heightened by the contrast of their Chinese surroundings. Aroused by the unbroken expanse of her white skin and its connotations of sexual and racial purity, he kisses the “little crumpled round of flesh that showed where her glove buttoned” (105), a circle of whiteness that mirrors the circle of Harriett’s engagement ring and later her tattoo. His act seals his possessorship of Harriett, the erotic promise of her flesh, and the whiteness that her heritage and her skin both signify to him.

As they enter the deserted restaurant, which “might just as well be in China itself” (104), Harriett and Hillegas wonder why the guides have never shown them this spot and ask the mixed race Kanaka/Chinese “fortuneteller” to tell their fortunes. Instead, he offers to tattoo Harriett’s little finger with the figure of a small butterfly, a gesture that will pierce Harriett’s unbroken white skin, penetrating the surface and impregnating it with a foreign dye, a foreshadowing of the sexual violation she later endures. More daring than Hillegas in her quest for the exotic, Harriett declares that a tattoo would be “awfully queer and original.” Her “marquise” (diamond engagement ring) will hide it, she tells Hillegas, who worries that marring her skin with a tattoo will make it so that she “never could wear evening
dress” (105), a statement that shows his concern for her skin as a trophy of her whiteness. The permanent tattoo of the butterfly symbolically displaces Hillegas’s kiss and his engagement ring, and it foreshadows another displacement by marking her as the permanent property of the space she now inhabits.

As in other Gothic tales like *My Little Sister*, nothing is what it seems, and seemingly harmless buildings reveal themselves to be prisons, disorienting the characters in time and space. As Robins does in *My Little Sister*, Norris creates a disturbing sense of tension through the characters’ inability to interpret their surroundings, including the oddly empty spaces in a crowded neighborhood, the Chinese fortuneteller who is neither Chinese nor a fortuneteller, and the tattoo itself, which turns out to be less a butterfly than “a grotesque little insect, as much dragon-fly as anything else” (106). To an alert San Franciscan, the situation would have set off alarm bells because of its distortions of time and space: The restaurant is within sight of “Aunt Harriett’s rooms” yet it is “in China” and deserted. The fortuneteller-tattoo artist is racially marked right down to his “brown teeth” (105) and offers only one form of tattoo. More sinister events follow: when searching for a waiter, Hillegas sees a Chinese man adding up accounts and assumes the imperial authority of the white man by ordering him about in pidgin: “I say, John . . . Get plenty much move on. Hey?” But in another reversal of expectations, the Chinese merchant speaks in a more upper-class dialect than Hillegas: “You will, no doubt, be attended to presently. You are a stranger in Chinatown?” (106). The merchant is a stranger, too, having leased the shop from the See Yups who own it. In this dreamlike atmosphere, time is distorted and lengthens as Hillegas “stayed for some little time while talking to this man” (107). When he returns to the restaurant, Harriett Ten Eyck has vanished, and “no white man” ever sees her again (107).

In the second part of the story, the narrator seeks out information on Harriett by enlisting the aid of a “Plaza bum,” Manning, who takes him to a “slave-girl joint under Ah Yee’s tan room” (108) or fan tan gambling place. Three white slave women live there with Ah Yee and “a policeman named Yank,” all races made equal in corruption by addiction to *yen shee*—“the cleanings of the opium pipe” (108). The men find the women “four floors below the tan room . . . in a room about as big as a big trunk” (108), which suggests not only imprisonment but entombment, a death in life akin to that suffered by Madeline Usher in Poe’s story. One of the women, Sadie, is “a dreadful-looking beast of a woman, wrinkled like a shriveled apple, her teeth quite black from nicotine” (109) as she smokes a cigar. Sadie cannot speak unless drunk, but even after the pair give her ample amounts of gin
and ask her about “Harriett Ten Eyck,” she claims not to remember her. She then thrusts out her left hand, with a butterfly tattooed on the little finger: “Say, how did I get that on me?” (110). It is ironically true that “no white man” ever sees Harriett again, for Sadie is no longer Harriett, after a stint of forced prostitution when she was purchased “from a sailor on a junk in the Pei Ho river” (110). Her teeth are now as black as those of the tattoo artist were brown, a suggestion not only of her new race but of her vampiric preying upon outsiders as an opium peddler and a prostitute. Living in a form of death in life in her gravelike hole, Sadie sells opium to the prisoners at San Quentin, and the contamination that she sought by inviting the tattoo has spread until its color, and its contamination, pervades her teeth and body.

Both My Little Sister and “The Third Circle” preach the dangers of the victim becoming a vampire, since in its logic the body of the white woman, once violated, cannot be redeemed and no trace of whiteness remains. The woman herself disappears, as Bettina does in My Little Sister, or assumes another racial identity, as in “The Third Circle.” Harriett’s smooth skin becomes wrinkled; her white skin and teeth turn black. Only the tattoo, the mark that once “married” her to Chinatown and rendered her identity permanent, unlike the temporary marquise, remains intact from the woman she had been twenty years before. “The Third Circle” anticipates the white slavery panic in its warnings about the safety of the white woman who ventures a little too far in looking for an adventure in the unknown parts of a city, its censure of the overcivilized and overconfident man who carelessly refuses to see the ominous signs around him and fails to protect the woman in his care, the malevolent racial Other who presses white women into prostitution, and the inevitable downfall of the white woman who, crossing the racial barrier, becomes as addicted to degradation as she is to opium. Like the curse of a granted prayer, Harriett/Sadie’s desire for the “queer” and exotic and Bettina’s wish to please and attract men have ironically taken them to places they could have dreamt of only in nightmares, and having once crossed this line, neither can ever return to the white world.

In their anxiety over whiteness, both works deliver a surface warning about the need for curbing women’s adventurous spirits. In the Gothic and Naturalistic environments of the white slave narrative, the only means of becoming neither victim nor vampire is to die, as Bettina does. But both Norris and Robins suggest that the deeper threat arises from entrenched institutional indifference, from male complicity in endangering women, and from carelessly arrogant misreadings of ethnic Others through the lens of Empire and white superiority. As revealed through the sensational Gothic and Naturalistic elements of each work, however, the real horror lies not
only in the forced prostitution of a nation’s women but in the indifference and lack of will that governmental institutions display where women’s lives and women’s bodies are concerned.

Notes

This chapter is also part of the author’s book Bitter Tastes: Literary Naturalism and Early Cinema in American Women’s Writing (Athens: U of Georgia P, 2016). It appears here with permission of the press.

1. All references to Maggie: A Girl of the Streets are from Crane: Prose and Poetry.
2. According to Katie N. Johnson, “the prostitute fatale represents the deadly part of pleasure, the evil side of the flower . . . the dangerous potential of unchecked female sexuality” (168).
3. In tracing the connection between the figure of the vampire and governmental corruption, Marilyn Michaud links “the consumptive and oppressive habits of the vampire” to “the eighteenth-century fear of corruption, tyranny, and degeneration” (Michaud 61). Later in the Progressive Era, as a result of the popularity of the destructive temptress played by Theda Bara in the film A Fool There Was (1915), based on Rudyard Kipling’s poem “The Vampire” and Edward Burne-Jones’s painting of the same name, the term would acquire its secondary meaning of a sexually active and predatory woman who lures men to their doom.
4. For a comprehensive overview of theories of the Gothic, see Monika Elbert and Bridget M. Marshall’s introduction to Transnational Gothic: Literary and Social Exchanges in the Long Nineteenth Century.
II

Horrors of the Civil War and Its Aftermath
5

Domestic Gothic in the Civil War
Fiction of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps (Ward) and Ambrose Bierce

Monika Elbert

O well is it their mothers, their sisters cannot see them—cannot conceive, and never conceiv’d, these things. . . . One man is shot by a shell, both in the arm and leg—both are amputated—there lie the rejected members. Some have their legs blown off—some bullets through the breast—some indescribably horrid wounds in the face or head, all mutilated, sickening, torn, gouged out. . . . Such is the camp of the wounded—such a fragment, a reflection afar off of the bloody scene—while over all the clear, large moon comes out at times softly, quietly shining.

—Walt Whitman, Memoranda during the War

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Ambrose Bierce, usually not juxtaposed, actually come to similar conclusions about the devastation caused by the Civil War in their framing of a Gothic narrative that revolves around the mourning for the loss of a stable sense of home and homeland. A picture emerges of a suffering woman or mother, who represents the security or sanctity of a past (historically or psychologically) that can be no more, or of a child bereft of its parent. Whereas Phelps is usually seen as a sentimental writer, her Naturalist Gothic tendencies emerge as she displays, in her most popular novel mourning the Civil War, *The Gates Ajar*, a horrifying tableau belonging to the subplot: a doting mother goes up in flames as a result of her son’s reckless playing with matches. Likewise, Bierce, who is usually seen as a Naturalist Gothic writer, often turns to sentimental images—the vision of a mother, or a baby, or the hearth—with which to juxtapose the horrors of the bloody battlefield associated with military men. The strange contrasts established by both create a sense of yearning and grieving: both authors depict the walking dead in a kind of surreal Gothic setting to evoke the need for healing.¹
The image of the Union rent asunder by the Civil War is depicted as a broken home. I am collapsing the realms of the domestic (female) and the battlefield (male) as I focus on uncanny spiritualist phenomena resulting from the ordeals of war. Both writers, Phelps and Bierce, work within a Gothic framework of ghostly soldiers to renew a sense of nation-(re)building through a call not to arms, but to the domestic hearth. Ghostly troops generally point to the home, women’s sphere, as the place for recovery and healing, and mourning women sit with the mementoes and memories of the dead in their parlors, so that the dead come back to life. The evocation of the past cannot put the dead to rest; what Brian Thomsen has said of Bierce could be applied to Phelps as well—that the Civil War “was a soul-shattering experience that required an exorcism” (Thomsen 7). Both Bierce and Phelps move toward the other-worldly to make sense of the carnage on the battlefields. Both authors’ Gothic rendition of the Civil War is tinged with the recall of ghosts associated with the Spiritualist movement. It is the domestic parlor that brings a semblance of normalcy back to the Gothic revenant, although the juxtaposition between domestic space and Gothic bloody battlefields ultimately makes the home that much more unheimlich and the war experience that much more grotesque.

Critics have discussed the gender stereotypes attached to both men and women during the war. Men had to prove their manhood by acquiescing toward death in the military, and letters show that men would rather have gone to battle even if they were gravely ill than not participate and later be labeled cowards (McPherson). In Victorian America, “manhood” was equated with “courage” and war was the test of man’s courage (Blight 63). But soldiers’ letters attest to the homesickness of soldiers and their deep concern for their wives and children (Marten, Civil War 123–32). As David W. Blight points out, “Letters were a humanizing element in a dehumanizing environment, evidence that however foreign civilian life might come to appear, something called ‘home’ still existed” (59). In a romanticized image of home in a Currier and Ives print from 1862, “The Soldier’s Dream of Home,” the sleeping soldier on the battlefield finds safe haven in a dream about his wife and child. Similarly, another Currier and Ives print, “Home from the War,” shows a soldier (with nary a tatter in his uniform) returning to his gorgeously dressed wife. Women, for their part, had to put on a brave face for the men who died and left them widows (Fahs 146–49). But as various critics point out, these celebratory myths hide the truth of pain and suffering. Phelps and Bierce remedy that situation by painting the most grotesque vision of war that denies the comfort of home and gothicizes the stable influence of the family, the mother. Alice Fahs, quoting from Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s “A Sacrifice Consumed” (Harper’s Maga-
zine, January 1864), in which a Union woman loses her lover at Antietam, sets up the binary between the image of the beautiful soldier and the grieving wife or lover: “There are heroes who take their lives in their hands . . . [who] face death with a smile, and we do them honor. But there are martyrs at humble firesides who give up more than this. They empty heart and home of life’s life-love [and] go back to their desolate days from which all the beauty . . . has been departed . . . working in lowly trust til the Rest comes” (147). This vision offers an empty heart and hearth, not a pleasant vision for women in mourning.

Elizabeth Duquette asserts that Phelps tried to avert the Gothic mode in The Gates Ajar: “The gothic uncertainty must be contained to stabilize the insecurities introduced by the too real horrors. Sentimental discipline—the conversion of rebellious emotions into loyal ones—is more likely to generate security than gothic inversion or instability” (96). Disagreeing with Duquette here, I suggest that the Naturalist reader dealing with post-traumatic stress would need to confront the Gothic brutality to heal the pain wrought by a senseless wartime universe. Sentimentalizing events to make them seem normal would give the wrong impression of a world gone topsy-turvy, and that easy vision of bereavement would have accorded with a misguided religious notion of grieving, one that Phelps finally shows as simplistic (through the figure of Reverend Bland). Duquette disagrees with a critic with whom I would concur. Bonnie Honig, in her Democracy and the Foreigner (2001), challenges the romantic vision of keeping the Gothic under cover, as citizens of a democratic nation need to know the Gothic truth: “The idealization of romance needs to be tempered by gothic overtones to assist readers in learning to cope with the ‘responsibilities and challenges of democratic citizenship,’ thereby accustoming readers to the strangeness of the law and the precarious nature of the democratic present” (qtd in Duquette 96).

The Unheimlich of Phelps’s Civil War Home

The house feels like a prison. I walk up and down and wonder that I ever called it home. Something is the matter with the sunsets: they come and go, and I do not notice them.

—Mary, in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, The Gates Ajar

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s The Gates Ajar, written during the Civil War (begun in 1864) and published in 1868, became the most popular novel Phelps would ever write for her time (with the sale of 80,000 copies in America). Its appeal, as a consolation narrative, was its antidote to the grieving that so many Americans, Northerners and Southerners, felt in the wake
of the Civil War. In her autobiographical *Chapters from a Life* (1896), Phelps specifically remarks that her novel was intended for the suffering women of the nation: “I do not think I thought so much about the suffering of men—the fathers, the brothers, the sons—bereft; but the women,—the helpless, outnumbering, unconsulted women; they whom the war trampled down, without a choice or protest; the patient, limited, domestic women, who thought little, but loved much, and, loving, had lost all” (Phelps, qtd in Sizer 264). When she had occasion to take a backward glance at her book in her essay “Immortality and Agnosticism” for *North American Review* (1893), she does admit that the “passionate beliefs of youth and the quiet faith of middle life cannot be formulated in the same manner” (569), but she also insists that the message of her book still holds true: “The human argument for a divine truth, as called into expression by the effort of a girl’s pen, has never been overthrown by any counter conclusion of the woman’s more mature and cautious religious faith” (569). She recalls the thousands of letters she received after the book’s publication: “They were the letters of the bereaved;—from all countries, all ages, all sorts and conditions of men” (575). Obviously, the occasion of grieving, the fallen soldier in the Civil War, became a universalized experience of grief for the many readers, worldwide. Phelps explains the pain that accompanied her reading of these epistles: “Sometimes I used to lay them aside, awaiting a courageous moment to read through the tale of woe which even the personal blessings and affectionate prayers that loaded them could not mitigate” (575). Though Phelps announces that she destroyed the letters several years since, she can still remember the cries of woe: “How shall I bear this anguish? Comfort me, for I am left desolate! Help me, for my heart is broken! Where is he whom my soul desired [etc.]” (575). The injunctions on the part of the letter writers became stronger: “Prove to me that I shall find my lost and chosen friend! . . . Hasten this which you call Heaven, if it means that which you aver!” (575). Several skeptical readers asked her whether her powers were supernatural and, if so, the source, whether of darkness or of light: “How knew you this? Did an angel speak it in the ear? Did a spirit guide your pen? . . . Are you a deceiving prophet, sent to confuse the people? Or, is the spirit of Almighty God upon you?” (576).

Phelps’s *The Gates Ajar* casts a magical spell and offers a healing balm to her readers, but not without including discordant images that permitted readers to confront ghosts of the past in order to exorcise them. Phelps, like the wise woman of the novel, Aunt Forceythe (an obvious homonym of foresight), is endowed with second sight; like the grieving protagonist, Mary Cabot, she becomes a medium to contact the spirits of the other world. Mary, one of the many grieving female characters, records her
thoughts in journals to access the subconscious and the spirit world and
learns to be like her Aunt Forceythe, who is much like Phelps the writer and
consoler. Phelps was no stranger to supernatural occurrences in her own life.
As Nina Baym describes, the Spiritualist movement (of rappers and tapp-ers, the legacy of the Fox sisters in New York) was very much alive at the
end of the nineteenth century, despite or perhaps because of the demands
of science. Though Phelps would never completely condone the teachings
of Spiritualists or adhere to some of the more occult teachings of Sweden-
borg (which she critiques in The Gates Ajar), she does propose a counter-
movement to the strict Congregationalist or Calvinist teachings of her fore-
bears, a maternal vision that resided on a less patriarchal, less abstract vision
of God and the afterlife.

The legacy of the supernatural could be traced to Phelps’s grandfather,
whose house appeared to be haunted. In two of her autobiographical works,
Phelps discusses the “Stratford poltergeist,” a constant (and tormenting)
visitor to her paternal grandfather’s home for seven years. Both of the Phelps
patriarchs, Phelps’s grandfather and father (Austin), tried to explain the
phenomenon scientifically but could not. Though Elizabeth never encoun-
tered the poltergeist, she did not discount the existence of the spirit or the
spirit world—or that the spirit could be convinced to work for the hu-
man good: “Night upon night I have crept gasping to bed, and shivered for
hours with my head under the clothes, after an evening spent in listening
to the authentic and fantastic family tale. How the candlesticks walked out
into the air from the mantelpiece and back again . . . how the dishes at the
table leaped, and the silver forks were bent by unseen hands” (Gates Ajar xvi;
Chapters from a Life 6–10). Even if Phelps could not channel the spirits, she
did act, like her protagonist Aunt Forceythe, as the inspiring Sunday school
teacher, who taught her students unauthorized versions and visions of an af-
terlife that seemed very much like domestic life, but a much improved ver-
sion. Significantly, the famous astrologer and clairvoyant Evangeline Adams
had Elizabeth Stuart Phelps to thank as her earliest esoteric teacher. Adams
asserted that her introduction both to the occult and to homeopathy, and
the bridge between spiritual and material, was ushered in by Sunday School
lessons under the auspices and tutelage of her famous teacher, Elizabeth
Phelps (Christino 22–25). 4

Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward’s connection to the spirit world offered her
solace when she herself was suffering from a broken heart (with the death of
her close friend—and possible fiancé—Samuel Thompson, who died in the
Civil War) and when she encountered many of the grief-stricken mothers,
wives, and daughters who walked, zombie-like, through the streets of their
town. Her Calvinist Andover minister father, Austin Phelps, would not
have approved of her spiritual philosophy that entertained the possibility of a feminine (even feminist) utopian afterlife, or her sense of a reality that suggested simultaneous lives in two dimensions, lives that were intertwined and mirror images of each other, lives that reflected back familiar faces of the past and present, so that a time warp didn’t exist. The souls of the dead are eerily present in *The Gates Ajar*, so that Aunt Forceythe’s early lesson to Mary is not to use the conditional or the future in terms of her communing with her deceased and beloved brother Roy, but the present tense. She explains: “I have been looking at Roy’s picture a long time, and wondering how he would like the new plan. I said something of that sort to her. Why put any ‘would’ in that sentence. . . . It belongs in the present tense” (60). Aunt Forceythe’s death at the end of the book suggests that earthly time as we know it does not seem to matter—as she has collapsed the two realms and talks to her deceased husband John at the moment of her death. This merging of the realms becomes even more pronounced in Phelps’s next two *Gates* novels, where the bridge to the afterlife is even less clear as the dead and living seem indistinguishable.

*The Gates Ajar* records Mary Cabot’s movement from grief about her soldier brother’s death to acceptance, serenity, and enlightenment. Not much happens in the novel, after we hear straight away that her beloved brother, Roy, has died in battle—not much, that is, except in her mind. Mary’s Aunt Winifred Forceythe, herself grieving after the loss of her husband, visits her to help her with the grieving process—and she teaches her much about the thin gossamer veil that separates this life from the afterworld, so that Mary finally feels the presence of her beloved departed brother in this life. Aunt Forceythe comes down with a fatal disease and an inoperable condition, which causes her rather precipitous death, though she lingers long enough to teach Mary (and her own daughter Faith) lessons about the spirit world. As the erudite but mystical Aunt Forceythe explains using Platonic theory, natural beauty is permanent: “The ideal of everything exists eternally in the mind of God . . . whatever of God is expressed to us in this world by flower, or blade of grass, or human face, why should not that be expressed forever in heaven by something corresponding to flower, or grass, or human face?” (81).

The novel seems initially to be heavily allegorical, in the tradition of earlier mid-nineteenth-century sentimental women’s novels, as Aunt Forceythe finally bequeaths her own daughter, named (heavy-handedly) Faith, to Mary before her death. In a world bereft of men lost to the Civil War, Mary finds solace in a sisterhood or feminine utopian family structure. It is not a world of fake condolences that brings solace to Mary, but a true caring female domestic unit. Phelps ridicules the gossipy women who come to pay their con-
dolences to Mary, and indeed, Mary herself sequesters herself in her room when they make their dutiful visitations. Mary thrives on the power generated by strong women: though her mother has died while she was still young and Mary was but a child (paralleling Phelps's own life), her servant Phoebe becomes her doting mother, and the mistress/servant relationship is overturned. Aunt Winifred Forceythe, also a type of surrogate mother to Mary, is Mary’s own mother’s youngest sister. Although Mary is of childbearing age, it is almost as if her grief about her deceased brother has been translated into grief about a deceased lover (her brother had seemed “heart of [her] heart, life of my / [her] life” [7]). She takes on a maternal role in becoming Faith’s surrogate mother. True of the Civil War world of widows and mourning daughters and sisters, families seem to survive without the strong masculine support by becoming their own support systems. Spiritual mothering seems more significant than biological mothering; Mrs. Bland, a veritable birthing machine, meets her untimely death because of her inability to control her children. Her young son later plays with matches, she catches on fire, and the protective and selfless mother Mrs. Bland attempts to smother the flames with her own clothing, leading to her death: “The little boy—the baby—crept into the kitchen by himself, and began to throw the contents of the match-box on the stove, ‘to make a bonfire,’ the poor little fellow said. In five minutes, his apron was ablaze. His mother was on the spot at his first cry, smothered the little apron, and saved the child, but her dress was muslin, and everybody was too far off to hear her at first,—and by the time her husband came in from the garden, it was too late” (119). The dying mother is comforted by Aunt Winifred, who tells her she can exert motherly power over her children from the otherworld. Mrs. Bland’s earlier presentiment and vision of heaven seem to be coming eerily true: “I hope there’ll be a great many babies there. I should be perfectly happy if I always could have babies to play with” (95). Dr. Bland, the husband, is now inconsolable, and Mary learns to sympathize with the erstwhile cold and rational minister.

Mary explores her feelings, more genuine and pagan than Evangelical, as she initially feels despondency and anger at God. She sentimentalizes all that she remembers about Roy—the “flash in his eyes,” “the smile that lighted the house all up,” “the pretty soft hair” that she used to curl and kiss about her finger, “his bounding step, his strong arms that folded me in and cared for me.” Then a discordant image, as in Bierce, follows—with a mixture of sentimentality and horror, she thinks of God in a Gothic Dickinsonian way: “Roy snatched away in an instant by a dreadful God.” She thinks of Roy’s body lying “there in the wet and snow” and then again “in the hideous wet and snow” (7). The aversion toward death is quite visceral as she
remarks upon “the bare, blank sense of physical repulsion from death, which was all the idea I had of anything when they brought him home” (7). Still, as time goes on, she realizes, “One can live without dreams and crowns and thrills. . . . I have not lost them. They lie under the ivied cross with Roy for a little while. They will come back to me with him. ‘Nothing is lost’ [Aunt Winifred] teaches me” (108). Aunt Winifred’s hopeful message ultimately sinks in so that Mary is literally enlightened; her aunt comments, “Mary, what a light in your eyes!” (109). Mary ultimately shares her aunt’s vision; earlier, “Her [aunt’s] eyes assumed that distant look, ‘like the eyes of those who see the dead’” (26), and later, her aunt speaks to the spirit world: “I have been talking it over with them all the afternoon; it seems to be what they want” (59). The stern minister and Mary’s pastor, Dr. Bland, doesn’t understand Mary’s initial grieving process and embitterment (the feeling of “Hell” in her heart [5]) and chides her for her disbelief in a Christian sense of an afterlife. He too must undergo a conversion toward humane grieving when his own wife dies from a freak accident, which seems as senseless as Roy’s death in the Civil War.

No heroic mode of male suffering (as recounted in many Civil War stories) is celebrated in Phelps’s work; rather, she presents a softened view—perhaps a feminized way of expressing or perceiving pain. To accept the horrors of war and death, the men in Phelps finally have to admit pain and undergo a type of catharsis. It is not tough soldiers but inflexible ministers who undergo Aunt Winifred’s conversion in *The Gates Ajar*. Aunt Winifred talks about her deceased (minister) husband’s enlightened view of suffering and of heaven—which he was able to achieve, “early in life, by the death of a very dear sister” (115). Aunt Winifred realizes that the local ministers of Mary’s town still need such enlightenment. She is able to transform the clergy (Dr. Bland and Deacon Quirk) into more open-minded, receptive ministers, with less dogmatic views of heaven, but only after their own encounter with death and grieving. Aunt Winifred intuitively knows that Dr. Bland will need to suffer to have a less abstract view of God and the spirit world. Almost clairvoyantly, she predicts, “There is some trouble in store for him; some intense pain,—if he is capable of intense pain, which shall shake his cold, smooth theorizing to the foundation. He speaks a foreign tongue when he talks of bereavement, of death, of the future life” (62). When his wife dies in the house fire, only Aunt Winifred is able to console him, and he grows to see her way of understanding the other realm. Another man who makes a breakthrough after experiencing deep sorrow is Deacon Quirk; although less abstract and kinder than Dr. Bland, he still adheres, initially, to church doctrine. However, he is so touched by Aunt Winifred’s compassion that he quite loses his usual composure and falls apart at her passing.
In a sentimental vein, he bestows a “single white carnation” upon the dead woman—by laying it between her hands. At the same time, he accepts the reality of death (a real dead body): “The great awkward fellow bent down as simply as a child, as tenderly as a woman, and left the flower in its place” (137, emphasis added). He ends up like a child “sobbing” and hiding “his face in his great hands” (138). In this way, the men in the text are humanized through grieving, and the ubiquitous and universal feeling is transformed into a cathartic experience, so that the male realm of withholding emotion in the face of death is overturned. The real horror, then, is the absence of women who would keep the home front intact.\(^6\)

**Bierce’s Lost Boys, Mangled Maternal Bodies**

There, conspicuous in the light of the conflagration, lay the dead body of a woman—the white face turned upward, the hands thrown out and clutched full of grass, the clothing deranged, the long dark hair in tangles and full of clotted blood. The greater part of the forehead was torn away, and from the jagged hole the brain protruded, overflowing the temple, a frothy mass of gray, crowned with clusters of crimson bubbles—the work of a shell.

—Ambrose Bierce, “Chickamauga”

Ambrose Bierce, though having spent time as a tough, swaggering soldier in the Union Army, recounts many moments of hauntings in his Civil War stories. Bierce enlisted for four years and was commended for his bravery “before receiving a serious head wound at Kennesaw Mountain in 1864” (Faust 197). As Drew Gilpin Faust remarks, “Bierce . . . found the role of survivor troubling. The war had left him, he observed, ‘sentenced to life,’ and the war dead haunted him and his prose” (199). Bierce himself had declared he was haunted by “visions of the dead and dying” (Faust 196). I would argue that a disappearing domestic ideal also haunts him, and possibly too because his own home life growing up was far from positive. These intense intersections between the world of the living and the world of the dead always include some scenes of the domestic Gothic, as in the case of Phelps, as we have seen. This nostalgic moment emerges too in Walt Whitman’s *Memoranda during the War*, when he discusses the carnage of the battlefield at Chancellorsville in contradistinction to the “radiance of the moon, the round, maternal queen, looking from heaven at intervals so placid” (25), as if feminine nature had little to do with masculine civilization. Looking at the mangled bodies, Whitman thinks of how the pain would affect the “mothers and sisters,” how the realm of the domestic is bloodied by war. Ul-
timately Bierce is more like Darwin than Whitman in his attitude toward corpses on the battlefield and toward nature in general, but Bierce’s sense of the loss is magnified by the extreme homelessness felt by the characters in his stories. Moreover, one can see the turn to the modern in a senseless universe. Lisa Long has compared Mary’s “rebellion” and doubt in *The Gates Ajar* to Henry Fleming’s “psychological permutations” in *The Red Badge of Courage*, and Winifred’s “heaven” in *The Gates Ajar* with Bierce’s “spectral landscapes” in his war stories to reveal “The Gates Ajar’s shadows and depths, and its resonance with the fiction of the modern period” (801–2).

In the most famous of Bierce’s war stories, “An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge,” the soldier who is caught between the interstices of life and death (in the process of being hanged) finds solace in a near-death experience that actually does culminate in his death. In Peyton Farquhar’s phantasmagoric moments right before death, he imagines standing “at the gate of his own home. All is as he left it, and all bright and beautiful in the morning sunshine. . . . As he pushes open the gate and passes up the wide white walk, he sees a flutter of female garments; his wife, looking fresh and cool and sweet, steps down from the veranda to meet him. At the bottom of the steps, she stands waiting, with a smile of ineffable joy, an attitude of matchless grace and dignity” (53). We anticipate what happens the next moment; as he feels “a blow upon the back of the neck,” the unassuming Farquhar dies by hanging. The flashback recalls the domestically happy moments before his enlistment in the army, in the nostalgic time before he joins the Confederacy—his life as a well-to-do and respectable planter in Alabama who was wont to spend his evenings with his wife “sitting on a rustic bench near the entrance to his grounds” (307). In fact, it was the domestic vision of the lovely wife on the veranda that kept him out of the war (a bit suspiciously) too long—until he was in his mid-thirties, when he felt the need to prove his manhood once and for all by fighting for a cause: “He chafed under the inglorious restraint, longing for the release of his energies, the larger life of the soldier, the opportunity for distinction” (307). The war actually arrives at Peyton’s door, with the arrival of a Northern spy scouting the area and discussing the plans for the bridge, leading him into a trap.

This seizing of the moment of past domestic bliss offers solace but terrors to other haunted soldiers in the Bierce war stories. It is not so much the carnage of the battlefield that inspires ghosts but the memories of home that resurrect ghosts. Dead wives, dead mothers, dead brothers, and dead fathers make their appearance in the most grotesque and uncanny fashion. For example, in “The Affair at Coulter’s Notch,” Captain Coulter, who had joined a Northern regiment, despite his wife’s Southern allegiances and protestations, finds himself in a *tableau mort* scene after a Northern bat-
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talion has taken hold of his plantation house and bombarded it. Coulter has had orders from the colonel to fire upon the plantation area, where the rebels are holed up, and which he knows is in the vicinity of his house. The victorious colonel’s battalion then finds a makeshift house in the plantation—creating a ghoulish domesticity, with “women’s clothing” and “cupboards” in the quiet house. “The colonel established himself and his military family in the plantation house. It was somewhat shattered, but it was better than the open air. The furniture was greatly deranged and broken. Walls and ceilings were knocked away here and there, and a lingering odor of powder smoke was everywhere. The beds, the closets of women’s clothing, the cupboards were not greatly damaged. The new tenants for a night made themselves comfortable” (282). Though the staff officer is only “thinking of his unfinished supper” and the orderly “of what might possibly be in one of the casks on the other side of the cellar,” the colonel and his men make a horrifying discovery. After descending the stairs to the cellar, the group finds a living man crouching over a dead woman (holding her dead child), her hair intertwined with his beard, creating a most grotesque scene. “The long dark beard was the hair of a woman—dead. The dead woman clasped in her arms a dead babe. Both were clasped in the arms of the man, pressed against his breast, against his lips. There was blood in the hair of the woman; there was blood in the hair of the man” (283). “A yard away,” we hear, in the jagged terrain of the clear, “lay an infant’s foot.” The reader intuits what is coming, as the officer asks the man (whom they first deemed dead) in the dark cellar about his identity and that of the corpses. The response, a type of inversion of the domestic, is “this house belongs to me, sir.” The even more grizzly answer comes when he identifies the dead as “My wife and child. I am Captain Coulter” (283). Thus, Captain Coulter is one of the living dead in this predicament. And more than that, he appears to be described as victimized slave of Southern Gothic: “His complexion was coal black; the cheeks were apparently tattooed in irregular sinuous lines from the eyes downward. The lips, too, were white, like those of a stage negro.” In his anguish, his appearance is not Northern or Southern, but that of the disempowered black victim, torn from his family. His alliance is neither with the Union nor the Confederacy. The sentimental power (and horror) of the dead infant’s foot merges with the picture of the father, Captain Coulter, with his charred and burned face.

There are moments of patricide (as in “A Horseman in the Sky,” due in part to differing allegiances) and Brudermord in these Civil War ghost stories, the consequences of which bring grieving protagonists and defeated soldiers back to dreamscapes of their childhood. In “The Mocking-Bird,” the Union soldier Private Grayrock shoots a man but can’t find the
fallen victim. Utterly fatigued, he falls asleep and experiences an idyllic but tormenting dream about his childhood with his twin brother. In his imagination/dreamscape, he sees them “strolling along the banks of the stream” and exploring the landscape. We hear the domestic dream he has: “Hand in hand and heart in heart, they two, the only children of a widowed mother, walked in paths of light through valleys of peace, seeing new things under a new sun.” The private hears the sound of a songbird, but these idyllic moments of his memory are fleeting: “The good mother was dead, the meadowside home by the great river was broken up, and the brothers were parted between two of their kinsmen.” It turns out that the boys had been sent to different relatives in the North and the South and unwittingly became enemies. William, the dreamer son, regrets the loss of the lovely mocking bird, which had belonged to the mother, and which ends up in brother John’s possession in the South. These two become the feuding brothers of Gothic plots and, as might be expected, William Grayrock hears the haunting sound of the bird and then finds this brother’s body in a thicket close by: William realizes that the man he killed was his brother John.

Perhaps the most allegorical but sentimental ghost story by Bierce is “Chickamauga,” which recounts the horrors of a deaf-mute six-year-old child who loses his way in the forest as he plays soldier with the wooden play sword he has carved for himself. The boy wants to imitate his military father. After conquering imaginary enemies, the boy realizes he is terribly lost and “cries for his mother, weeping, stumbling, his tender skin cruelly torn by brambles, his little heart beating hard with terror—breathless, blind with tears—lost in the forest.” The scene becomes even more sentimentally painful when we hear that “on the little plantation, where white men and black were hastily searching the fields and hedges in alarm, a mother’s heart was breaking for her missing child” (314). The child unwittingly chances upon an approaching army of Union soldiers, but, unfazed, he sees that though these were men, they “crept like babies.” Finally the darkness recedes and becomes much worse “as the haunted landscape began to brighten.” In the end, we realize that the army has been firing upon the child’s house, now engulfed in flames. The child stumbles toward the house, making a most macabre discovery—the burning of his home and the death of his mother: “There, conspicuous in the light of the conflagration, lay the dead body of a woman—the white face turned upward, the hands thrown out and clutched full of grass, the clothing deranged, the long dark hair in tangles and full of clotted blood” (318). The horror is excessive as the boy encounters the mangled body of his mother: “The greater part of the forehead was
torn away, and from the jagged hole the brain protruded, overflowing the temple, a frothy mass of gray, crowned with clusters of crimson bubbles—the work of a shell” (318). The maternal image, which should have offered solace to the boy and hope to the nation of soldiers, becomes not just a sacrificial victim but an object of horror in her death. The boy, whose only human connection, as a deaf-mute, had been to his mother, finds himself orphaned and alone, with no one with whom he can communicate.

It is not the horrors of bleeding corpses on the battlefield that so haunt the Bierce protagonist survivors, but the terrors of a world bereft of the mother and the yearning for what she represented in terms of security. The motherless deaf-mute child shrieks—“something between the chattering of an ape and the gobbling of a turkey—a startling, soulless, unholy sound, the language of a devil.” In this Naturalist Gothic, the language of the disposessed—the child, the deaf-mute, the soldier—is allied with the language of animals and the devil. The Civil War renders soldiers orphaned boys who have lost their way and are confused in a motherless universe—and they walk zombie-like through the landscape. Bierce himself locates his loss of innocence at the battle of Chickamauga, as he once asserted: ‘When I ask myself what has happened to Ambrose Bierce the youth, who fought at Chickamauga, I am bound to answer that he is dead” (Faust 199).

In the last two Bierce stories I examine, the idea of living with the dead (family) is paramount and it is hard to distinguish between the living and the dead in the phantasmagoric visions conjured up by soldiers. In “Three and One are One,” we have another instance of a family rent asunder by the differing allegiances to North and South. A young Union soldier, Barr Lassiter, during his first leave of absence approaches his Southern home and is overjoyed to find that “nothing, apparently, changed. At the sight of each dear and familiar object he was profoundly affected.” It is the nighttime, though, and thus deceiving. He sees his father coming out of the house, “bare-headed in the moonlight,” but is surprised and hurt that his father does not greet him: “The elder man looked him sternly in the face, stood a moment motionless and without a word, withdrew into the house” (119). He goes through similar moments of failed encounters and experiences dejection; his mother sits “on a low stool by the hearthside, the only article of furniture in the place,” but she does not recognize him. His phantomlike sister, also in the room, doesn’t acknowledge his presence. Feeling overcome by the optical illusions wrought by the moonlight, the soldier returns to camp but seeks out his home again the next day. A friend from his youth greets him and warns him of the sorry series of events that have befallen his family—the house was destroyed by a Union shell a year be-
before, and his family members died in the devastation. All that greets Soldier Barr is the “fire-blackened foundation of stone, enclosing an area of compact ashes by rain” (120).

Bierce suggests that the hauntings will continue to disrupt American history and offers an interesting parable in “The Other Lodgers.” Here a character named Colonel Levering advises a traveler he meets at the Waldorf Astoria, a luxury hotel in New York, not to lodge at the “Breathitt House” in Atlanta, based on his own horrifying experience at the hotel. He found himself a prisoner in a house of horrors as a ghostlike night clerk led him into the hotel. Awakening in a moonlit room, he discovered “at least a dozen other lodgers” lying on the floor with him. Ghoulishly, though, he states that “these men were obviously all dead.” The living guest, the colonel, complained to the night clerk, who simply vanished, ghostlike. The next morning, the caretaker of the property sets the traveling Northern colonel straight: the hotel had been a hospital during the siege of 1864, and the colonel had slept in “the dead-room”—the so-called night clerk used to book patients, but he too had been dead for a long time.

If Phelps’s Civil War survivors find hope in a type of sisterly/maternal bonding based on a positive form of spiritualism, very distinct from the rhetoric of stern earthly ministers, Bierce’s protagonists suffer in a world bereft of mothers and in a horrifying world of suffering spirits who cannot be put to rest. If the spirits of the past can’t be exorcised, both authors show an attempt to resuscitate the domestic milieux of the past to find meaning in an ever more senseless world. Phelps can recreate the world of the mothers in a utopian and heavenly realm beyond, but Bierce can only yearn for the domestic hearth now missing. Although the ruins of Southern plantations are the Gothic emblems of Bierce’s Civil War works, he, like Phelps, does not take sides as he shows the devastation to all humanity. Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Ambrose Bierce actually come to similar conclusions about the suffering caused by the Civil War in their framing of a Gothic narrative that revolves around the mourning for a stable sense of home or homeland. This sense of loss is felt in the image of a tormented woman or mother, who represents the security of a past no longer salvageable or tenable. The Naturalist Gothic depiction of unsettling domestic tableaux offers a grotesque image of sympathy for a family structure that can be no more.

Notes

1. This is not the dreadful and dreaded mother that Claire Kahane evokes in her rendering of the typical Gothic plot, in her essay “The Gothic Mirror.” In Kahane, adolescent children, especially girls, attempt to extricate themselves from the hor-
rifying mother’s hold. In my reading, the mother is a figure that Phelps and Bierce invest with positive meaning, though she is viewed as a vestige of a bygone time.

2. Elizabeth Young only briefly deals with Phelps, but her focus on Louisa May Alcott’s *Hospital Sketches* is relevant: “In making the ‘republic’ into a ‘home-like’ place, Alice begins to emphasize the image of the national ‘household’ over that of the injured body politic. Intertwined metaphors of injury and domesticity suffuse her Civil War fiction” (Young 99). Alice Fahs asserts that “a feminized war literature put white women center stage in the war, demanding recognition not only of the women’s contributions to the war effort but also, as the war went on, of their intense suffering” (148). Fahs also shows how grief-stricken women like Phelps, making sense of the war, incorporated an ideology of domesticity in their vision of a feminized theology (148).

3. Cf. Phelps’s story “Oath of Allegiance,” with the return of the dead man, Harold, through a letter that had been intended for his beloved but was lost in the war; the ghostly return of the lover through the long-lost letter plunges the living betrothed, Miriam, into a continuous engagement with her dead sweetheart.

4. Evangeline Adams “was particularly taken with the teacher who taught her Congregational Sunday School class, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps . . . a local celebrity” because of her international best seller *The Gates Ajar*, and because of her feminist inclinations (Christino 22).

5. In Phelps’s work, the little boy’s aggressive action (playing with the matches), culminating in the mother’s death, is similar to the actions of some of the reckless boys or soldiers in Bierce’s works who bring catastrophe into the household through their military games or actions. In Bierce’s “Chickamauga,” the deaf-mute child glories in wartime feats with his imaginary sword, until he witnesses the corpse of his own mother.

6. In her story “The Oath of Allegiance” and novella *Comrades*, Phelps uses the letters from heaven, missives from the other world, to describe the spectral presence of the fallen soldier/lover in the devastated household, or the spectral but familial reunion of a shell-shocked soldier with the dead at the graves of the fallen on Memorial Day.
Stephen Crane is regarded as among America’s most important Naturalists, especially for his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets* (1893), which was set in the Bowery district of New York. The same attention to realistic detail, dialect, and environmental forces impacting individual lives that characterized *Maggie* is also present in *The Red Badge of Courage* (1895), his second and most famous work. Critics often supplement the term “Naturalist” with another term—“Impressionist”—when discussing Crane’s specific style, in an attempt to account for Crane’s bold range of metaphors, his reliance on color to create mood, and his tendency to evoke emotion when describing settings. It would be more accurate to say, however, that Crane’s work is indebted to the Gothic, a fact that has been overlooked due to a tendency to see Realism and the Gothic as polar opposites on a stylistic spectrum. This essay examines Crane’s use of Gothic imagery and rhetoric in a range of texts from *Maggie* to later stories, poems, and newspaper articles. Of these, *The Red Badge of Courage* is Crane’s most densely Gothic text, though “The Monster” also explicitly borrows its title and key trope from the Gothic tradition. Although Crane was influenced by Ambrose Bierce’s Gothicism, the uses to which he put this mode were significantly different and uniquely his own. In this essay I show that the single most important image in Crane’s Gothic repertoire is the face that has lost its human appearance and has become uncanny—through strong emotion, mutilation, or death. Crane’s fiction returns time and again to two main themes: death and a condition I am calling the estranged self; both are figured by this trope in his work. Both of these themes are also strongly linked to violence and warfare, themes that inspired Crane’s most effective Gothic
writing, though ultimately the reigning pro-war ideology of his generation pulled his later war writing away from the Gothic.

That Crane read and admired Ambrose Bierce’s collection of Civil War stories, *Tales of Soldiers and Civilians*, published in 1892, is a matter of historical record. “Nothing better exists,” Crane told a friend, speaking about Bierce’s short story “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge” (qtd in Berryman 168). The influence on Crane of Bierce’s Gothic tales and war writing is particularly visible in *The Red Badge of Courage*, in which the world that Bierce created in “Chickamauga” is evident in the gory details that Crane uses to describe injuries, the intense play of ironies, the forest that shifts from being a sunny and innocent field of play one minute to a hellish shadow world of devils and beasts the next. It bears saying nevertheless that Bierce and Crane use Gothic elements in quite different ways. We could call this a question of degree but it is also a matter of purpose. Bierce wrote a number of stories that were clearly Gothic or supernatural or “fantastic” (as the title of the collection *Fantastic Fables* identified them), whereas Crane always uses the Gothic on a purely linguistic or rhetorical level. The Gothic is a metaphorical toolbox for him, whereas with Bierce we can speak of a level of engagement that approaches what critics used to call “genre.” I would use this term with great care since literary theory has convincingly questioned the validity of the notion of genre, moving since several decades to a more pragmatic, performative, and qualified understanding of form. In light of this scholarship it makes more sense to think of the Gothic as a *mode* that combines readily with other modes and forms. Crane’s novel is thus first and foremost a war novel, a realist narrative of an infantryman’s first experiences with combat, belonging to a genre that would become very common in the twentieth century, but it draws heavily on the Gothic for its imagery, atmosphere, and figurative language at certain moments. Bierce also combines the Gothic with other forms—the Western tall tale, the sketch, the fable, the incident of war—but Bierce sometimes allows the Gothic to dominate the story, going so far as to rely on supernatural occurrences; Crane, however, never does.

The most important difference between the two writers’ use of Gothic elements in relation to war is that for Bierce it is a means for describing psychological damage, whereas for Crane it is mainly a language for representing fear and violence. The Gothic allows Bierce to show something that was only beginning to be understood at the time, namely, that war can destroy people psychically as well as physically (Monnet 177). Thus Bierce’s war stories are full of characters with varying degrees of madness, and the Gothic tropes of haunting, the undead, and the uncanny are used to illus-
trate this insanity. This translates into a strong antiwar current in Bierce’s work. What is strikingly missing from Crane’s war fiction and nonfiction prose is an acknowledgment of the possibility of mental injury or trauma. The question that interests Crane far more is how men act in the extreme circumstances of war, what is revealed to them of their character, and how they are changed by the experience. This change, however, is never represented as damage or diminution, but, in keeping with the jingoistic attitudes of his generation, always as a change for the better (if the men survive, of course, or don’t suffer debilitating physical injuries). In Crane’s work, boys become men in the crucible of war. Consequently, Crane rarely uses the trope of haunting, which is Bierce’s favorite trope for traumatic memory, as it would become widely used in the twentieth century.

Instead, Crane generally uses Gothic rhetoric to describe the transformed and estranged state of men in danger, in combat, or in the grips of strong emotion (e.g., fear, rage, drunkenness). Crane is generally fascinated by the situations in which men become something other than themselves, or in which they are subject to forces internal and/or external that are beyond mere volition or personality. One of these conditions that Crane returns to repeatedly in his work is alcoholic intoxication. This is a theme featured centrally in his best-known short stories, such as “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” and “The Blue Hotel.” It is fully present already in his first novel, *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*, in the character of Maggie’s mother, who is arguably the most villainous character in the book. Her role in Maggie’s downfall is presented as a consequence of her unnatural lack of motherly feeling and femininity, since she is represented as very large and very aggressive, but the most terrifying aspect of her character is the fact that she drinks. In his descriptions of the mother, Crane uses a colorful and Gothic-tinged language that renders her fully monstrous. One of the first of these passages describes her luridly: “The rough yellow of her face and neck flared suddenly crimson. She began to howl” (13). She also “screams” and “roars” and “howls” in this altercation with her husband, terms that evoke animalistic violence and serve to compare her to a beast. The incident ends with the mother casting her terrifying attention on her son: “Her glittering eyes fastened on her child with sudden hatred. The fervent red of her face turned almost purple. The little boy ran to the halls, shrieking like a monk in an earthquake” (15). The reference to the “monk” explicitly evokes the British Gothic tradition, but the many references to colors—crimson, red, purple—to represent violent emotion and violence itself are uniquely Crane’s.

If the mother is the most explicitly Gothic character in the novel because of her drinking, there is one other scene in which a full-fledged Gothic vocabulary is used, and this is the fight between Maggie’s brother and the
man who has “ruined” her. It is the only scene of its kind in the book and it clearly anticipates the way that Crane will use the Gothic in *The Red Badge of Courage* and later stories. As in the descriptions of the mother, a lexicon of animality is used to describe the rising tension: “he snarled like a wild animal” (47), “the glare of a panther came into Jimmie’s eyes” (47), “they bristled like three roosters,” and “the bravery of bulldogs sat upon the faces of the men” (48). When the fight actually begins, a darker and more explicitly Gothic vocabulary emerges: “The faces of the men, at first flushed to flame-colored anger, now began to fade to the pallor of warriors in the blood and heat of a battle. Their lips curled back and stretched tightly over the teeth in ghoul-like grins. Through their white, gripped teeth struggled hoarse whisperings of oaths” (48). We see again the typically Cranean attention to color, first “flame-colored,” then a ghastly pallor. The faces of the men serve as a synecdoche for their emotions, but the masklike grin that settles on their features is once again something specific to Crane. It is a symptom of his attempt to render the strangeness and impersonality of violence. The men are no longer themselves; they are grim figures in an event that wholly transcends their individuality. They are no longer even in control of their actions and words. The oaths are given agency as they struggle through the men’s gripped teeth. It is not the men who swear, but the oaths that speak through the men. The description of the fight continues in this highly impersonal and dissociated mode: “their blood-colored fists whirled,” “blows left crimson blotches upon the pale skin.” The sounds they make are not human sounds: “Pete at intervals gave vent to low, labored hisses, that sounded like a desire to kill,” while “Jimmie’s ally gibbered at times like a wounded maniac” (48). In Crane’s fiction, violence transforms men into beasts, but there is also an element of religious ecstasy or frenzy in the passage when one man is described fighting with “the face of a sacrificial priest.” One can note again the focus on the face and the utterly transformed character of the men in the midst of their battle. This scene anticipates in every respect the way that Crane describes combat in his next novel.

As I have mentioned, *The Red Badge of Courage* is the most fully realized Gothic text that Crane wrote, largely because it is the only text wholly devoted to the literary rendering of the subjective experience of fear and violence. This is the topic for which Crane would use the Gothic most often and most fully. The novel has not been read as Gothic in the twentieth century, however. Its reception has focused almost entirely on its ironic treatment of the male rite-of-passage theme, with a critical debate raging for decades about whether the young protagonist Henry Fleming should be read as a hero or as vainglorious coward. I will return to this question in a moment when I discuss the short story “The Veteran” that Crane published a
year after *The Red Badge of Courage*, which shows the same protagonist as an old man reflecting back on his Civil War experiences. For now, I would like to discuss the three main ways that Crane uses the Gothic in the novel. These three ways can be described as atmosphere, battle, and injury/death. By atmosphere, I refer to the way that Crane uses Gothic imagery to create ambiance as well as to describe the setting. This imagery begins in the very first paragraph, where Crane describes the military camp on the bank of a stream whose “sorrowful blackness” was countered only by the “red eye-like gleam of hostile camp fires” in the distant hills (3). This image, giving the enemy army a kind of monstrous form and face, will continue throughout the book, with descriptions of the armies as “huge crawling reptiles” or “monsters wending with many feet” or even “rows of dragons” (15). The dragon image is repeated in the book but another image for the armies, and for the war more generally, emerges at times, anticipating the literature of World War I, and this is the image of the death machine. As Henry watches from a distance at one point, “the battle was like the grinding of an immense and terrible machine to him” (50). What it produces, in a grim travesty of industrial production, is “corpses.” The conceit is reinforced in another line shortly after when the protagonist surveys how “the torn bodies expressed the awful machinery in which the men had been entangled” (51). This is one of the most terrible images of the book and one of the most resistant to military jingoism. It is often cited by critics who argue that the novel is a fierce and ironic criticism of war.

The other main pattern of Gothic imagery, representing injury and death, also seems to fall into this antiwar tendency. These passages are relentlessly demystifying and absolutely uncanny. One, for example, is clearly inspired by Bierce: the man who has been shot through the cheeks. In “Chickamauga” there is a man with a “face that lacked a lower jaw—from the upper teeth to the throat was a great red gap fringed with hanging shreds of flesh and splinters of bone” (51). Crane is clearly thinking of this image when he writes: “Its supports being injured, his jaw hung afar down, disclosing in the wide cavern of his mouth a pulsing mass of blood and teeth” (125–26). We can note how extremely dehumanizing this injury is, especially since it concerns a face which is distorted into an inhuman “cavern” where the mouth should be.

No topic inspired Crane to passages of Gothic figuration of greater intensity or power than those concerning death. The narrator describes being a soldier as “touching the great death,” and it is clear that death is something of a mystery both to the protagonist and to Crane, something both terrible and uncanny in its power to render humans into inanimate objects. Although the first corpse Fleming encounters is more piteous than any-
thing else, exposed in death and avoided by all the soldiers who nevertheless “try to read in dead eyes the answer to the Question” (24), the second corpse reveals something far more terrible to Fleming. It is seated against a tree in a grotesque mimicry of human posture, but the face has nothing human in it. The eyes “had changed to the dull hue to be seen on the side of a dead fish” (47). The mouth once again is the worst feature, open and now an “appalling yellow,” with an ant “trundling some sort of bundle” across the upper lip. In fact, “little ants” are running all over the “gray skin of the face.” The corpse is twice called a “thing” and yet it and Henry “exchanged a long look” (48). Its eyes are “liquid looking” but turn Henry to “stone” even as he shrieks and flees. Looking back at it once more, he sees the ants “swarming greedily upon the gray face and venturing horribly near to the eyes.” The register here is unmistakably that of the uncanny, the confusion of the animate and inanimate, human and insect, living and dead, but the passage also invokes the abject, of which the corpse is the most basic instance. The corpse in this passage is waste, subject to the decomposing activities of ants, and yet his imagination gives it life and agency, as Henry listens to hear if “some strange voice would come from the dead throat” (48).

The third main pattern of Gothicism in *The Red Badge of Courage* is the one already discussed with regard to *Maggie: A Girl of the Streets*—namely, violence as bestiality. This is the most consistent and recurring conceit in Crane’s work, though sometimes it is embellished, as in *Maggie*, with references to religious frenzy or berserker-type madness. War itself is often figured in both animalistic and religious terms, as a “red animal—war, the blood swollen god,” a phrase that is used at least twice in the book (25, 69). More specifically, the moments of combat are described as transforming Henry with a “red rage” into a “driven beast” (35). His teeth are set in a “cur-like snarl” and he cries out “savagely” (94). He is like a “mad horse” and his friend springs at the enemy banner like a “panther” (129, 130). The other soldiers also seem to the youth like “animals, tossed for a death struggle into a dark pit” (95). The lexicon of animality is reinforced with a vocabulary of religious ecstasy: “He had been a barbarian, a beast . . . he had fought like a pagan who defends his religion” (97). The soldiers are in a “state of frenzy,” gripped by “wild battle madness.” The rhetoric also dips into the macabre and satanic at times: the youth feels surrounded by “swirling battle phantoms” (127), his fellow soldiers are “jabbering the while . . . with their swaying bodies, black faces, and glowing eyes, like strange and ugly fiends jigging heavily in the smoke” (124). Combat is thus consistently figured as a state of temporary insanity, in which men revert to more primitive instincts, of animals or of pagans. They are not themselves, and yet they discover through this experience their deepest selves. There is no room for choice and will
power; they act as madmen, irrational and unselfconscious, but they thereby take an accurate measure of their true natures. In the case of the protagonist, he discovers himself a coward on the first day of battle but a hero, a “war devil,” the next. The fact that Crane makes him both has confused critics for over a hundred years, and the reception of the book is defined by the debate over whether Henry is a hero or a craven fool.³

This debate is fueled by Henry’s own uncertainty over the answer to this question in the last chapter. This is the only moment in the novel, and in Crane’s work as a whole, where the trope of memory as a haunting is invoked. When the battles are over, Henry looks over the events of the last couple days and tries to “comprehend himself” (133). He is initially pleased with the public praise he has received, but then he remembers his shameful deeds: running away from battle and abandoning a dying man in a field. These memories are figured in terms of being haunted, by “the ghost of his flight” and “the somber phantom of his desertion in the fields,” and by a “specter of reproach” (134). His conscience itself seems to be figured as a “specter in his path,” to take the phrase Edgar Allan Poe uses in “William Wilson” (the Gothic tale that most perfectly expresses the conceit of conscience as an exteriorized phantom). The final ambiguity in the novel comes from the fact that he is able to chase these phantoms away in the last page and discover in himself “a store of assurance” and a “quiet manhood” (135). Some critics have read this ironically, as a continuation of Henry’s various self-deceptions in the novel, but the narrator fails to make the irony explicit. Instead, he allows Henry to finish the narrative feeling like a man as a “ray of sun came through the hosts of leaden rain clouds” (136).

It has proved impossible to mount a definitive reading through internal textual evidence alone, but a short story published by Crane a year later that revisits the character of Henry Fielding can help shed light on this puzzle. In “The Veteran,” the final story in a collection of eight short stories called The Little Regiment (1896), Henry Fielding is an old man telling eager listeners, including his young grandson, about the fact that he ran from his first battle. The men laugh and admire his courage to admit this potentially shameful fact, but Henry himself has clearly come to terms with it and explains his subsequent actions as a question of having gotten “used to” combat (83). Apparently he acquitted himself bravely after this first flight and achieved the level of an “orderly sergeant.” Crane does not let Henry merely speak of his overcoming of his initial cowardice; the whole point of the story is in fact to prove that Henry is not only a coward, but has become a heroically brave man thanks to his combat experience. The second half of the story begins with the discovery of a fire on Henry’s property. A curious thing happens to Henry’s face at the news. It ceases “instantly to
be a face” and turns into a “mask, a grey thing, with horror written around the mouth and eyes” (84). It is a very striking image, unmistakably Gothic, and could be read either as reacting to fear or as steeling himself to courage, because Henry immediately runs to the burning barn and leads out the horses at great risk to himself. Anticipating the later story “The Monster,” where a black man saves a boy from a fire but loses his face when chemicals fall on him and burn it away, Henry emerges from the fire with no whiskers and very little hair. After he saves the cows, he is reminded by the “Swede” who accidently started the fire (anticipating another famous story with a drunken Swede—“The Blue Hotel”) that some colts are still in the barn. Attempting to save them is a suicidal act, but Henry cries “poor little things” and rushes into the burning barn, which collapses upon him. In this way, the story settles in no uncertain terms the question of Henry’s courage. He may have been cowardly and foolish in his first battle, but the novel and the story both work to demonstrate that he has learned to do his duty, and even far beyond. The ending of “The Veteran” gives his death a decidedly melodramatic flourish, with its description of “the old man’s mighty spirit, released from its body” (86) and floating up into the universe. It is clearly a redemptive ending and is meant to help readers understand Crane’s intentions in the novel. Criticized for writing a novel about a cowardly soldier, Crane uses “The Veteran” to show that Henry’s story is not of cowardice but of learning to overcome a natural fear and become a better man.

Thus, “The Veteran” suggests that combat, far from being psychologically injurious, helps turn vain, selfish boys into good men. In this respect, Crane is entirely a product of his generation, which was defined not only by jingoism and a hawk-like eagerness for imperial expansion but a conviction that war offers men an excellent opportunity to build character. Arguments in favor of the Spanish–American War tended to rely on this belief, and no one was more vocal about the benefits of combat on American men than Theodore Roosevelt (Hoganson 68–87). Debates about the war found men of the Civil War generation far more cautious about the prospect of war than their sons, who had never lived through combat. Although some readers have mistakenly taken The Red Badge of Courage as an ironic and critical account of war by a Civil War veteran, it is more accurate to read it as an argument for the benefits of war as a rite of passage for a young man of the Spanish–American War generation. In fact, reading Crane’s dispatches from the wars he covered as a reporter, in Greece and then Cuba, one is struck by how little Gothic imagery there is in them. Instead, Crane focuses on ironic incidents of war, chance accidents, occasional moments of bravery or cowardice, and other interesting but never horrific details. While covering the war in Cuba, Crane uses the word “gallant” freely, especially in
describing the Rough Riders, and falls completely in line with Roosevelt’s own enthusiastic account of the battle of San Juan Hill. In fact, when describing the “thril of patriotic insanity” that “coursed through us” when he heard “By God, there go our boys up the hill!” he uses the first person plural to emphasize that he was there (“No. 39” 158).

After The Red Badge of Courage, Crane published two collections of Civil War stories, The Little Regiment and Other Episodes from the American Civil War (1896), which contained “The Veteran,” and Wounds in the Rain: War Stories (1900). The earlier collection still bears traces of Bierce’s influence and contains Gothic language, but there are far fewer instances than in The Red Badge of Courage. There are no ghastly corpses or bloody battle scenes. Instead, the Gothic is used mainly to represent mood and atmosphere and the subjective experience of fear. The most interesting story in this regard is “Three Miraculous Soldiers,” which is about a Southern girl hiding three rebels in her barn while Union soldiers occupy her property. Like the heroines of Walpole’s and Radcliffe’s novels, the protagonist is a plucky and intrepid young woman. Crane uses Gothic imagery in this story mainly in one moment, when she creeps down to the barn to help them and is gripped by fear and wonder at the fact that they seem to have disappeared. Because her “dominating emotion was fright” (37), the scene is painted in terms of “shadowy figures,” “monstrous wavering shadows,” “ghoulish whiteness” and “terror after terror” (38). Nevertheless, the Gothic has shrunk in scope from the novel to serve in a far more limited way in the short story collection. It almost never appears at all in the later short story collection, Wounds in the Rain. In fact, the only place that the Gothic reemerges in Crane’s later work in a significant way at all is in a poem, “Do Not Weep, Maiden, For War Is Kind,” in the volume War Is Kind, published in 1900. It is the only poem dealing with war in the entire collection, but it is strikingly dark for a man whose last contracted assignment was a series of celebratory articles about famous battles (Great Battles of the World). In “Do Not Weep, Maiden, For War Is Kind,” the recurring image is “a field where a thousand corpses lie” and the ironic refrain “war is kind” (45). It is clearly an anti-war poem, focusing on the people who mourn the fallen rather than on heroism and combat itself, addressing the “maiden” who loses her lover, the “babe” who loses its father, and the “mother” who loses her son. The image of the “battle-god” from the novel returns, but it is not swollen with blood this time, though his “kingdom” is a “field where a thousand corpses lie.” In other words, the Gothicism is present but muted. The fact that Crane chose a poem to express a criticism of the slaughter produced by war is interesting in light of the way that poetry would become the literary form
most devoted to antiwar sentiment in the twentieth century, especially in the wake of World War I.

I end with a look at “The Monster” (1899), which is, after all, the text by Crane with the most explicit allusion to the Gothic in its title. “The Monster” is also an interesting companion piece to *The Red Badge of Courage* (and especially “The Veteran”) insofar as it returns to the theme of an unheroic man doing heroic deeds. Like Henry Fleming, Henry Johnson is a vain and somewhat foolish young man, very concerned with impressing his employer’s young son and the girls in the neighborhood. He also finds himself performing a deed of utmost heroism with no hesitation, acting on pure instinct to plunge into a burning house in order to rescue the child that has been his friend. If the basic situation resembles Henry Fleming’s, certain key circumstances and results are dramatically different. First of all, Henry Johnson is black, and so Crane indulges in the casual racism of the late nineteenth century in rendering his pride in his appearance comically ironic. For the white nineteenth-century American, nothing was quite so ridiculous as a black dandy. Second, unlike Henry Fleming, Henry Johnson is not changed for the better by his brush with danger; instead, he has the misfortune of being hideously disfigured and going mad. To be precise, he emerges from the fire with no face and no coherent self. The story is not concerned with his abjection only, however, but with the stubborn loyalty of the man whose son he saved, Dr. Trescott, who defies his friends and neighbors by insisting on taking care of what is now an insane and terrifying outcast. One of the ironies of the story is the theme of how heroism and monstrosity, seemingly opposed, are strangely linked: Henry becomes a hero and a monster at once, while Dr. Trescott does so more gradually. If his gratitude to Henry is heroic, his association with the lunatic makes him a pariah in his community and a source of terror as well. “If you’re sick and nervous, Doctor Trescott would scare the life out of you, wouldn’t he?” one townsman says to another (52). Thus, the Gothic language in the story is mainly used for the effect that Henry’s face (or rather, lack of) has on people: fear. Like Frankenstein’s monster, Henry makes people flee in terror when he appears. Their descriptions of what they saw are always framed in an explicitly Gothic rhetoric: “a thing, a dreadful thing” (46) and “a monster” (47).

One plausible way of reading the story has been as a commentary on human prejudice and mob violence. In this light, the monster is not Henry Johnson but the community that insists on seeing him as one and treating both him and his protector accordingly. Yet the story seems to present a dilemma for the reader in terms of how to read Dr. Trescott’s insistence
on keeping the terrifying and now lunatic Johnson under his roof. Readers have wondered if Crane does not wish Trescott to be understood as going too far. The dilemma the story presents is an ethical double-bind that situates the story at the heart of the Gothic tradition. Like Shelley's Frankenstein, Melville's Pierre, or James's Turn of the Screw, “The Monster” uses a Gothic framework in order to probe the mysterious event-horizon of ethics, the zone where our moral compass fails and our judgment doubles back on itself. Often, in such texts, two radically incommensurable moral paradigms or worldviews encounter each other and create dramatic situations that both demand and defy the reader to position him or herself with regards to the story. The combined force of the imperative and impossibility to do so is often the source of the most compelling and unforgettable Gothic narratives, such as this one.

I would like to return to the issue of faces and the uncanny effect of disfigurement so powerfully staged in “The Monster.” As mentioned earlier, this is arguably the single most important rhetorical and thematic feature that consistently runs through Crane’s fiction, and is often the locus of Gothic effects. What seems to have fascinated Crane about the human face as a trope most of all is how it permitted him to represent divided or failed identity. In other words, Crane returns again and again to the moments and situations in which subjects are not themselves. To take a very simple example, one of Crane’s most famous stories “The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky” is about drunkenness, and the way that people became altered, behaving as both themselves and yet not themselves, by strong drink. When Scratchy Wilson is sober he is “the nicest fellow in town” who “wouldn’t hurt a fly,” but when he drinks he terrorizes the town with his gun and stalks the sheriff (116). Combat is another situation in which people act in ways that they do not fully control with their conscious mind, as we have seen in The Red Badge of Courage, which is why it was considered such a prized test of character in the 1890s (and continues to be a mythic site of masculine identity formation).

That such transformations are uncanny is obvious, and the most uncanny transformation is effected by death itself. Once again, Crane’s writing focuses on the face as the site where this strangeness is most visible and most terrifying. No story illustrates this better than the late tale “The Upturned Face” (1900). Set during the Spanish–American War, the story is about the terrifying power of the human face in death. Two young soldiers tasked with burying a body are violently intimidated by the corpse’s “chalk-blue” face and “gleaming eyes” that “stared at the sky” (297). Scarcely able to touch the body to search it for personal effects, they are most particularly upset by the prospect of dumping dirt on its face. Recalling the horror that Henry Flem-
ing feels when he finds a dead body with ants on its face, the story has no particular plot except the fact of the dread felt by the soldiers as they confront the upturned face of the corpse. This is among the most succinctly Gothic of Crane’s tales: death is its theme, and the uncanny is the framework through which the potent affect generated by the presence of death is mediated. Just as the German unheimlich is able to signify both the familiar (heimlich) and its opposite, so the dead face is able to signify both the human subject and its inanimate opposite, dead matter. The story ends with the dreadful sound that the dirt makes as it falls on the body, “plop,” a sound that underscores the fact that the body has now become indistinguishable from the substance in which it lies.

With the trope of the disfigured face, Crane finds a way to figure a theme that was emerging in the late nineteenth century and which would be a core feature of twentieth-century intellectual life, namely, self-estrangement. Without recourse to psychoanalytic tropes of repression or sexual neurosis, Crane finds a powerful image for the dissolution of the coherent and self-identical subject that was emerging in the latter decades of the nineteenth century. If I have conflated the uncanniness of the divided self (alienated by madness, emotion, or intoxication) with the uncanniness of the corpse, that is because Crane was equally fascinated by both and used the same trope to figure them. Whether dead, drunk, or deranged, the face was Crane’s favorite and most Gothic synecdoche for the strangeness of the human psyche in a secular and scientific age.

In conclusion, Crane’s place in the Naturalist movement must be supplemented by an acknowledgment of the crucial role played by Gothic rhetoric in his work, especially around the theme of the modern subject in the grip of forces both inner and outer beyond his control. The Gothic offers Crane a toolbox for writing about the ways in which violence and warfare estrange men from themselves and irrevocably alter them, either in death or in the ecstasy of combat. Far from being opposed to Realism or Naturalism, the Gothic is an integral part of the Naturalist aesthetic and a crucial means of figuring the forces that overwhelm and annihilate the modern subject.

Notes

1. All references to Maggie: A Girl of the Streets are from The Works of Stephen Crane vol. 1.

2. Although the standard critical reference for the uncanny is Sigmund Freud’s essay about the effect produced by a confusion of the familiar and unfamiliar, there is another kind of uncanny that Freud mentions only briefly in his discussion of Ernst Jentsch and that is more relevant for Stephen Crane’s work: the uncanny pro-
duced by a confusion about the animate or inanimate nature of a given figure or object (*The Uncanny* 135–36). For the abject, the best discussion remains Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982).

3. According to Michael Schaefer, John J. McDermott is representative of critics who argue that Crane meant readers to see Henry as a hero, while Weihong Julia Zhu argues that Henry’s courage is “absurd” (2). Schaefer’s article offers a concise summary of this debate.

4. All references to “The Monster” are from *The Works of Stephen Crane* vol VII.

5. For a discussion of Henry Johnson’s facelessness in relation to issues of disability as they intersect with race, see Schweik.
“The Lynching of Jube Benson” does not quite seem to fit among the short fiction of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Alone among Dunbar’s published tales, this 1904 story uses a typical “club story” frame setting (in this case a social gathering at a gentleman’s library) in which a white middle-class professional relates—in an interior narrative—a tale of rape, murder, and lynching to an entirely white internal audience. It is uncharacteristic, too, in Dunbar’s prose fiction in its direct treatment of racial violence. It strikes more directly than in any of Dunbar’s other tales at the roots of lynching in the white psyche, showing what A. Robert Lee has called “a sure grasp of the process whereby racial typologies are created” (170).¹ Dunbar’s atypical directness and the ferocity of the tale going beyond Dunbar’s usual sadly ironic discussions of racial foibles may be best understood as an entry into a national conversation about the causes and prevention of lynching. They may be profitably seen particularly as Dunbar’s response to the then-popular short fiction and nonfiction essays of plantation tradition author Thomas Nelson Page.

Gavin Jones calls Paul Laurence Dunbar a “wily manipulator of literary conventions” and “a subtle over turner of racist stereotypes” (20), and many critics in recent years have noted Dunbar’s complicated engagement with and subversion of other works of the plantation tradition, sometimes using and sometimes resisting that genre’s nostalgic program for national reconstruction of the past after the Civil War. However, at the turn of the century those plantation tradition writers experimented with new narrative techniques and darker themes borrowed from Gothic magazine fiction. Turning from a project of national reconstruction focused on build-
ing a collective white nostalgia toward the plantation past, writers began to use literary technique to reshape the racist fears of the nation in order to justify Jim Crow laws and lobby for disenfranchisement—and at that moment, Dunbar picked the conventions up and repurposed them. Dunbar had made little use of the classic plantation fiction frame story as used in the nostalgic Uncle Remus stories of Joel Chandler Harris and the earlier sentimental tales of Page. In that frame technique, so deftly skewered by Charles Chesnutt, outside frames often involve encounters with picturesque African American narrators, who often recounted the tales of a glorious and sadly lost antebellum past. It was not until mounting racial tension and the eruption of racial violence caused Thomas Nelson Page to adopt a different sort of frame tale that Dunbar responded.

The typical plantation frame tale frequently dramatizes a confrontation between a majority, Northern, or outsider listener in a postbellum present, and a minority, local speaker associated with the past, with the frame moderating the reception of some lesson, frequently accompanied by a dollop of sentimental nostalgia. The “club tale” frame that Page presented in “The Spectre in the Cart” is traditionally suited to a different sort of story and requires a different sort of audience response.

“Club tales” are commonly framed first-person accounts of adventures, delivered to an interested but frequently doubtful internal audience of a friend or group of gentlemen. The telling often takes place in some sort of class-appropriate safe haven for such disclosures—drawing rooms after dinner, libraries, clubs. Seeing some of its early development in story cycles like those “Strange Stories of a Nervous Gentleman” contained in Washington Irving’s 1824 Tales of a Traveler, the form often involved experiences with the supernatural or the exotic: experiences beyond the pale of the polite society that often frames them. As John Clute notes, the club story is “both a story and a device to mandate its reception” that frames the interior narrative “in a way that eases our suspension of belief during the duration of the telling . . . but surrender[s] the tale to the judgment of the world once it has been told” (422). Thus, the form, which had reached a peak in popularity and in flexibility of application near the turn of the twentieth century, was adapted to humorous treatment of fantastic or tall tales, tales of conflict with the colonial other (including Conrad’s Heart of Darkness, serialized in 1898), and ghost stories hinging on skepticism or credulity (including Henry James’s masterful psychological transcendence of the common form in 1898’s The Turn of the Screw). First Page and then Dunbar use the Gothic conventions of this popular form to represent and model for the audience a “seeing through” of aspects of Romantic racial stereotype to what each considers the haunting Naturalistic truths of racial violence.
Page’s “The Spectre in the Cart” appeared in the July 1899 “fiction number” of *Scribner’s Magazine*, one of the top four “quality” literary magazines of the period, with a large, predominantly middle-class national audience. The story got second billing in newspaper advertisements as “Thomas Nelson Page’s latest Southern Story,” though an advertisement in the previous month’s *Scribner’s* calls it more forthrightly “a tale of a Southern lynching.” Despite those prepublication blurbs indicating the sensational appeal of the subject, the first few pages of Page’s short story promises a very different kind of tale.

Readers of the first pages of “The Spectre in the Cart” find all the standard tropes of a club tale story of haunting. The outside-frame narrator, a doctor, visits his old college friend Stokeman, now a judge, in a rather vaguely described setting, and with a device at least as old as Poe, he finds him much changed and uncharacteristically grave. Stokeman is presented as a type quite familiar to readers of nineteenth-century ghost stories—the once-skeptical investigator of the supernatural, “a hard headed man, without a particle of superstition, if such a thing be possible in a land where we are brought up on superstition from the bottle” (179). The younger Stokeman had arrogantly asserted not only that “no difficulty could exist which a man’s intellect could not overcome” but also that “there was no apparition or supernatural manifestation, or series of circumstances pointing to such a manifestation, however strongly substantiated they appeared to be, that could not be explained on purely natural grounds.” The narrator provides a brief backstory to cement Stokeman’s bona fides as a fearless ghost hunter: he had single-handedly, “on the bet of a box of cigars,” debunked a supposedly haunted house on a plantation, after it had already “baffled all investigation, and got into the newspapers, recalling the Cock Lane ghost, and many more less celebrated apparitions.” Though “parties had been organized” and failed, and something like a popular panic had hit, Stokeman ended it by “not only putting the restless spirit to flight, but capturing it and dragging it into town as the physical and indisputable witness both of the truth of his theory and of his personal courage.” The reader’s genre expectations are further cemented when the narrator notes that the older, graver, chastened Stokeman admits to having seen apparitions, using vaguely scientific terminology: “Yes, I have seen ghosts. They not only have appeared to me but were as real to my ocular vision as any other external physical object which I saw with my eyes.” When the narrator overeagerly offers to explain what must have been a hallucination, Stokeman notes, “I explained it myself. . . . But it left me with a little conceit and a little more sympathy with the hallucinations of others not so gifted” (179). The reader now likely expects a story telling how Stokeman wrestled with his skepticism.
and came out unshaken but sympathetic, probably chastening the outside frame narrator out of his apparently overeager and unsympathetic skepticism. Instead, Page gives us a complex story of race relations, political conflict, rape, murder, and lynching in the post-Reconstruction South, which both uses and extends a complex racial mythology. By the time the story delivers the promised “Spectre in the Cart,” along with another apparent ghost hanging from a tree, the canny reader will know that the tale is not negotiating the conflict between reason and superstition, evidence and appearance. The Gothic trappings mask Page’s attempt to make his Northern readers rethink both their views of racial violence and their ideas of where the guilt should properly lie, part of an extended campaign of racist mythmaking to change the public opinion on race that will include not only fiction like his novel Red Rock, but a series of controversial essays published in major US magazines, many of them gathered in his 1904 The Negro: The Southerner’s Problem. This mythmaking, which uses pseudo-scientific discourses of racism to link black political and social aspiration to rape and lynching, would serve as a justification and a mask for segregation, oppression, and racial violence. The mythical complex most famously informs works like Thomas Dixon’s 1905 novel The Clansman and its 1915 film adaptation, The Birth of a Nation.

Page’s early and wildly successful construction of the plantation tradition of literature invoked romance and nostalgic sentiment in an attempt to conjure up the myth of the old plantation home as the site of a lost agrarian paradise available imaginatively to whites both North and South. In those works, Page’s previous cast of African American characters are childlike, loyal, sometimes mischievous or mildly disruptive, but always kept in line. As Page came to see further change in society and race relations as inevitable, though, his mythology turned more threatened and threatening. In “Spectre in the Cart,” he begins to lay out his new vision of a precariously restored Southern civilization under threat. This darker worldview, as Michael Flusche argues, coincides with Page’s abandoning of “nostalgic moralizing for a quasi-scientific, more rational approach” (481). The result is a disquieting combination of the Naturalistic, the Gothic, and the sentimental. Page creates a vision of class and race in the post-Reconstruction South that, while depending on the domestic sentimentality of earlier work, resorts more and more to animalistic and violent African American stereotypes, symbolizing threats to an only recently reestablished social and domestic order.

Significantly, the story is set shortly after the reestablishment of white supremacy in politics following the Reconstruction period. Joseph Keener has noted that Page’s fiction “co-opts African victimization” and fully em-
braces “the Lost Cause idea that the Reconstruction was much worse than the Civil War” (58). Dark hints of that struggle are used to frame the current plot. The inside narrator, Stokeman, says he has been state’s attorney for his county since “we emancipated ourselves from carpet-bag rule” (180). Throughout the story there are references to military occupation or “gun-rule” and past election-related violence “when the two sides were like hostile armies” (180, 181, 180). The story begins at a crisis point, when a “storm suddenly appeared about to rise again.” The threat to order and to Stokeman’s office is explicitly related to the possibility of a resurgent black vote: those who “had appeared to have quieted down and become indifferent as to politics were suddenly revivified” (180).

The delicate balance that allows peaceful coexistence under white rule is described as “lines” being “sharply drawn”: the two antagonists of the story will be those who threaten to cross those lines and seek the advantages of a higher position (180). Father and son Joel and Absalom Turnell represent the stereotypes of African American threat, one mollified to apparent harmlessness by being raised under slavery, the other representing in his violence and danger what Page thought of as the “new issue.” In Page’s moral universe, the glue that binds the classes and allows sincere feeling across the color line will be the exchange of personal favors and obligations. His villains will be those who participate dishonestly in that economy or who threaten the system. Joel Turnell is described as “one who went over” when lines were sharply drawn. Joel is presented as “an easygoing, palaver-ing old fellow with not much principle, but with kindly manners and a likable way.” He enters falsely into the exchange of favors: “always” having “claimed to be a supporter” of Stokeman, he “professed to vote with the whites” (180). Though Stokeman judges him “a chronic liar” and thief, Stokeman has defended him when he was brought to court for his thefts. In the system of loyalty and favors, Joel claims “the emoluments and privileges of friendship” simply for gain.

Page uses Joel’s son Absalom as a vehicle for his ideas of racial devolution among the blacks whose character was set by the war or the ideals of reconstruction—a member of the “new issue.” Bestial, bow-legged, of “brutal strength,” and covered with scars, Absalom has a propensity not just for personal violence but, more dangerously for Stokeman, for upsetting the status quo of regional politics, where the African American voters have been suppressed into apathy about politics. Turnell, always a bully, ran away before the war, and may have been corrupted, Stokeman insinuates, by serving in the Union Army. He returns a symbol of brutal violence, fighting members of his own race but also ready to advocate for violent confrontation in order to vote. He whips up the black voters to “go to the polls next
day prepared to ‘wade in blood to their lips’” (181). In his speech he claims to have “drunk blood’ before, both of white men and women, and he meant to drink it again.” Absalom thus serves as one of the first “black brute” stereotype figures in American literature.

Against this threat to white dominance and black apathy is arrayed not just Stokeman, but John Halloway, his knight in the field. Halloway is an idealized, small-holding farmer, an epitome of Romantic family values and an ideal of white masculinity, bound in a web of affectionate obligation to his social superiors. These obligations are wrapped around the mythological center of the spotless white-woman-as-conscience. Halloway helps Stokeman not for himself, but because Stokeman’s mother, a Sunday school teacher, whom Halloway saw as “an angel,” taught Halloway the way of peace, helped Halloway’s courtship, and took care of his “old people” during the war (183). It is Stokeman’s mother’s handkerchief, given as a wedding present during the lean years after the war, which Halloway wears as a favor from his wife for luck. These obligations cross not only lines of wealth, but serve as the only legitimate ways to cross the lines of color and politics in the work’s moral universe. In the past, at his own wife’s urging, Halloway rode all night to attempt to save the sick wife of a nearby poor black farmer, who had implicated him during Reconstruction. The farmer, in turn, sacrifices his life almost unnoticed after attempting to warn Halloway of Turnell’s malice.

It is Halloway who, refusing on principles to carry a gun, goes alone and faces down Turnell in the midst of an incendiary rally, just as Turnell’s rhetoric and weapon-waving begins to intoxicate the crowd. Halloway had fought and beaten Turnell as a boy, and when Halloway faces him, Absalom “faltered . . . jest like a dog givin’ way before a man who ain’t afraid of him” (182). In a metaphor that Dunbar later employs very differently (as he does with all of Page’s central mythological figures), Page shows his idea of the two races in the behavior of their respective champions in the contest. As Turnell’s credit in the community is destroyed, the situation is disarmed. The black crowd performs the usual token statements: that Turnell never convinced them, that he was an outsider, that his violence was all drunken ramblings (he would rather “drink whiskey’ than blood). The mask of cordiality slips back into place, the lines are again sharply drawn, and the “greetings” the dispersed black voters gave to Halloway and Stokeman are “as civil and good-humored as if no unpleasantness had ever existed.”

Riding home, Halloway is ambushed and killed, his wife killed, and the house set ablaze. While the rape of Halloway’s wife is not made explicit, it is carefully encoded in the text: as the witnesses to the crime scene note, “There had been a terrible struggle. She had lived to taste the bitterness
of death, before it took her." After recounting that, we return to the outer frame for a moment, while the narrator Stokeman gestures toward an unspeakable trauma: “He put his hand over his eyes as though to shut out the vision that recurred to him” (183). The crime is solved by a combination of primitive forensics and the murderer’s incompetence: when interviewed, the elder Turnell draws from his pocket the handkerchief-token, symbolic of the intergenerational angelic moral nature of white womanhood, and he has a stick of lighter-pine in his pocket that matches one left at the scene of the arson.

Page’s story summarizes the legal drama that ensues. He uses a pattern that is common with him: “outside newspapers” and political machinations and procedural abuses are arrayed against local whites, who act throughout with patience, control, and some sense of justice—even the lynchers (187). Political forces are aligned against Stokeman as the prosecutor, and his attempts to bring the Turnells to justice are full of reversals. Finally, Joel is hanged legally, while Absalom, after several delays and retrials, is abducted from prison and lynched by a calm and organized masked band who were “perfectly quiet and acted with the precision of old soldiers” (186). While Stokeman describes the mob in terms of overwhelming power—he experiences a “sensation of utter powerlessness and insignificance; just as in a storm at sea, a hurricane, or a conflagration. The individual disappeared before the irresistible force”—all proceeds coldly and in military fashion with little raised passion, bestial or otherwise (187). Stokeman is taken prisoner by the mob but is treated politely and allowed to address the crowd, whose spokesman rebuts with their frustration the imperfect and slow system of justice, even going so far as to offer a policy suggestion: “The remedy was,” Stokeman paraphrases, “to do away with all but proper defences and execute the law without unreasonable delay.” If the white mob is uncannily ordered, Absalom is forced into disordered abjection. He turns superstitious and confesses to his guilt when brought toward the scene of the crime, the now-ruined former rose-bower of the Halloway’s property: “He began a sort of wild incoherent ramble; confessed that he had murdered Halloway and his wife, but laid the chief blame on his father, and begged them to tell his friends to meet him in heaven.” Stokeman is allowed to leave for the actual hanging: no blood is on his hands, though “outside newspapers” will later claim otherwise.

The much-delayed ghost story appears near the end of the tale. Riding home one night after a political speech that praises the dead Halloway and denounces the lynchers, Stokeman passes the turnoff to the ruined Halloway place, seeing there the ghosts of Joel on his coffin as Stokeman saw him riding to his execution, and Absalom hanging from the tree. In a trope
familiar to readers of the Naturalistic ghost stories of the period, Stokeman is unable to reason his way out of the vision at the scene, though the next day, a blooming dogwood bush and a dangling tree limb provide explanation for the apparitions. However, for Stokeman, “it was hard to believe that these were the things which had created such impressions on my mind—as hard to believe as that the quiet cottage peering out from amid the mass of peach-bloom on the other slope was one hour the home of such happiness, and the next the scene of such a tragedy” (190). The memory of the murders, but particularly the “unspeakable” crime against Halloway and his wife, cause the tale-telling Stokeman to say, “Yes, I have seen apparitions. . . But I have seen what was worse”; then he “put his hand suddenly before his face as though to shut out something from his vision.” Page doesn’t show the audience’s reaction, but the modeled reaction seems clear: the guilt over the execution and lynching of the traditional ghosts of the Turnells, who were executed on his evidence, bother him substantially less than the more real and more pressing specter of black social agitation, political threat, and violence, particularly rape. In one of his much later contributions to the lynching debate, in an essay for McClure’s, Page tellingly notes that “the negro is the specter that stands ever at the door” (“The Great American Question” 567).

In 1904, when Page reprinted the story in his collection Bred in the Bone, he also continued the conversation on rape and lynching in his “The Lynching of Negroes, Its Cause and Its Prevention,” published in the January issue of the North American Review, and later republished in a book of essays, The Negro: The Southerner’s Problem. While Keener, one of Page’s most sensitive recent critics, has attempted to isolate Page’s fiction from these more nonfiction essays, the connection between their views and “The Spectre in the Cart” is clear (69–70). “The Lynching of Negroes” begins with an unproven assertion: that Northern teachings and the resulting frustrated urge for (what he thinks is an impossible) social equality for blacks has caused an epidemic of rape of white women by black men. Lynching is presented as the regrettable but inevitable result of this epidemic. While Page presents statistics, he ignores them in his argument in favor of his core myth of white womanhood under siege. Confronted with the statistics that most lynchings are not even purportedly about rapes, he concludes, “Though lynching began as punishment for assault on white women, it has extended” to other crimes (36). Mary Church Terrell, a friend and former Washington neighbor of Dunbar, and the founder of the National Association of Colored Women, called the essay “one of the most scurrilous attacks on colored men of this country which has ever appeared in print . . . full of misleading statements from beginning to end” (qtd in Watson 65). Terrell’s rebuttal to
Page’s article, published in the June issue of the *North American Review*, as Martha Solomon Watson has noted, fails to contest the heart of Page’s mythology—his overstatement of the incidence of black-on-white rape and its centrality to lynching. Terrell winds up conceding him the point and instead makes an argument that primarily works to absolve her own class of upwardly mobile African Americans of guilt: she focuses on separating the bestial black rapist from any association with the middle-class black urge for social equality. Page received correspondence that challenged other assertions in the article, most notably a letter from Boston writer Albert Matthews, the author of several articles on lynch law that dispute the idea that rape was unknown before emancipation and that lynching began as a punishment for rape. Matthews’s evidence would eventually be included in the 1905 *Lynch-Law: An Investigation into the History of Lynching in the United States* by James Elbert Cutler. One public challenge to the basic narrative, however, would come not in a direct engagement with Page’s essay, but in a short fictional account, Dunbar’s “Lynching of Jube Benson.”

Dunbar had always been a close and sometimes critical reader of Page. Reynolds J. Scott-Childress has noted that, because of Dunbar’s middle-class Indiana upbringing, and the predominantly nostalgic tone of his mother’s recollection of the prewar South, early in his career Dunbar was able to consider Page’s dialect works not as crafting of stereotypes, but as recording historical or folkloric tales (369–70). As Dunbar’s understanding of racial politics became more acute, he became less and less forgiving of Page’s treatment of black characters. By 1899, when a reporter asked which authors gave the most accurate picture of his race, he mentioned Joel Chandler Harris but omitted Page. When asked about the omission, Dunbar replied that Page’s characters are “always condescending” (“Negro in Literature”). By 1905, however, Dunbar, slowly dying of tuberculosis, apparently became angry enough about Page’s increasingly brutal politics to intervene directly in the latter’s racist mythmaking.

Dunbar answered Page’s lynching tale point for point, signifying on its formal characteristics, unmasking Page’s veiled assumptions, and (as Church-Terrell had not) disputing the very existence of the “black brute” and the stereotypical happy, rascally, and abject servant for a white population whose understanding is tragically limited by the sort of Gothic racial mythology that Page engaged in creating.

In the “Lynching of Jube Benson,” Dunbar deploys the club-tale apparatus with a white narrator—a device unknown in the rest of his published short fiction. Where Page used the frame’s ghost-story apparatus to drape a sheet over his real political purposes, Dunbar uses the club tale to focus directly on the issue at hand and point the moral force at the intended au-
dience through the frame: three white gentlemen in the library of a large house are coming to the end of a conversation when one, an “ambitious young reporter,” mentions a lynching story “in a recent magazine” and says, “I should like to see a real lynching” (375). The owner of the house, Gordon Fairfax (possibly a member of the Virginian Fairfax family sometimes featured in Dunbar’s fiction), says, “If a real, live lynching were to come my way, I should not avoid it.” Dunbar’s in-frame audience is not deceived, not expecting a ghost story, but instead looking forward to the lynching Gothic that, like Page’s stories, have already become a familiar genre and source of vicarious thrills for national magazine audiences. One prematurely aged man steps forward: Dunbar’s interior frame narrator, Dr. Melville.  

Dunbar’s narrative unmasks Page’s in many ways: Dr. Melville isn’t allowed the narrative distance of Page’s second-hand doctor outside narrator (instead, it is implied that the story may have been recorded by the newspaper reporter, who is seen surreptitiously taking notes). Neither is he allowed the moral high ground of Stokeman, who always follows his moral code despite a broken system, or the distance from the immediacy of the crime offered by Page’s sacrificial Halloway and his wife. Dr. Melville will be the victim (his fiancée is raped and murdered), perpetrator (he lynch his innocent black best friend, Jube Benson, for the crime), and detective (like Stokeman, he uses primitive forensics to identify the real killer—though this time, too late, after the lynching has taken place). While Page’s lynching conforms to the stereotypes of lynching apologists (the right culprit is hanged, and the lynchers are allowed to argue their case against unreasonable delays), in “Jube Benson” Melville makes a tragic mistake that leaves him clearly and unambiguously “blood guilty” (380). While Stokeman is left to ineffectually threaten lynchers who wore masks, then allowed to leave so as to avoid witnessing the hanging, in Dunbar’s tale the lynching mob and victim are unmasked. The real rapist and murderer, however, a white criminal, wears blackface—as Elizabeth Young writes, “The image of the black man as monster is so fully a projection of white fantasy” in the story “that it turns out to be performed by a white man himself” (138).

Like Page, Dunbar engages with both the grinning, friendly, but occasionally untruthful black stereotype (a stock character in plantation fiction, which Page made malignant in Joel Turnell) and the dangerous, animalistic brute. While in Page the difference between the two is generational and degenerative, caused by Absalom’s contact with Northern whites, in Dunbar the characterizations are applied alternatively to one man, a servant of Annie, the girl Melville is courting.

We are introduced to Jube Benson through Melville’s own prejudiced
view as “an apparently steady-going, grinning sort” who serves his mistress “like a faithful dog” and begins to help Melville’s courtship by tricking other suitors (376). Later, he befriends Melville at risk to his own life, nursing him with incredible kindness when the doctor succumbs at the end of a typhoid epidemic—serving, like Halloway, as a nexus for affectionate obligation across class and racial lines. The doctor comes to “love him” (377), but then comments on the reliability of that system of sentimental obligation that Page championed: “Why, I grew to love him, love him, oh, yes, I loved him as well—oh, what am I saying? All human love and gratitude are damned poor things; excuse me, gentlemen, this isn’t a pleasant story. The truth is usually a nasty thing to stand.” When Annie is raped and murdered, dying with ambiguous last words that accuse “that black,” Jube is immediately relabeled as a brute: the deceptions that were amusing before are now read as diabolical. Instead of an abject dog, or a faithful guardian “Cerberus,” Jube is a vicious “hound,” a “human tiger” (376, 378). Meanwhile, the bestial tropes also are deployed to fit the narrator and the members of the mob, who move “like hungry beasts.”

Melville the storyteller later judges his actions as the result of a “false education” that made him see Jube’s “black face glooming there in the half light” as “a monster,” standing for “all the powers of evil, the results of whose machinations had been gathering in my mind from childhood up” (379). In Melville’s eyes, the tragedy is that he misclassifies Jube Benson as the wrong one of two available stereotypes: Jube isn’t a wild beast, but really an abject but lovable dog. However, as Gayle Jones has noted, the cognitive and descriptive limitations of Melville (even the chastened Melville who’s telling the story) are clear, and a careful reader may note that Jube is never presented except from behind a mask of literary dialect and the limitations of Melville’s own worldview and perhaps that of implied recording journalist (38).

In keeping with the club tale form, while the teller often has the last word, the audience (internal and external) must decide how much to believe. The moment each speaker chooses to end on, though, shows the rather complex reactions they expect or hope for from their audiences: in Page’s tale, the illusory specters of the two killed men are meant to pale in comparison with the “reality” the audience is left with: the unspeakable vision of the raped and murdered white woman. In Dunbar’s transformed story, the narrator remembers standing in the full light of day “between the two murdered ones, [Annie and Jube] while . . . something in my ears kept crying, ‘Blood guilty! Blood guilty!’” (242). For Dunbar, the specters the audience should see through are precisely the literary myths propagated by Page.
1. Kenny Williams notes “probably nowhere in American literature has the protest against lynching been more plaintively revealed” (165).

2. See Page’s “Marse Chan” from In Ole Virginia for the most influential example, and Martin’s “The Two-Faced New South: The Plantation Tales of Thomas Nelson Page and Charles W. Chesnutt” for a good analysis of the relationship between Page’s and Chesnutt’s fiction.

3. According to Garcia, Scribners had a circulation of 165,000 by 1900 (264).


5. Three authorial versions of Page’s story were published: the first appeared in Scribner’s Magazine in August 1899, the second with several substantial revisions in Page’s collection of short stories, Bred in the Bone in 1904, and then finally in a lightly revised form as Bred in the Bone, volume 9, of the 1906 “Plantation Edition” of Page’s collected works. I refer primarily to the 1899 version, as it is likely the one Dunbar read. In the 1899, the younger Stokeman had been “wont to say that he regretted that he had not followed [the narrator’s] profession: Medicine instead of the Law, that he might study and explain” the apparently supernatural (179). In all later editions, the passage is omitted.

6. Rushdy’s American Lynching has a fine account of Page’s pivotal role in disseminating “lynching for rape discourse.” See Gunning’s Race, Rape and Lynching for a strong treatment of the issue generally as it plays out in literature. “The Spectre in the Cart” is generally ignored in these discussions.

7. The choice of the name “Absalom” seems a perverse reference to the biblical account in the book of Samuel: Absalom serves as a sign of generational rebellion as he rises up against his father, David, and is later killed while hanging from a tree.

8. Page, in his revision for the 1904 edition, elaborated on this point, making the reaction even more visceral: “Stokeman, with a little shiver, put his hand over his eyes as though to shut out the vision that recurred to him. After a long breath he began again” (81).

9. Nicole Waligora-Davis’s “Dunbar and the Science of Lynching” provides a fair overview of the overlap of lynching literature and the nascent science of forensics, noting similar passages in Dixon.

10. This maneuver on the part of the about-to-be executed seems a particular bugbear of Page’s. In “The Lynching of Negroes, Its Cause and Prevention,” he describes African American rapists as often having “gotten religion,’ and from the shadow of the gallows call[ing] on his friends to follow him to glory” (38).

11. In the 1904 and 1906 versions, Page ends with “I have seen what was worse.”

12. W. E. B. Du Bois also takes on The Negro: The Southerner’s Problem in a 1905 review in The Dial, where he points out Page’s “Careless statements of fact” in regard to some rape and lynching cases (315).

13. “The Case of Cadwallader” from The Complete Stories of Paul Laurence Dun-
bar has an unspecified audience and location, and a possibly white miner narrator, but was not published in Dunbar’s lifetime.

14. Gayle Jones notes the relationship between the in-frame audience and the intended audience (35).

15. Both authors use doctors for their supposed objectivity and perhaps metaphorical power to diagnose and prescribe a cure. In an earlier essay, the 1898 “Recession Never,” Dunbar had introduced the metaphor, stating that the Northern writer on racial violence might seem to be “very apt to be like a doctor who prescribes for a case he has no chance to diagnose” (36) except that lynchings were happening in both North and South.
III

Wicked Money, Haunted Objects
Dangerous Houses in the Uncanny Tales of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Mary E. Wilkins

_Dara Downey_

One often hears of the influence of climate upon character; there is a strong influence of place; and the inanimate things which surround us indoors and out make us follow out in our lives their own silent characteristics. We unconsciously catch the tone of every house in which we live, and of every view of the outward, material world which grows familiar to us, and we are influenced by surroundings nearer and closer still than the climate or the country which we inhabit.

—Sarah Orne Jewett, “Lady Ferry”

As this statement from Sarah Orne Jewett’s gently Gothic story “Lady Ferry” (1879) exemplifies, late nineteenth-century American culture was preoccupied by the relationship between an individual and his or her living space. Betsy Klimasmith argues that this is very much the line taken by journalist and urban-reform writer Jacob Riis (along with domestic advice writers such as Catharine Beecher and Andrew Jackson Downing), who insisted that architecture had a direct influence on its inhabitants (109). Riis, Beecher, and their ilk therefore urged that the layout of private dwellings should encode and prescribe a separation of activities and of individuals, as well as useful but also sentimentally meaningful decoration and furnishings, which would, they argued, inculcate moral and healthful living; “through proximity to a clean, well-ordered apartment, new habits would be adopted ‘almost unconsciously,’” according to a mode of thinking that Klimasmith dubs “architectural determinism” (117–18, 127, and 108ff.). As an anonymous contributor to the _Atlantic Monthly_ in 1882 gushed, a harmoniously decorated and orderly house or apartment “brings out your best thoughts and those traits of your disposition which people find admirable” (“Pleasant Rooms” 569).

Such resounding optimism is, however, shadowed by the vast body of dark, Gothic tales—ghost and other uncanny stories—produced by female
authors in the United States toward the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth by such writers as Edith Wharton, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Elia W. Peattie, Emma Frances Dawson, Madeline Yale Wynne, and Mary E. Wilkins (later Freeman). These authors’ short fiction dramatizes, in Gothic terms, the fraught relationship between middle-class women in fin-de-siècle America and the spaces they inhabit. Gilman and Wilkins in particular are noteworthy for the extent to which their supernatural short fiction dwells on the abusive nature of domestic space and ideology, figuring the home and the behavior it prescribed as actively injurious, not only to middle-class women, but to American society at large. As Gilman asserted in *The Home: Its Work and Influence* (1903), “whosoever, man or woman, lives always in a small dark place, is always guarded, protected, directed, and restrained, will become inevitably narrowed and weakened by it” (277).

Both Gilman’s and Wilkins’s Gothic stories literalize this kind of thinking, conjuring up frightening houses that imperil those unlucky enough to live in them. In order to clarify the ways in which these stories establish the malign influence of domestic space and ideology, I begin this essay with a broad discussion of the ways in which houses, home, and interiors are figured by both authors and by their contemporaries. From here, I move on to an examination of Gilman’s “The Giant Wistaria” (1891) and Wilkins's “The Lost Ghost” (1903), in which the myth of idealized nineteenth-century domesticity, and its attendant policing of sexuality and motherhood, is portrayed as a murderous force, determining and ultimately destroying the lives of those forced to conform to it. The final section then explores the converse of this situation, in Gilman’s “The Rocking-chair” (1893) and Wilkins's “Luella Miller” (1902), in which, rather than existing in conflict, femininity and the home form an unholy alliance. I argue, however, that the monstrous femininity that these stories imply, the result of rigidly enforced models of female appearance and character, is as devastating for the vampiric women at the heart of these stories as it is for their hapless victims. Overall, then, I examine here the ways in which, true to the conventions of Naturalism, Gilman and Wilkins depict the middle-class American home as under attack from forces that are beyond the control of the protagonists and that ultimately prove too powerful to be overcome, forces that are, however, intrinsic to the contemporary conception of the home itself.

The Malevolent House

In her polemical work *Women and Economics* (1898), Gilman declared, “How close is the connection of that which we call the soul with our external
conditions” (317). As the contemporary proponents of architectural determinism acknowledged, this connection could produce detrimental as much as positive effects on a home’s tenants. This idea is given vivid expression by Wilkins in her contribution to the collective novel *The Whole Family* (1908). Wilkins’s narrator Elizabeth mounts a trenchant critique of the “mansard [sloping, flat-topped] roof” to the house inhabited by the eponymous family, observing, “I have always had a theory that inanimate things exert more of an influence over people than they dreamed, and a mansard-roof, to my mind, belongs to a period which was most unsophisticated and fatuous, not merely concerning aesthetics, but simple comfort. Those bedrooms under the mansard-roof are miracles not only of ugliness, but discomfort, and there is no attic. I think that a house without a good roomy attic is like a man without brains” (Wilkins, “Aunt Elizabeth” 32). The house is therefore incapable, due to its very architecture, of producing a rational space for its occupants. Instead, it tyrannizes them with its impracticality and discomfort, denying them agency rather than nurturing and protecting it. As Daniel Miller puts it, to be “oppressed by a home that is anything but an expression of one’s agency . . . is a constant reminder that power lies elsewhere” (“Possessions” 119). Indeed, architectural determinism effectively asserts that a house is never an expression of its inhabitants’ agency; if anything, those who dwell in it are the products of its influence, rather than vice-versa. In late nineteenth-century America, this would have seemed like a foregone conclusion to many, as wave after wave of economic downturns shook the nation (see Satter 114; Budd 34–35; Anesko 79). Consequently, owning a house seemed like an increasingly perilous enterprise; advice books cautioned “that if the household were not managed properly . . . it would bring both financial and moral ruin on the family that occupied it” (Hetherington 139). More generally, moralists warned against the loss of individual self-control both in business and in the new realm of consumption that the era’s flood of readily available commodities opened up, “resulting in the pursuit of worldly goods that would lead to madness and death” (Lears 81).

These are precisely the fears made manifest in Wilkins’s story “The Hall Bedroom” (1903). Forced by widowhood into renting a large house to take in boarders, the narrator, a “highly respectable woman,” finds herself in some financial precarity, as the events of the tale compel her to find another dwelling in something of a hurry. She relays these events from “the journal of Mr. George H. Wheatcroft” (“Hall Bedroom” 1277), a former boarder who has since gone missing. Mr. Wheatcroft, the journal makes clear, is himself in considerable financial difficulties, and therefore finds himself having to rent the “hall bedroom,” which he describes as “an ignominious and sternly
uncompromising thing,” indicating a position so low on the social ladder that it “proves the ignominy of the dweller therein” (1277). The unpleasantly close match between his circumstances and his domicile is not, however, the only negative effect that the room is to have on him. One night, getting up in the dark to find his medicine bottle (for he has also been ill), he discovers that “the steps which had hitherto sufficed to take me across my room did not suffice to do so. I advanced several paces, and my outstretched hands touched nothing” (1284), an experience that is repeated on subsequent nights, though the effect disappears when a light is switched on. During these odd forays into his own room, he is assailed with the most extraordinarily alluring sensations, first of smell, and then of touch, taste, sound, and finally sight. After a few of these experiences, he meets an acquaintance, Mr. Addison, who is shocked to hear where he is living, and tells him that there have been two previous disappearances from that very room; “foul play” was suspected in both cases, making the hall bedroom difficult to rent (1293). Mr. Wheatcroft himself ultimately becomes one of the room’s victims, wandering off into the newly visible world that appears there during the hours of darkness, a world far richer and more alluring than his own straightened circumstances could ever permit him to enter in “normal” life. While this might appear to be a reasonably optimistic conclusion, the story’s frequent evocations of economic straits implies that it is precisely the dangerous pleasures of consumerism that have spirited him away into a place from which there is no returning. What is more, in abandoning himself to this phantasmagoric world of sensual pleasures, he effectively ruins Mrs. Jennings’s business, rendering this a cautionary tale (albeit a slightly ambivalent one) against the lures of commodity culture.

A similar anxiety regarding the perils of property is to be found in Wilkins’s “The Vacant Lot,” in which the Townsend family, who had been country tavern keepers for generations, move to Boston in the wake of a sudden, unexpected, and especially generous inheritance, where Mr. Townsend purchases what appears to be a very impressive but strangely inexpensive house. Indeed, it is so reasonably priced that the family is somewhat suspicious, despite the fact that “nothing whatever was amiss with plumbing, furnace, anything” (172). In addition, the house adjoins some waste ground, which the family assumes must be “valuable . . . being on a corner”; they remark that “it was rather singular that it had not been built upon” (174). It is here that the family’s maid, Cordelia, sees “the shadow of somebody, very slim, hanging out” in what she describes as “queer” clothes, but she can find no source for the shadows, and the experience leaves her in hysterics (176–77). Soon, the entire family has seen the shadows, and a host of eerie phenomena follow, until one day the whole house begins to shake,
mirrors shatter, and, while sewing by a window overlooking the street, Mrs. Townsend sees “a great black group of people crossing it just in front of the vacant lot.” They are described as “inexpressibly strange and gloomy”; she catches a glimpse “of sweeping, wavings and foldings of sable draperies and gleams of deadly white faces,” before “they disappeared in the vacant lot” (184). Shortly after this, an identical procession of pale, robed figures troops through the dining room, and Mr. Townsend tells his agent to sell up as quickly as he can, most likely at a loss, though not before he learns that the vacant lot had belonged to someone murdered in the tavern owned by one of his ancestors. Like Mrs. Jennings, then, architectural but also historical attributes of his house that are only tangentially connected with him as an individual actively oppress Mr. Townsend, to the point where he too is hit with substantial financial losses, and all because of a building that appears, at first, to be a significant asset.

It is the domineering nature of these houses, and the devastating effects that they have on the lives of their inhabitants, that pushes the Gothic content of Wilkins’s stories into the realm of Naturalism, which, for Donald Pizer, essentially “dramatiz[es] ‘hard times’ in America . . . in the sense both of economic decline and of spiritual malaise” (Cambridge 14). Louis J. Budd sees the genre’s bleak outlook where individuals’ efforts to determine their own fates are repeatedly thwarted by nature, genetics, or social conditions as springing from a time when the rise of banks, railroads, and large corporations meant that power was increasingly concentrated among a small, urban elite (23–24; see Chase 186, 199; G. Crane 188). Moreover, the writings of Charles Darwin and Herbert Spencer conjured up a universe dictated by vast, impersonal “forces” that shaped human destiny including sexuality, reproduction, and the survival instinct. Because “naturalistic doctrine . . . assumes that fate is something imposed on the individual from the outside,” for Richard Chase “the protagonist . . . is therefore at the mercy of circumstances rather than himself” (199). Consequently, the individual subject was, for many contemporary thinkers, subsumed beneath the “type” (Budd 29, 31, 42–43; Chase 203). In the logic of uncanny tales by American women writers around the end of the century, the definitive Naturalist type was the overworked, socially determined “woman of the house,” quite literally oppressed by her home, its contents, and the forms of behavior that middle-class dwellings dictated.

Women as Victims

For Gilman, the economic position of the housewife “creates a market for sensuous decoration and personal ornament, for all that is luxurious and en-
ervating, and for a false and capricious variety in such supplies” (*Women and Economics* 120). Because it was upon these very objects that the fragmented, frenetic work of the housewife centered, and because they dictated her actions and the outward performance of her personality, the housewife became, in effect, an extension of the house and its contents to the detriment of her autonomy and self-determination. As Gilman puts it, “The economically dependent woman, spending the accumulating energies of the race in her small cage, has thrown out a tangled mass of expression. . . . She has crowded her limited habitat with unlimited things, things useful and unuseful, ornamental and unornamental, comfortable and uncomfortable; and the labor of her life is to wait upon these things, and keep them clean” (*Women and Economics* 257). It is this conception of the deleterious, limiting, and exploitative interrelation between women and the spaces of the home that underpins Gilman’s ghost story “The Giant Wistaria” (1891), in which a young couple and their friends rent an old house because the wife thinks it looks haunted, not least because “a huge wistaria [sic] vine covered the whole front of the house. The trunk . . . rose at the corner of the porch by the high steps, and had once climbed its pillars; but now the pillars were wrenched from their places and held rigid and helpless by the tightly wound and knotted arms” (156). The house is both torn apart and supported by the vine, which we later learn grows over the concealed grave of a young woman and her illegitimate child, who have apparently been murdered (though suicide is also a possible explanation) by her puritanical parents. The woman has, according to her parents’ religious and social beliefs, disgraced them by conceiving a child out of wedlock; as the story opens, in a brief flashback sequence, she asks plaintively to see her baby but is denied by her stone-hearted mother. A conversation with her husband, however, reveals a more forgiving side to the mother than she has shown to her unlucky offspring, though her husband calls her “mad” for her sympathy (“Wistaria” 155). Their archaic speech patterns and sternly pious response to the family tragedy places them somewhere around the seventeenth century, in a nineteenth-century reimagining of dark Puritan times, when, it seems, all women cowered beneath harsh patriarchal oppression, embodied here by the strangling wistaria vine.

By contrast, the three couples who rent the house for a short vacation in the present of the story enjoy what appears to be comparative equality, and the “girls” are free to boss their husbands around and take carefree, expensive holidays whenever they please. As the story unfolds, however, subtle reassertions of male dominance creep in, not least through the men’s patronizing and dismissive reactions to their wives’ suspicions regarding the house. Jenny, the woman who first saw the place, is determined to find a
ghost, though she receives no satisfactory answers to her repeated quizzing of the housekeeper about the building’s history. Jenny’s husband, George, can only respond to his wife’s evident disappointment and confusion by joking, “Jenny makes much of her wistaria . . . because she’s so disappointed about the ghosts. She made up her mind at first sight to have ghosts in the house, and she can’t find even a ghost story!” (157). Jenny’s brother-in-law is equally flippant, sparking off a half-serious row between the couples, in which the women are indulgently exasperated by their husbands’ collective inability to read the atmosphere of the place correctly.

For all the men’s levity, that night Jenny has only a vague unsettling “feeling” without seeing anything, while Jack actually has what he thinks was a dream about a ghost. A newspaper reporter by trade, this vision undermines his putative narrative hegemony. He recounts brokenly how he has seen a “young and handsome” female figure in his room, evidently looking for something “in frantic haste and terror,” carrying “a big bundle under her arm” and wearing “a little red cross that hung from her neck by a thin gold chain.” Halfway through this account, he pauses and exclaims, “Dear me, I am spoiling the story!” (159). What he sees has played havoc with his ability to make everything into a joke or a “story”; indeed, the rest of Gilman’s narrative is devoted to dismantling the men’s authority regarding what is real and how events should be told. George decides, in response to his wife’s night terrors, that there might be burglars and so goes to investigate the cellar, where he sees a woman, wearing a little red cross around her neck, peering into a dark well. He tells the party, “I’m no believer in ghosts, and I firmly object to unknown parties in the house at night; so I spoke to her rather fiercely. She didn’t seem to notice that, and I reached down to take hold of her, then I came upstairs!” (160). His lack of belief and practicality aside, he still refuses to stay in the place to which he has so boldly gone and cannot even properly describe what it was that made him flee.

These half-told stories prompt the group to explore the cellar, and we are told that “the fresh cambrics and pretty boots were gallantly escorted below by gentlemen whose jokes were so frequent that many of them were a little forced” (160–61). On the one hand, the reduction of turn-of-the-century womanhood to attractive commodities is here acknowledged, even perpetuated, just as the female ghost is depicted as inextricable from the religiously coded jewelry that she wears. On the other hand, the story equally positions the menfolk as profoundly rattled by the very thing they hitherto refused to accept. Their status as the arbiters of knowledge is further destabilized when George pulls up the bucket that hangs from a chain descending into the well and we are told:
They emptied the bucket up on the dark earth, and then the girls all went out into the air, into the bright warm sunshine in front of the house. . . . There was nothing said until the men joined them, and then Jenny timidly asked:

“How old should you think it was, George?”

“All of a century,” he answered. “That water is a preservative, lime in it. Oh! you mean? Not more than a month; a very little baby!” (161–62)

While the story appears to protect the women and the reader from what they find down the well, getting them out of the way before what the men have found is obliquely revealed, ultimately the “girls” see for themselves and grasp more quickly than their husbands what it implies. George is still too concerned with hard facts to understand Jenny’s question at first, only gradually realizing that she has asked a far more important question than he has either credited her with or thought of himself. The story thus stages the triumph of feminine sympathy with and understanding of other women’s plights over the arrogance of middle-class men. At the same time, however, the final lines refocus the narrative on the house’s victim herself. After her child is unearthed in the cellar, the workmen who George has employed to fix the rotten front porch uncover the young mother’s remains “in the strangling grasp of the roots of the great wistaria,” and around the skeleton’s neck is visible “a tiny scarlet cross on a thin chain of gold” (162). The story therefore ends with a repetition of the metonymical association between women and decorative objects. Furthermore, in this dense image, the daughter is doubly determined by things and by external forces, tangled up, even in death, in the symbolic growth that grips her parents’ house in its vice-like limbs. The narrative closes on an assertion of inscription within domestic space, then, rather than the more conventional trope of the liberation of the soul of the dead once the body has been discovered. Consequently, the implication is that the condescending attitude and objectifying gaze of these apparently indulgent husbands will continue to exert a less physically but equally psychologically stunting influence on the women who have yoked themselves to them for life. Nothing, in other words, has been exorcised here; houses, domesticity, and marriage continue to haunt.

Whereas Gilman’s “The Giant Wistaria” takes as its targets sexual morality and the abuses made possible by patriarchal control, Wilkins’s tale of victimized womanhood, “The Lost Ghost,” focuses instead on housework and motherhood and on the ways in which women internalize the idea that both require completely self-sacrifice, even self-abnegation. The story is told to a friend by a Mrs. Meserve, who recounts a time when she was much younger and an orphan and had gone to live with two sisters named Mrs.
Dennison and Mrs. Bird. Mrs. Bird has impoverished herself by buying and renovating an old house and takes in the young narrator (then Miss Arms) as a boarder to recoup her losses. One day, Miss Arms is startled by the appearance of a tiny figure with “a little white face with eyes so scared and wishful that they seemed as if they might eat a hole in anybody’s heart. It was a dreadful little face, with something about it which made it different from any other face on earth, but it was so pitiful that somehow it did away a good deal with the dreadfulness.” The child can only whimper “I can’t find my mother” (214–16). When, faint with terror, Miss Arms tells the two older women about what she has seen in their house, it emerges that they have been seeing the child, in identical circumstances, since they first moved in. They have asked around, and eventually the “land agent” told them about what had happened there, having been reluctant to do so before so as not to discourage Mrs. Bird from buying the place. The child seems to be the daughter of a woman who was described by locals as “a real wicked woman,” “bad clean through.” Despite being well respected and expensively dressed, “she never seemed to take much interest in the child, and folks began to say she wasn’t treated right” (227–28). The little girl had been forced to do all the housework while the father was out West on business, and the mother eventually ran away with another man, leaving the child locked in her room to die of cold and hunger.

Unsurprisingly, then, the child helps Mrs. Bird with her housework; while she washes dishes, “all at once the child would be standing beside her with the dish-towel, wiping them. . . Sometimes when they were making cake they would find the raisins all picked over, and sometimes little sticks of kindling-wood would be found laying beside the kitchen stove” (226). The child’s attention to Mrs. Bird begins to take on sinister connotations in light of Mrs. Meserve’s comment that she “was a good woman, and one that couldn’t do things enough for other folks. It seemed as if that was what she lived on. I don’t think she was ever so scared by that poor little ghost, as much as she pitied it,” and she was “most heartbroken because she couldn’t do anything for it, as she could have done for a live child” (235). Indeed, Mrs. Bird herself remarks, “It seems to me sometimes as if I should die if I can’t get that awful little white robe off that child and get her in some clothes and feed her and stop her looking for her mother” (235). When Mrs. Bird subsequently becomes sick and reluctantly goes to bed, Mrs. Dennison is surprised to look out the window to see Mrs Bird walking hand-in-hand with the child, and when she and Miss Arms run upstairs, they find the other woman dead. The child therefore preys on the women’s emotions and ultimately leads the most susceptible of the three to her death. While she herself had been the victim of domestic neglect, in a cycle of abuse, the
child in turn becomes an agent of domestic ideology at its most dangerous, manipulating Mrs. Bird’s maternal conditioning. Indeed, the child is never seen again after this, implying that she has made Mrs. Bird into a substitute mother, but only by insisting on a model of motherhood that demands total, self-destructive devotion to and self-sacrifice for others.

Women as Victimizers

A refusal to do one’s own housework, and a vampiric tendency to take advantage of women’s socially conditioned desire to care for others, is also at the forefront of Wilkins’s “Luella Miller.” The young lady of the title is depicted as far too pretty, well dressed, and fragile to engage in the often back-breaking work that keeping house requires. Her conventionally appealing femininity turns the head of Erastus Miller, a previously sensible young man, who marries her despite having courted another local girl, Lydia Anderson, who, many years later, tells the whole story to the narrator. It rapidly becomes clear that Erastus has married into a life of domestic servitude, as “he always got the breakfast and let Luella lay abed. He did all the sweepin’ and the washin’ and the ironin’ and most of the cookin’. He couldn’t bear to have Luella lift her finger, and she let him do for her. She lived like a queen for all the work she did. She didn’t even do her sewin’. She said it made her shoulder ache to sew, and poor Erastus’s sister Lily used to do all her sewin’. She wa’n’t able to, either; she was never strong in her back, but she did it beautifully. She had to, to suit Luella, she was so dreadful particular” (61). Indeed, Luella’s husband subsequently wastes away and dies, worn out from protecting his wife from domestic drudgery. That there is more to the story than a simple demonization of women who shirk their housework, however, becomes clear in the description of what happens to Lilly, who comes to live with Luella. Before long, “her rosy colour faded and her pretty curves became wan hollows. White shadows began to show in the black rings of her hair, and the light died out of her eyes, her features sharpened, and there were pathetic lines at her mouth, which yet wore always an expression of utter sweetness and even happiness. She was devoted to her sister; there was no doubt that she loved her with her whole heart, and was perfectly content in her service. It was her sole anxiety lest she should die and leave her alone” (82–83). An identical sentiment is expressed by Maria Brown, who moves in with Luella after first Lilly and then her Aunt Abby die from trying to meet Luella’s relentless demands. Lydia describes how Maria “began to fade away just the same fashion the others had. Well, she was warned, but she acted real mad when folks said anythin’: said Luella was a poor, abused woman, too delicate to help herself, and they’d ought to
be ashamed, and if she died helpin’ them that couldn’t help themselves she
would and she did” (94). What all of this implies is that the story is essen-
tially a critique, not just of Luella herself, but of the self-abnegation that
is expected of the “Angel in the House” more generally, the utterly selfless
devotion that devours a woman from within, even as she feels she is do-
ing exactly her duty, and even as her internalization of social gender roles
means that she feels personally fulfilled in doing so. Luella’s own helpless-
ness is also vital here; she herself repeatedly goes into a decline when left
alone, suggesting that the exploitation that she appears to demand is in
fact beyond her control. Her situation is therefore a very graphic depiction
of the devastating effects of a rigid gender ideology, which defines femi-
ninity in terms of weakness, and which punishes those women who fail to
find someone to look after them financially and emotionally. Luella never
profits from her vampirism, being left penniless by her husband and later
by the doctor who dies before he is able to marry her. A clinging vine of a
wife, Wilkins implies, is not merely a financial burden within marriage; to
embody this idealized vision of femininity renders a woman harmful both
to her loved ones and to herself.

The femme fatale in Gilman’s “The Rocking-chair” is somewhat more
unproblematically wicked; the story as a whole, however, is just as censori-
ous of the financially and morally toxic effects of domestic life on men and
women alike. The narrator and his friend are “young newspaper men,” “part
of that struggling crowd of aspirants” known as “‘penny-a-liners’” (184). Their
lowly professional and financial position pushes the young men to search
among dingy boarding houses for lodgings, but it is the sight of a girl sit-
ting in a rocking-chair inside an open window, her blond hair and the brass
fittings of the chair throwing off light, that attracts their gazes to the house
where they come to lodge. The chair dominates the two-room apartment
they share but is “very comfortable,” and they therefore “both used it a great
deal” despite the “heavy square corners,” the “great sharp knobs that tipped
the arms,” and the hardness of the brass that cover “every other point and
angle” (185). These sharp corners quickly become a menace to the two young
men, who are constantly banging into them in the dark. The chair seems
to “walk,” lurking in unexpected places in the middle of the night, wait-
ing for them to bruise themselves on its unyielding surfaces. “I never saw
a chair so made to hurt as that one,” the narrator remarks, and this phrase
soon takes on more sinister connotations (188). Each man thinks that the
other has been rocking in it all night long, much to their mutual irritation,
and the chair itself quickly creates an irreducible rift between the two firm
friends. The elusive presence of the “golden-haired charmer” only deepens
that rift, not least because each gradually becomes convinced that the other
has seen and spoken to her. Both of them, however, only ever see her “from the street, for she still availed herself of our chair by the window. . . . We . . . used to rush stealthily and swiftly upstairs, hoping to surprise her. But we never succeeded. Only the chair was often found still rocking, and sometimes I fancied a faint sweet odor lingering about, an odor strangely saddening and suggestive” (186). Soon, the narrator begins to see, again from the street, Hal meeting the girl in their apartment, and once sitting in the chair with her, her head resting intimately on his shoulder. The narrator, enraged with jealousy, endeavors vainly to catch them, but only hears her laugh and her footsteps, disappearing behind a locked door in his room. It emerges, however, that Hal has been doing precisely the same thing, himself convinced that the narrator has been enjoying pleasures that should be his. It is both the woman’s beauty (and the comfort offered by the chair) and the men’s possessive, competitive response to it that ultimately destroys them. The narrator sees her one day while in his room and almost manages to speak to her before Hal bursts in angrily. Finding the girl gone, Hal insists on opening the mysterious door, which the narrator knows is locked but which somehow opens to Hal’s touch. Behind it, they find “a closet, two by four, as bare and shallow as an empty coffin!” (192). Hal responds, however, not with bafflement, but with further rage, assuming that the narrator has hidden their love object somewhere. They argue bitterly, and begin to fight, crashing into the merciless rocking chair, and the narrator walks out.

When he returns the next day, he tries to find the landlady to announce that he will be moving out; instead, he finds that, “in all that house, from cellar to garret, was no furnished room but ours, no sign of human occupancy. Dust, dust, and cobwebs everywhere. Nothing else.” Their own rooms are equally bare and “empty of all life,” empty of everything except Hal’s dead body, marked with injuries clearly inflicted by the rocking chair (192). Of the chair itself, however, there is no sign. Hearing the girl’s “whispered laugh” as he stares in terror at his friend’s corpse, the narrator flees “desperately” “out of that house of terror,” casting “one shuddering glance at the fateful window.” The story ends with the lines, “The risen sun was gilding all the housetops, and its level rays, striking the high panes on the building opposite, shone back in a calm glory on the great chair by the window, the sweet face, down-dropped eyes, and swaying golden head” (193). The girl is therefore a strange mixture of modesty and self-display. She is the idealized domestic woman who is so inextricable from the home that she all but disappears into the furniture. At the same time, her symbiotic relationship with the chair and positioning inside the window, like a commodity in a shop, implies that she is almost literally a beautiful, commodified object of the male gaze. The story thus criticizes the domestic ideology that
transforms women into extensions of their home, but also into objects of visual pleasure, censuring the male sense of entitlement to such a woman. We as readers can, moreover, only imagine that more men will be lured by both the girl’s tantalizing looks and the phantasmagoric promise of cheap lodgings, the two being part and parcel of what makes the house so attractive and so deadly.

As Kevin Hetherington asserts, commodities foster desire precisely because they appear to contain and give the purchaser access to transcendent, even otherworldly, realms of signification and belonging “beyond straightforward associations with functional use or exchange value alike.” For this very reason, however, “the spirit of the commodity is not something that can ever fully be taken possession of; it always retains the fetish power to possess (haunt) its possessor,” and it is this nightmare reversal of possession and agency that these stories image (155). In effect, they dramatize the process of reification in which, as Michael Anesko describes it, “man not only becomes alienated from himself, but also projects his commodified consciousness into an illusory world of ‘things,’ hence leaving him twice removed from primary, or objective reality” (84). However, both Gilman and Wilkins suggest in these stories that it is not merely the commodity status of houses and of domestic objects that renders them dangerous. If an ideal home contains and fosters individual agency and the creation of personal memories and emotions, it can also transmit the memories and emotions of those who have come before us. These stories therefore position the present as haunted by alienated pasts as much as by alienation itself, by a rapidly shifting modernity in which one never knows what kinds of spaces one is inhabiting, or what effects they might have. Indeed, these stories imply that the home is itself an agent of social power, one that seeks to keep women there in order to maintain the structures that it represents and enforces. At the same time, the source of terror here is the idea that positivist architectural determinism is wrong, that a pleasant environment, and a pretty woman to oversee it, might actually produce not an ordered and morally uplifting home life, but financial ruin, violence, and even death.

Notes


2. I employ the name “Wilkins” rather than “Freeman” because many of her stories, including the collection The Wind in the Rose-bush, were published under the name “Mary E. Wilkins.”
What is the work of the ghost in early twentieth-century African American fiction? This essay considers two similar apparitions in two otherwise dissimilar novels: Pauline Hopkins’s *Of One Blood* (1902–1903) and W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* (1911). Although Hopkins and Du Bois shared an antipathy for Booker T. Washington and, as Cynthia Schrager notes, were both influenced by William James and “the new psychology” (309), at first glance their novels seem to have little in common beyond their focus on characters representative of those Du Bois calls the “talented tenth.” *Of One Blood*’s serialized, sensational narrative offered readers of the *Colored American Magazine* (in which the novel first appeared and where Hopkins was editor until ousted in 1904) both entertainment and a chance to exercise their racial pride. By contrast, although *Quest* has been seen as something of a generic mess, its structure draws less from the dime novel and more from the traditions of American romance and Realism.

Despite these apparent differences, each of these works—like any number of Naturalist novels—focuses on the relationship between individual agency and the decreasing possibility of changing one’s social, political, and economic circumstances. And each of these works—like any number of Gothic texts—also considers the impact of the past upon the present. By recognizing both literary influences in both novels, we gain insight into a dilemma that postbellum, pre-Harlem black writers struggled to resolve: how to envision the conditions that make socioeconomic progress for African Americans possible, without simplifying the complex history that shaped turn-of-the-century race relations or curtailing the significance of choices and actions that might improve the lives of African Americans. The ghosts that appear in these novels are central to this project. Their appearances re-
mind the reader of the inescapable determinations of history, but in contrast to other examples of the Gothic in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these ghosts demonstrate how the past shapes—but does not determine—actions and choices that take place in the present.\(^2\)

Notably, both novels’ ghosts are of African American women whose lives were closely and coercively tied to a white plantation owner and whose black children have none of the economic advantages enjoyed by their white fathers (or their “white” siblings). Their appearances in *Of One Blood* and *The Quest of the Silver Fleece* bring into focus the particular traumas that were experienced by enslaved black women, and they connect this history to the material conditions of the present. The ghosts of such women are a powerful method of illustrating this connection: they remind us not only of the sexual violation suffered by enslaved women, but of the enduring economic disadvantages that these violations produced. Their offspring increased the property of their masters even as those same children were robbed of any property they might have inherited—because as slaves, they were themselves property, not heirs.\(^3\) When the mothers of these children appear as ghosts, inspiring professions of guilt from a former slave owner in *Quest*, or contextualizing the economic deprivations suffered by the protagonist of *Of One Blood*, they emphasize how the economic conditions of African Americans under Jim Crow are connected to the long history of exploitation perpetrated by the slave system. As such, I argue, they transform the movement of money between blacks and whites in these novels into an act of atonement. They make the novels’ economic shifts legible as the payment of a debt to African Americans left unaddressed by Reconstruction-era attempts at social and economic reform.

At the same time, by representing this history of exploitation and its aftermath through the figure of the ghost—an entity that demands both justice and atonement but, as a ghost, is unable to enjoy the economic realignment that it helps to shape—both Du Bois and Hopkins suggest that although retribution can be powerfully inspired by the memory of past injustices, it must benefit—materially—those who suffer in the present. Furthermore, because the female ghost represents physical trauma in an immaterial form, the appearances of these specters also show the impact of the past on the present without allowing such past experiences to over-determine the lives of the living. As emblems of the past that have no life in the present and a limited presence in each novel, these ghosts thus perform an important but curious role of conjuring connections to the past in order to quarantine them. These ghosts harness, rather than unleash, the potentially overwhelming recognition of how a life is determined by forces beyond one’s control. As a result, the descendants of slaves who benefit from
newly acquired money are not defined solely by their status as victims or beneficiaries, but remain actors with some control over their futures.

As examples of Gothic Naturalism, then, these novels present us with a Naturalism made less deterministic by the presence of the Gothic trope, which is to say that while Hopkins and Du Bois share an emphasis on power and powerlessness that occupied other early twentieth-century writers, they manage the representations of such forces quite carefully. Their use of the Gothic softens the pessimistic Naturalism with which each novel ends; the ghost allows us to see black economic progress both as evidence of individual ability and as compensation for the injustices produced by the slave system and its aftermath, even as we recognize new iterations of those injustices. The novels lament the sociopolitical and economic forces that slow the pace of racial uplift but allow us to be inspired by the efforts of exceptional individuals, for neither writer wants to deny agency to African Americans, even as their novels present, at times quite pessimistically, the social forces that stymy any resolution of the race problem in the early twentieth century. Du Bois and Hopkins show how economic forces and the histories and ideologies that shape them influence the course of black lives, but their particular use of the Gothic tempers this power. Even their use of the Gothic is tempered: the ghostly appearances in these novels are not traditionally Gothic in that the ghosts evoke neither fear nor dread in the reader.

Although notable for the distinctly unemotional responses they provoke from both characters and readers, the Gothic moments that I discuss below emerge from a long history, and this history helps us to understand what is at stake in Du Bois’s and Hopkins’s particular staging of ghostly hauntings. Numerous critics—Eva Cherniavsky, Peter Coviello, and Teresa Goddu, to name a prominent few—have discussed how antebellum American representations of slavery are permeated by Gothic tropes that expose the suffering of slaves and the persistence of their claims for justice. My argument has a particular resonance with that of Goddu’s epilogue in *Gothic America*. Writing about Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*, she states that “the African-American Gothic insists” on “a history that must be reclaimed” while also noting that such an effort is “double-edged. . . . Resurrecting one’s history may be crucial to any forward movement, but it can be debilitating as well” (155). Morrison’s *Beloved*, she argues, dramatizes the risks and “difficulty of transforming the debilitating history of slavery into a usable past” (154); here, I suggest that Hopkins and Du Bois similarly sought to create a “usable past” through their use of the Gothic. To the extent that their efforts demonstrate that the Gothic is “a dynamic mode that undergoes historical change when specific agents adopt and transform its conventions” (Goddu
we see that such transformations are also bound by genre. Writing in the early twentieth century, Du Bois and Hopkins use the Gothic to counter the excesses of Naturalism, in which social forces permeate human relations and power over the individual as something not easily contained. This instance of the Gothic is markedly different from that which we see in the works of a writer like Charles W. Chesnutt, whose stories depict the eruption of the slave past into the supposedly “free” present. Chesnutt’s Gothic moments unleash the power of the past to saturate and transform the present: they are uncanny. In the instances of haunting I discuss below, the uncanny exists, so to speak, in name only.

Chronology would dictate that I now turn to Of One Blood. Instead, I begin with Du Bois’s novel The Quest of the Silver Fleece, as it encapsulates the relationship between the Gothic and Naturalism that animates this argument more efficiently. Moreover, Quest comes closer in content to what we expect of early twentieth-century Naturalism: the forces of the market, the blasé attitude of the wealthy, and the impossibility of forging alliances among poor blacks and whites prominent in the novel. Du Bois’s ending, too, frames the perseverance of the novel’s central characters, Bles and Zora, with the sense that their work will be long, difficult, and frequently undone. While their marriage validates and valorizes the work of racial uplift, much as Frances E. W. Harper does through the marriages of her characters at the conclusion of Iola Leroy (1892), Du Bois’s final words are an address to “O God the Reader,” whom he entreats to “lift up thine eyes upon the Horror in this land;—the maiming and mocking and murdering of my people” (378). The biblical phrasing intensifies the gravity of his plea.

These narrative features, grounded in both the sentimental idealism of an earlier era and the conventions of late nineteenth-century literary fiction, increase the impact of the novel’s moments of mysticism, inspiration, and haunting, particularly when they intersect with the Quest’s prevailing attention to the effects of economic conditions and political machinations on Du Bois’s African American characters. Such an intersection occurs at the conclusion of the novel, when an aging Southern aristocrat, Colonel Cresswell, dies after seeing the ghost of a light-skinned African American woman to whom he refers as his “wife” (the novel, however, is unclear as to whether she is legally his wife or not). Cresswell has been a central figure in two of the novel’s most important plots: the ongoing attempt to destroy (or at least transform the impact of) the black school run by a Northern reformer and former abolitionist, Miss Smith (who is herself marked as the relic of the antebellum era’s selfless idealism and social activism); and the alliance of Northern capital with Southern planters in order to corner the postbellum cotton market. Cresswell has benefited financially from the lat-
ter and comes close to achieving the former when he falls ill and announces to his daughter-in-law that he has made his will. As he describes its directives, he tells her, “Then there’s another gift of two hundred thousand dollars and this house and plantation. Whom do you think that’s for?” (372). He refuses to reveal the answer, and shortly thereafter their conversation is interrupted by Cresswell’s noticing of a young African American woman who walks like the colonel’s “wife” and is, we discover, his granddaughter. This encounter, in turn, is interrupted by what seems to be an aural hallucination. Cresswell suddenly cries, “Hark! . . . Do you hear the bodies creaking on the limbs? It’s Rob and Johnson, I did it” (373).

This moment alone is quite surprising, for Rob and Johnson are two black men who were lynched as a result of mob violence orchestrated by Cresswell. If this is an instance of haunting, we see quite clearly that the colonel’s sense of guilt is reflected in the sounds he hears. But Cresswell’s encounter becomes even stranger when his aural hallucination is followed by the appearance of a ghostly figure only he can see. He exclaims: “‘Nell—Nell! Is it you, little wife, come back to accuse me? Ah, Nell, don’t shrink! I know—I have sinned against the light and the blood of your poor black people is red on these old hands. No, don’t put your clean white hands upon me, Nell, till I wash mine. I’ll do it, Nell; I’ll atone. I’m a Cresswell yet, Nell, a Cresswell and a gen—’ He swayed. Vainly he struggled for the word. The shudder of death shook his soul, and he passed” (373). One of the central events of the chapter Du Bois calls “Atonement,” this scene suggests that Cresswell feels guilt not just because of his role in Rob’s and Johnson’s deaths, but more broadly for his sins against “the light”: the guilt he expresses is for acts he has committed against a people, not just a pair of individuals. And these acts are numerous: in addition to whatever he did as a member of the Confederate army during the Civil War (the source of his status as “Colonel”), and as a slaveholder before that, his treatment of Miss Smith’s school has sought to transform educational opportunity into training designed to keep future African American servants docile. His actions throughout the novel have held African Americans in debt and relentlessly impede their sociopolitical progress in the aptly named county of Tooms, Alabama.

The colonel’s atonement for these sins begins as he sees the ghost of Nell: she appears, he dies, and we soon discover that the extensive legacy the colonel detailed to his daughter-in-law was left to Miss Smith’s school. This use of the ghost to frame the reallocation of property as atonement for past sins is a familiar function for a Gothic trope. But the way the scene presents this outcome does not follow the script we expect for such a moment of retribution. The ghost causes Cresswell to declare his intentions
but does not create them. His will, with its bequest to the school, was already in place before he declared to Nell that he would “atone.” Thus, the ghost elicits a confession from Cresswell, but we are left to ponder the unknown thoughts, feelings, and experiences that led to Cresswell’s will in the first place. Du Bois, quite pointedly, doesn’t give us a conversion scene, such as we might see in an antebellum novel, in which Cresswell’s change of heart is dramatized. His change of heart has already occurred; his conversation with Nell merely affirms it. Here, the immaterial presence of the ghost reveals, rather than creates, this conversion, and as a result emphasizes the unknown, similarly immaterial sources of Cresswell’s ethical decision. Planted by the Gothic trope of the ghost, the hint that the interior of Cresswell’s mind has unexpected depths is stranger than the actual appearance of his “wife’s” ghost.

This depiction of the colonel’s decisions regarding his estate suggests an important contrast to the sentimental narratives of the antebellum era, in which proper ethical choices are the linear products of “every individual” making sure that “they feel right” (385), to use Harriet Beecher Stowe’s phrase, and right feeling in turn rests on recognizing the suffering of others and the moral guidance of Christian beliefs. As seems apt for a writer who noted the limits of such sentimental ethics to transform society, but who nevertheless resisted the determinations of Naturalism, Du Bois posits but does not map the transformative power of unknown feelings. Nevertheless, we might be tempted to chalk this depiction up to a clumsy solution for a writing problem: there’s no way to make Cresswell’s change of heart believable, so the less we see of it the better. But I am inclined to think that Du Bois is on to something more complex. He betrays a hope that even for the seemingly unrepentant, ethical actions are possible and can have important effects on the lives of others. Du Bois seems unwilling to abandon individual choices as a source of progressive change, even in the unlikely character of Colonel Cresswell. But his depiction suggests that such ethical transformations cannot be predictably produced: we do not witness the mental work that produces this dramatic, material change in the fortunes of the black community in Tooms.

What we do witness is the hard work and determination of African Americans. Significantly, the plot of The Quest of the Silver Fleece makes the colonel’s transformation secondary to actions and choices made by Bles and Zora, both former students at Miss Smith’s school. Their efforts toward racial uplift are aided by Colonel Cresswell’s bequest but not dependent upon it. Du Bois does not allow the choices of one powerful white man to overshadow the actions of black Americans, particularly those dedicated to bettering the social, political, and economic conditions of their people. Like-
wise, he keeps the focus on those who act in the present by underplaying how the ghost, as a representation of past injustices, connects those injustices to the present. Nell doesn't frighten the reader or the colonel; her brief presence reminds us of the past while allowing the novel to remain resolutely focused on the present, particularly the fate of Zora, who defies stereotypes of black femininity that have their origin in the slave system and would seem to connect her experience explicitly to Nell's.\(^7\) Zora has been deeply injured in the past—she was sexually exploited as a girl by her mother, for the benefit of white men—but her desire for education, her dedication to Miss Smith's school, and her tireless work for the dispossessed ultimately define her, not her lack of purity or her victimization. Du Bois explicitly contrasts this characterization of Zora with the narrow vision of a white teacher at Miss Smith's school who sees Zora's fate as determined by the violations she has experienced; the novel's conclusion rejects such judgments of Zora, once and for all. In the novel's final line, Zora asks Bles to marry her, knowing that he will, despite his knowledge of her past.

Thus, while the ghost of Nell links Zora's exploitation to that of enslaved women, Du Bois is more concerned with what Zora will do with her life than with her connection to this victimization. Du Bois shows how the past has shaped the conditions under which Bles and Zora work, but the Gothic framing of this past directs its power to define who a person is and what he or she can do. We recognize Colonel Cresswell's bequest as a mysterious product of his guilt, as one moment of reparation for a long history of exploitation, but the reach of the past is held in check when it comes to those who work for racial justice. Zora is not Nell.

But Dianthe—the tragic female protagonist of Hopkins's *Of One Blood*—might be Mira, the ghost that appears in Hopkins's novel. Mira, the mother of Dianthe and the novel's two other central characters, Reuel Briggs and Aubrey Livingston, appears as a ghost four times in *Of One Blood*, and is also featured (as a living person) in two flashbacks that reveal a hidden ante-bellum familial history of exploitation and psychic power. Susan Gillman has argued that the novel, with its intertwined "maternal melodrama" (40) of passing and black familial history, presents "the ambivalent temporality of the present, caught between the still imperfectly redeemed claims of the past and the future imperative" (45). Her tour-de-force analysis is compelling for its ability to read together the novel's disparate topics—Egyptology and Ethiopianism; occult science and haunted psyches; ethnology and other forms of racialism; Pan-Africanism and American histories of the slave system—without simplifying its melodramatic and ideological excesses. Notably, Gillman's emphasis on the present as "caught" by the past relies on
the expected function of the ghost: that it intensifies our sense of the past as intruding on the present. Certainly the past does intrude in *Of One Blood*: the complex history of Reuel and his siblings, including the exploitation of their mother, sets their lives in motion, and when this history is revealed to the main characters, they in turn are changed. The impact of this intrusion, however, is far from uniform, and this observation is central to understanding how Hopkins, like Du Bois, uses the ghost not just to emphasize but to manage the impact of the past on the present. Hopkins’s carefully deployed ghost maintains a space in her narrative for both recuperation and agency that doesn’t unduly simplify the complex contexts that shaped the racialized experience of Americans in the early twentieth century.

*Of One Blood* takes place after the Civil War and centers around the psychic powers (and overall brilliance) of medical student Reuel Briggs, who amazes his fellow doctors when he brings a seemingly dead woman, Dianthe Lusk, back to consciousness. Dianthe (whom he has seen in a vision prior to treating her) eventually becomes Reuel’s wife, and after they marry, he leaves (that very day) for an expedition to Africa in order to make his fortune and support his bride. Unbeknownst to him, his participation in this expedition has been engineered by his supposed friend and fellow doctor Aubrey Livingston, who discovers that Reuel is actually black, and uses this information to prevent Reuel from getting a job in the United States. Although engaged to a Northern heiress, Aubrey secretly wants Dianthe for himself; upon Reuel’s departure, Aubrey murders his fiancée, fakes Dianthe’s death, and uses his own mesmeric powers to convince Dianthe to marry him. They depart for Aubrey’s plantation, where Dianthe eventually discovers that both Reuel and Aubrey are her brothers—all the children of an enslaved woman Mira, who herself had psychic powers that she was forced to access by her master, Aubrey’s father (also a Dr. Livingston). Distraught, Dianthe attempts to kill Aubrey, but he forces her to drink poison that she intended for him.

Meanwhile, Reuel mourns Dianthe and eventually disappears from his expedition. He discovers the hidden city of Meroe, where he finds out that he is a descendant of Ethiopian royalty and is hailed as King Ergamenes. Reuel explores his new kingdom, marveling at its wealth and advanced form of civilization; when he learns about tools that intensify an individual’s psychic ability, allowing him to see into the past as well as to look upon any person, living or dead, he discovers that Dianthe is alive and living with Aubrey. Reuel returns to the United States with Ai, his Ethiopian advisor; he arrives just in time to witness Dianthe’s death. Aubrey, having been tried for Dianthe’s murder and found not guilty by the American le-
gal system, is then punished by Ai, who, following the rules of Ethiopian justice, uses his mesmeric abilities to make Aubrey kill himself as punishment for his crimes.

Given this plot and its attention to hidden identities and histories (both familial and global), occult science, and mesmeric powers, it is hardly surprising to see a ghost—that of Reuel, Dianthe, and Aubrey’s mother Mira—appear. But for a novel that is clearly invested in thrills—it features a number of cliffhangers as well as heroic actions by Reuel—the appearances of this ghost are remarkably free of affect. They are, moreover, connected to present as well as past events, and are more important as symbols than they are to the advancement of the plot. When Dianthe witnesses the ghost of Mira pointing to the biblical verse “For there is nothing covered that shall not be revealed,” she does “not feel at all frightened, recognizing instantly the hand of mysticism in this strange occurrence” (506). Mira’s warning comes just as Dianthe has been drawn to Aubrey and just before Aubrey kills his fiancée and fakes Dianthe’s death: the revelation Mira promises—but does not herself reveal—is of the familial history that Aubrey, Dianthe, and Reuel share, but also of Aubrey’s crime and Dianthe’s unwilling complicity. When Mira once again appears to Dianthe, pointing to the same biblical verse, Dianthe calmly discusses the appearance with her now-husband Aubrey. This second incident precedes—but does not cause—two discoveries by Dianthe: the immediate one concerns not a hidden past but a hidden present: she learns of Aubrey’s plot to kill Reuel and his withholding of Reuel’s letters from Africa; two weeks later, she finally learns that she, Reuel, and Aubrey are “all of one blood” (607) when she stumbles upon a former slave—who turns out to be her grandmother—in the woods surrounding the Livingston plantation.

Similarly, when Mira appears to Reuel, she is distinctly not frightening and only marginally significant to the novel’s central plot:

Suddenly a rush of balmy air seemed to pass over the brow of the scribe, and a dim shadow fell across the tent door. It was the form of the handsome Negress who had appeared to Dianthe, and signed herself “Mira.”

There was no fear in Reuel’s gaze, no surprise; it was as if a familiar and welcome visitor had called upon him. For a moment an impulse to spring away into the wide, wide realms of air, seemed to possess him; the next, the still, dreamy ecstasy of a past time; and then he saw Jim—who sat directly behind him—placed like a picture on his very table. (522)
Reuel then uses his “spiritual eyes” (523)—directed by the hand of Mira—to read a letter held by the African American servant Jim. The discovery he makes is about the here and now: he learns his letters have been withheld, and he begins to suspect that Jim, at Aubrey’s bidding, is plotting against him. But Hopkins doesn’t use the ghost to reveal Aubrey’s other crime—that he has killed his fiancé and escaped with Dianthe to his family’s plantation: Reuel and Charlie (the brother of Aubrey’s fiancé) hear the voices of Aubrey’s victims without Mira’s help. Mira’s final appearance to Reuel, after he has been awakened by a loud yell, is also calming and reassuring: Reuel follows “the shadowy figure, full of confidence that she would show him the way to that fearful scream” (591). Her appearance again precedes, but doesn’t directly cause, a discovery about both now and then—Jim reveals his role as Aubrey’s accomplice (they grew up together; Jim explains that “Aubrey . . . was [his] foster brother, and [he] could deny him nothing” [593]) and that Reuel is Dianthe’s sister.

Mira’s role in each of these scenes is to set up revelations that tie the novel’s antebellum backstory and postbellum plot together. This connection makes clear how neither Aubrey’s schemes nor Reuel’s love for Dianthe would be possible if the hidden family history that their grandmother reveals was known from the beginning—or if it had not been produced by the manipulations and violations of family that occurred in the South under the system of slavery. As Dianthe’s newly discovered grandmother puts it, “Dese things jes’ got to happen in slavery” (605). But the constrained role of the ghost that we see in these examples allows Hopkins to manipulate carefully the determinism of the past. To the extent that Of One Blood insists that we must understand the relationship between present problems and past injustices, it does so most pointedly through Dianthe, who, Hopkins writes, represents “the accumulation of years of foulest wrongs heaped upon the innocent and defenceless [sic] women of a race” (594). Dianthe, like her mother Mira, who was commanded to “see” by Aubrey’s father (also a doctor), is controlled and victimized by a Dr. Livingston, and Hopkins uses this repetition to remind the reader that the afflictions of turn-of-the-century African American women both repeat, and have their roots in, the antebellum past. The “things” that get “to happen in slavery” still occur in the novel’s present. The extent to which neither Dianthe nor Reuel exhibit any fear when they encounter Mira suggests that such an intrusion of the past upon the present is taken for granted.

That the long reach of the past is a tragedy for Dianthe, but ultimately an opportunity for Reuel, reminds us of Hopkins’s keen awareness of how gender impacts the experience of racial inequality. Dianthe experiences the
repetition of victimization, while Reuel disrupts the pattern. One might argue, however, that gendering the difference between the fates of Dianthe and Reuel also serves a practical purpose. In Dianthe—the already marginalized female African American—Hopkins locates the determinism of the past without diminishing those whose socioeconomic prospects are at least marginally more promising. Dianthe’s haunted passivity emphasizes her tragic fate, but through Reuel, Hopkins presents to us the redemptive “claim of the past on the present” (Gillman 71).

She does so specifically through the changes that occur in Reuel’s economic and political status as his past is revealed. When it comes to Reuel, Mira’s presence—like Nell’s in *Quest*—brings into focus the relationship between the injustices of slavery and the economic inequities of the present. *Of One Blood* begins with a stark contrast between brothers Reuel and Aubrey, and in so doing makes clear the difference that inherited property makes. Reuel is a brilliant medical student, but his poverty dogs him throughout the novel; meanwhile Aubrey’s resources—he has inherited his father’s Maryland plantation—confer both comfort and privilege. Mira, then, reminds us of the exploitation that produced this stark economic contrast between Reuel and Aubrey. Hopkins intensifies this understanding of Reuel’s poverty by linking it to the unpaid, material debt owed to those who were slaves, and the African inheritance, disrupted by slavery, that he discovers. She notes of the novel’s postbellum moment that “money came from all directions, pouring into the hands of philanthropists, who were anxious to prove that the country was able, not only to free the slave, but to pay the great debt it owed him” (450). Writing at the turn of the twentieth century, Hopkins knows that despite such efforts, “the great debt” was not paid, and this attention to debt asks us to consider the conditions under which it is possible to rectify past injustices in order to create a more just present. The novel, I would argue, presents precisely such conditions, and they do not exist in the United States: as Reuel’s economic and political status changes abroad, the inequality that he has suffered under at home is figuratively repaired. The location of this change shows how limited prospects for African Americans in the United States remained. Reuel’s perpetually vulnerable status as a black man passing for white disappears when he learns that he is heir to the throne of Ethiopia; in formal terms, this inheritance serves as a replacement for the inheritance that he is denied by his white father, and a recovery of the African inheritance denied him by slavery and its aftermath. Thus it is not insignificant when Hopkins’s description of the hidden city Meroe, in which Reuel is crowned, emphasizes its wealth and material resources, at times giving a value in dollars for the gold, jewels, and art found in the country that Reuel now presides over. Moreover, the na-
tion that Reuel has inherited exceeds the progress of the western world—materially, scientifically, and ethically. Reuel’s fate, then—so distinct from Dianthe’s—rectifies what he was denied as the child of a slave by removing him from the source of this inequality: the United States. The location of this transformation—in Africa, in the hidden Ethiopian city of Meroe—is significant: Hopkins pointedly uses the novel’s geography to show that this reparation cannot take place in the United States, where the reality of the race problem prevents any such efforts toward social and economic justice for African Americans.

Mira’s appearances don’t create the political and economic transformation in Reuel’s status, and as a ghost, she, like Nell in *Quest*, cannot benefit from what Reuel experiences: her presence allows us to see Reuel’s success in the context of her exploitation, but again, as in *Quest*, her immateriality and limited role keeps the novel’s focus on what is possible in the present. In turn, this emphasis on the present keeps the reader focused on Reuel’s agency even as his status is altered by forces beyond his control, and this, too, is aided by the limited impact of Mira’s presence. Mira’s appearances direct Reuel’s attention, but his “spiritual eyes” make discoveries, and he is distinctly in control of the situations he uncovers. In addition, as a stand-in for the past, Mira is remarkable for being disconnected from the novel’s central moment of retribution, when Ai, Reuel, and Charlie confront Aubrey after he has been found innocent of his fiancée’s and Dianthe’s deaths. The only ghosts in this section of the novel are of the recently departed, Aubrey’s murdered fiancée and Dianthe, who create “chill foreboding” (618) just before Aubrey spies Dianthe’s body, with Reuel by her side. Later, when Aubrey faces those who know he is guilty, he looks to Reuel for mercy and finds only that Reuel’s “strange deep eyes before whose fixed gaze none could stand unflinching, took on a more sombre glow” (619).

This scene of punishment, in which justice is effected not through the American legal system but the powers of an Ethiopian priest, emphasizes the need for power in the present that has its sources in living individuals—note Reuel’s powerful eyes. Mira’s absence from the scene of Aubrey’s punishment keeps the focus on the living, both those who have the power to act and those who will benefit from such actions. Reuel returns to Africa, where he does “good works” (621) but worries over the present and the past in what Gillman has suggested is “a passive posture of waiting and wondering” (72): Hopkins ends her novel by stating that the scope of the race problem means that it can only be solved by God (621). The ghost, however, reminds us of the extraordinarily complicated work that Hopkins undertakes to both summon the past and contain it, to present a compelling example of individual agency without naively ignoring the contexts that
would limit it. The intricacy of Of One Blood suggests that, like Du Bois, Hopkins is invested in representations of the past that reveal the sources of injustice and confer larger meanings on our actions. Also like Du Bois, Hopkins creates a space in the present, however haunted it may be, in which those actions can also—in fact must be—our own.

Notes

1. On Quest and genre, see M. Lee 389–93.
2. Turn-of-the-century American Gothic—as demonstrated by other essays in this collection—often presents the past as an unrelenting force that intrudes upon the present. A number of writers—Ambrose Bierce, Charles Chesnutt, Henry James, Edith Wharton—use Gothic tropes this way in their work.
3. On the relationship between miscegenation law and the distribution of property, see Saks (64, 67–69, 72).
4. This concern is similar to the dilemma that Elizabeth Fox-Genovese argues is prevalent in African American fiction, particularly fiction by black women who focus on the experience of enslaved women. She writes of a tendency to present African American women as figures of oppression, or of perseverance, in ways that prevent a morally complex examination of slavery’s effects (473–74). While Hopkins seems to allegorize the costs of serving as this kind of figure through the profound passivity and tragic fate of Dianthe, Du Bois brings Zora’s history into his narrative but protects her agency—and her subjective complexity. Fox-Genovese writes that the ghosts of such traumatic histories are “tenacious” (488); Du Bois and Hopkins harness this tenacity in different ways.
5. On the novel’s relevance to understanding Du Bois’s emerging radicalism, see Van Wienen and Kraft (67).
6. Sympathy—and the limits of its power—is a frequent topic in The Souls of Black Folk (1903). See particularly pp. 36–37, 83, 149–53, and “Of the Passing of the First-Born,” as well as work by Hardwig, Mizruchi, and Schneider on Du Bois’s attention to the sociopolitical significance of sympathy.
7. Thus Zora, although as “good” as the African American heroines whom Fox-Genovese discusses, does speak the history she embodies (488). Contrary to Har-
Recent scholarship on the cultural politics of personal finance investigates the uncanny nature of home dispossession at the hands of foreclosing banks. Following David Zimmerman’s argument that the novel is an appraisal that seeks to account for the unaccountable, I argue that the Gothic ruptures the novel’s explanatory responses to fledgling financier Cowperwood’s query: “How this thing he had come into—this life—was organized” (7). Like the Gothic, which foregrounds the enigmatic and attempts to read rational resolutions on to it, Dreiser’s novel posits psychology as being a controlling, and controllable, interest in human makeup: “The professional traders were, of course, keen students of psychology” (53). Despite Dreiser’s depiction of psychology as an empirical tool for pecuniary success, a rational method of mitigating risk in the market, the novel traces the disorganization of Cowperwood’s life through his failure, foreclosure, and the subsequent sale of his art collection. His home, in effect, becomes a modern Gothic ruin reclaimed by the entropic forces of nature, his art collection scattered by the stampeding panic.

Dreiser’s approach to tabulating the unaccountable, his attempt to make legible the inscrutability of chance, is a fundamental facet of the American Gothic stemming from Wieland (1798) and running through North American culture to modern television crime drama whodunits, such as Motive (2013). Cowperwood wonders why he is “always favored financially, personally?” He hypothesizes that it could be an “accident, perhaps; but somehow the thought that he would always be protected—these intuitions . . . could not be so easily explained. Life was a dark, insoluble mystery” (314). I argue that Dreiser’s naturalist inquiry into the relationship between chance and determinism—what Shawn St. Jean calls Naturalism’s “variable determin-
ism” (212)—is similar to Gothic denouements predicated on divulging improbable but explainable coincidence. Gambling is a literary theme of the Gothic that stretches back to Ann Radcliffe’s not-quite-settled rationalization of protagonist Valancourt’s erratic behavior during the illuminating moment of disclosure in The Mysteries of Udolpho (1794). Gambling, when considered as “the chaos of untamed chance” (Reith 179), according to Lorraine Daston “weakened the will and rendered the gambler dangerously incalculable” and, significantly, dangerous to the home (qtd in Marshall 16).² Dreiser’s argument in The Financier is, indeed, that people produce chaos and that the distinction between legitimate speculation and criminal gambling is arbitrary yet highly culturally and politically charged—and therefore cannot be rendered logical despite the Gothic reflex to account.

The Gothic genre figures the home as a presumed place of reason, where the material claims ultimate epistemological authority, which stands in opposition to the murkiness of the preternatural ruin. This opposition is reflected in the narrator’s claim in The Financier: “We think we are individual, separate, above houses and material objects generally” (119), but “cut the thread, separate a man from that which is rightfully his own, characteristic of him, and you have a peculiar figure, half success, half failure, much as a spider without its web. Such a figure will never be its whole self again” (120). The problem with the home’s role in epistemologically stabilizing the subject, however, is that the home itself is on gambling ground. As a predicate of modernity, the home becomes a Gothic gamble, rather than a space away from “the ghostly world of market finance” (Anthony 65). Zimmerman documents that “sentimental writers lamented how speculation ruined families and destabilized middle-class homes, the putative sign and site of middle-class identity” (Panic! 119). Cowperwood’s home and his loss of it stands in for all homes threatened by uncontrollable and irrational market forces. It is precisely because Cowperwood “had been counting on getting all of his loans extended” that his failure and eviction dematerializes his home, since the market refuses any counting (230). Zimmerman argues that The Financier creates an “apotheosized abstraction—Accounting, or Accountability—as it manifests itself through the social activity of men, most obviously under crisis conditions” (5). Zimmerman’s reading of the proliferation of accounts in the novel as the gerund “accounting” straddles the division between nouns and verbs and eradicates the possibility of materially discrete, and therefore countable, objects or narratives. By turning accounts from nouns to the apotheosized action of accounting, “more balancing acts” (21–22), Zimmerman’s argument opens the possibility of my reading The Financier as performing the Gothic attempt at “accounting” for the home’s oscillation between materiality and immateriality. The thesis I
explore in this chapter is that as gambling tracks the Gothic unaccountability into the house, it turns the home into a ruin by shedding light on the unwelcome reality that it was always already materially dispersed. Dreiser’s depiction of housing displacement can be read as a Gothic breaching of the reasoned self as gambling renders the subject unreasoning and subhuman and his home environment, shorn of material certitude, incalculable.

Domestic Naturalism

“True, there are some jungle metaphors,” Donald Pizer admits of The Financier (Dreiser 179). Perhaps he confesses so reluctantly since such metaphors typically do the dirty polemical stall-mucking that readers often find so droningly didactic; however, it remains worth attending to the domestic animals husbanded by metaphors in The Financier. The jungle world of cutthroat capitalism has crept into the home, perhaps through the kitty door, as small creatures as well as beasts make themselves comfortable between the covers of the novel. This metaphorical menagerie harbors technical financial tropes of bears and bulls along with naturalist standbys such as a hound, wolves, and hawks (54, 21, 436, 549, 53). The 1927 edition of the novel also boasts a pair of matched leopards, spirited horses, and a mesmeric serpent with his fascinated bird (Financier [2008 ed.] 185, 140, 201).3 Such a “tropic-ical” collection, not unlike live-animal menageries, simultaneously exoticizes and domesticates the market and its manipulator, Cowperwood. However, the domestication is threatening since it brings home things that don’t belong there. As Andrew Smith and William Hughes note, “The point of the domestic Gothic is that it represents a particular manifestation of the uncanny” (4). In addition to the wildcat banks, the novel also quarters house pets, and pests, such as the “fiery-eyed public cat” who can’t scare “the older and wiser [political] rats” from pinching from the public kitchen (308). More than just a staging of “wary cooperation and cutthroat competition among economic animals” (Zimmerman, Panic! 35), the wild and domestic animal metaphors in The Financier reflect the dichotomy between the uncontrollable and that which should be controllable and yet remains wild in the wrong place, the home; a dichotomy that is, I contend, fundamentally Gothic.

T. Austin Graham has articulated the suspense that Dreiser creates by contrasting animal automatism and inexplicability: “The historical Cowperwood is at once a social actor, an animal, and the subject of some higher power. . . . Dreiser generally treats history as a knowable human narrative. . . . His novels [are] frequently suspended in a productive tension between the cold empiricism of the fish and the mystical insights of the crystal”
Houses, at the mercy of the market, are vessels for both the natural drive to settle, to account and accrete commodities, and the gnawing away of that possibility by the feral frenzy of modernity. Cowperwood’s fishy empiricism is confronted with a bestiality that denudes him on the floor during the panic of 1873: “When the time for closing came, his coat torn, his collar twisted loose, his necktie ripped, his hat lost, he emerged sane, quiet, steady‐mannered” (Dreiser 550). The financial panic that ruins Cowperwood and his home isn’t an external brutish force that buffets the stable domestic interior. Rather, houses in the novel are a priori invested in, and infested by, market fluctuations, and, more importantly, manipulations. As Gail Turley Houston argues, “Victorian capitalism normalized economic panic” (10) and “banking on panic had paid off with interest—crisis was now at home” (19). And yet such a deterministic normalization, while it accounts for the ever‐impending nineteenth‐century financial stampede, fails to abrogate the horror of the market stalking the floors of the home.

The pest that won’t go away, Cowperwood’s mock‐Homeric epithet and emblem, is the spider: “Like a spider in a spangled net, every thread of which he knew, had laid, had tested; and he was watching all the details” (Dreiser 177); he is “the horrific spider spinning his trap for the unthinking fly” (554). The spider makes his home out of a network over which he has visual dominion. The spider is a peculiarly delicate image for a financial titan, or a Naturalist hero in general—especially when compared with London’s sea wolf and Norris’s “old bear”; however, the spider is a Gothic creepy crawly that doesn’t belong in the home and yet is frequently found to make itself at home there. Lurking in the shadows, spiders are examples of what Willis calls “Gothic objects” (16). Such objects derive their “gothicity” from what I think is best pictured as an asymptotic approach to Realism: “Realist fiction introduces the Gothic mode through a variety of Gothic objects—which may be characters, but are also physical sites and immaterial spectres” (Willis 18). Willis erects the Realist Gothic by appointing Realism responsible for adjusting the tension between the materiality of modernity and its materialism compressed into a transcendental, yet leaden, concept. Although you cannot see them, things do go bump in the night. Dreiser likens spiders to “subtleties” missing their usually attendant preposition, “of,” opening up the possibility of their being both an entity in their own right and aspects of a noun or nouns unnamed: “Great lawyers were merely great unscrupulous subtleties, like himself, sitting back in dark, close‐woven lairs like spiders and awaiting the approach of unwary human flies” (372). The reader’s compulsion to ask, “The subtleties of what?” renders the corrective optic promise of the simile unfulfilled.

It is because the spider and the financier are both visible and yet hard to
see, natural actors and unpredictable threats within the home, that doubt works to spin them into Gothic objects. “Other people, men particularly, found it difficult to look into Cowperwood’s glazed stare persistently. It was as though there were another pair of eyes behind watching through thin, impenetrable curtains” (158). If eyes are the window into the soul, Cowperwood’s come furnished with some creepy window treatments. Mark M. Smith has deciphered the doubt that diminished the celebratory glow of exuberant nineteenth-century visual epistemology: “The Victorian imagination reaffirmed the idea that seeing was a subjective performance liable to distortion. Doubts about the certainty of sight emerged at the same time that seeing was considered central to surveillance, codification, and classification” (890). The optic difficulty in classifying animals in The Financier as either rationally self-interested animalistic automatons or crisis-causing critters compounds the novel’s nature of what Christophe Den Tandt calls “naturalist gothic” (126). Although Cowperwood decides that he would prefer to be a “financier,” never one of the “tools, or gamblers” (55), gambling later creeps up on him, suggesting that his reason decays into something like a self-dispossessing trance: “Cowperwood . . . had been unconsciously let in on this atmosphere of erratic and unsatisfactory speculation without really knowing it” (106). Smith and Hughes argue that “the sense of identity as potentially protean, unstable and incoherent . . . capture[s] an essential aspect of the Gothic form of the period: undecidability” (Victorian Gothic 1). Cowperwood’s “not quite” gambling on his own “account” (106) is inflected with Gothicity through his reduced agency and the indefinite nature of his role as a gambler.

Jude Davies, remarking on the oft-visited enclosure of the lobster-squid scene in the novel, profitably points out that “what is most striking about the passage is the sheer effort that goes into interpreting what the paradigmatic significance of animals might be” (61). The “interpretive effort” is, I think, a Gothic compulsion to resist letting the accident lie, to letting random variations determine the fate of real and human squids. Fruitful to remember is that the fish tank scene is far from a wild one. The tank itself is particularly in a “fish-market” (7) and therefore is in the realm of human control and, like the home, the events that occur within it should be predictable. And yet, since humans are undecidable creatures, the scene’s call for interpretation is evidence that it remains wildly “without,” outside the realm of rational explanation. Peter Collins contends that in the novel “nature is no more than a chaotic field for various elements that each seek their own ends. In the interplay of these elements Dreiser renders Smith’s invisible hand visible. The hand that places the lobster and the squid in the tank, sealing the squid’s fate, seeks to create a context in which the lobster will be the
more fit creature” (575). Cowperwood’s conclusion about the squid’s fate is formed as a question and answer: “What else could it be? ‘He didn’t have a chance’” (9). And yet as in the Gothic, questions in *The Financier*, especially about how life is organized, are never finally answered, only subjected to changing hypotheses that, no matter how firmly they are articulated initially, are always subject to revision. Even Cowperwood’s initial interpretation of the tank scene only “answered in a rough way that riddle” (9). “The proliferation of gothic prose,” Den Tandt argues, “manifests therefore the residual doubt that prevents the texts from articulating their ideology consistently” (72). Ultimately, it is the impulse to interpret, to explain, to categorize, and to account that characterizes the Gothic response to the presence of reason-obscurring animality in the market.

**Housing Banks**

The reification of money’s uncertainty is represented in the novel through the institutions that are meant most to mitigate its epistemological gamble, banking houses. The novel shows the early chaos of the banking system and the responsibility of Cowperwood Sr. as an employee of Third National of Philadelphia to control the whirl of paper confetti of “wildcat money” that was issued “without regulation upon insecure and unknown assets” (2). Jason Puskar remarks that the insurance industry lacks the kind of “obtrusive material infrastructure . . . [of] the mostly symbolic bank safe looming behind the teller” that served to mitigate its services’ “material invisibility” (41–42). Before turning attention to the blueprints of Cowperwood’s own homes, I look at the novel’s banking houses to afford a view of the Gothic epistemological gamble of money. *The Financier* begins with young Cowperwood finding himself attracted to the materiality of money when spying it snug in his father’s office: “From seeing his father count money, he was sure that he would like banking; and Third Street, where his father’s office was, seemed to him the cleanest, most fascinating street in the world” (10). Dreiser initiates money as a concrete countable item. Significantly, as the novel continues, money becomes less corporeal, less countable, when it is institutionalized in the banking house. As Houston argues of Dickens, “Like Marx and Macleod, the novelist is also fascinated by the animistic, supernatural energies inhabiting money and generated by bank[er]s who have the duty of circulating capital” (82, brackets in original).4 By passing through the hands of bankers, presumably who have only the ability to count money linearly as it comes through their doors, money is magically endowed with an other-worldly “ability to multiply, seemingly by the laying on of bankers’ ‘hands,’ if you will” (82). Cowperwood, learning the “note-brokerage
business,” would “go to one house, where he suspected ready money would be desirable, and offer to negotiate their notes or any paper they might issue bearing six per cent interest for a commission, and then he would take the paper to some man who had idle money and would welcome a secure investment, and sell him the paper for a small commission” (Dreiser 69). Dreiser describes Cowperwood’s banking institution as just such a place where money becomes subject to sleights of hand: “The houses and the bank-front of Cowperwood & Co. had been proceeding apace. The latter was early Florentine” (115), and “In the center panel had been hammered a hand, delicately wrought, thin and artistic, holding aloft a flaming brand. The latter, Ellsworth informed him, had formerly been a money-changer’s sign used . . . in Venice, but long since fallen into the limbo of nothingness” (116). The return of the sign from the mists of the medieval old world, in the Gothic passive voice, no less, is striking because the sign both functions and doesn’t function as a sign of a money-lender since its significance is forgotten to all except Ellsworth. The “sign” of money and moneylending, which creates more money as credit, is Gothically evacuated of its referent over the very banking house that is supposed to denote its presence.

Banking houses are not only Gothically undecidable in the way they house both money and gambling; their manipulations of money are tricks of the eye. As Alison Shonkwiler argues, “In The Financier, the forces of nature and history (as well as elements of order and disorder) are combined in the laboratory of the panic, producing an account of capitalism as not irrational per se but as a force of limited legibility” (52). Money dissolves from that which is discrete and visually accountable to something that Cowperwood has knowledge of through an indiscriminate sense that lends spirit to his art. Cowperwood knows “what could be done with a given sum of money—how as cash it could be deposited in one place, and yet as credit . . . used in not one but many other places at the same time” (121). Money takes flight from, rather than rests in, the comfort and immobility of the banking house.

As Bruce Robbins artfully extrapolates of Cowperwood’s youthful objection to being a stock-gambler, “To pursue the gambling analogy, we might say that he is not a gambler but the house: whatever happens, he always gets his cut” (122). I propose that a reading of the novel as working to elide banking houses and the “house” of cards paves the way for my understanding of homes in the novel as Gothic gambles that have a material coherence tied to, or rather loosened by, the mercuriality of the market. Houston significantly detects “a hint of frisson when remembering that nineteenth-century banks were referred to as ‘houses.’ . . . These linguistic and physical constructions of the bank as a home ostensibly served to domesticate the inhospitable features of a nascent capitalist society. Naturalizing, that is, mak-
ing banking panic at home” (3–4). But gambling’s comfort in both banking houses and personal homes also opens the door to remembering the lost special status of the home away from the market. When Cowperwood is “speculating upon the future,” he looks out of his office window, which “gave nowhere save into a back yard behind another office building which had formerly been a residence. Some grass grew feebly there. The red wall and old-fashioned brick fence which divided it from the next lot reminded him somehow of his old home” (174). That the former house becomes “nowhere” points to its stark immateriality in the wake of encroaching business offices. Yet even in his calculating eyes the withering of the pastoral home and its nostalgic residue intervenes at this moment of crisis in Cowperwood’s contemplation of the possibility of his invisibly amalgamating street lines. Similarly, Reith describes the gamblers of the modern gambling house who “found themselves competing against an invisible opponent with a permanent place at every table and unlimited resources. . . . Gamblers no longer played against each other but against the house, whose invisible impersonal force mirrored the imperatives of economic behavior, the ‘invisible hand’ of market forces” (80). Cowperwood, in his machinations, attempts to be that invisible hand when he tries to take over the reins of the market by pushing to combine railway lines. Acting from his spidery shadows, he uses “peculiar methods” to depress share values, and through agents he relieves stockholders of their unwanted stock: “They had not really been able to discover the source of all their woes” (177). However, the panic of 1871 returns the repressed materiality of money as Cowperwood loses his house advantage and gets slapped on his suddenly very visible wrist.

Banking/Gambling Houses

Although homes in the novel appear as spaces away from market fluctuations, they are actually always contingent upon them. The very first page of the novel marks the macabre real estate consequences of Cowperwood Sr.’s promotion. “Thanks to the death of the bank’s president and the consequent moving ahead of the other officers, [he] fell heir to the place vacated by the promoted teller,” and, consequently, he decides to move to “a much better neighborhood, where there was a nice brick house of three stories in height as opposed to their present two-storied domicile” (Financier [2008 ed.] 1). The inflation in Cowperwood Sr.’s salary is directly reflected in the escalation of his house in terms of stories, and yet Dreiser sends a shudder through the foundations of his success as he lets in the draft of death on upward mobility and domestic dreams. Cowperwood Sr. inherits not haunted property à la Hawthorne, but a “position” that can be taken away at any
time, and indeed we do see his resignation from the bank after his son fails.\(^5\)
Not only is it disturbing that financial positions can change, but houses can “move”; Aileen seeks shelter with Maimie whose father was a “house-mover” until killed by a falling wall (344). Early in the novel, during the first panic of 1857, in which “the country seemed to be going to the dogs” (58), Cowperwood watches financial speculation trespass upon the home: “Gambling in stocks, according to conditions produced by this panic, seemed very hazardous. . . . Their very homes were in danger, they said. . . . Their wives and children put out on the street” (59). That the house is haunted by the stock market through both upward mobility and subsequent downsizing is fairly clear. Houston makes the argument that the home and the Gothic are bound by the market: “Unheimlich (meaning . . . ‘unhomely’)” is an appropriate term since “the word ‘economics’ comes from the Greek term for control of the house. . . . The former meaning of ‘economy’ haunts the skeletal remains of ‘economics’” (2). My aim here is to investigate how the market haunts the house by divesting it of material coherence and what that process brings to light.

Cowperwood’s eviction performs a Gothic pageant of the market in the home. The materiality of the purchased goods that make up his home, and the necessity of liquidating them, dislocate the home even further from property ownership. Dreiser’s initial reproof that we are not “separate, above houses and material objects,” shows that both the home and its objects work to make Cowperwood “feel of more weight in the world” (123). Not just the house but the materiality of the objects in the house do the work of transferring the psychological and social significance of home to the subject. Eviction is Gothic not just because you and your wife and children are thrown out of your house and become unsheltered; it is also eerie in that your stuff is thrown out of your house in a pile, or flung far and wide back through the medium of the market to the highest bidder, who usually bids too low. What makes the house Gothic, in a sense just like money, is the sheer scatterability of its materiality. The house, even though it is composed of brick and mortar and chattels, is quite effervescent because of the fluctuations of the market. “The dominant trope of much Gothic is of claustrophobia,” David Punter notes (176); however, in The Financier, homes are not a claustrophobic interior but an exposing exteriority. A total lack of adhesion, like that of the crumbling ruin, is the mark of the modern home.

Robbins notes that Cowperwood’s defection to Aileen is “evidence that Dreiser is committed not to production but to speculation” (115). Cowperwood sets up the love nest where Aileen could “call without seeming strangely out of place” as she was “governed . . . by her wild and unreasoning affection and passion” (167). At the house they can engage in “that other form
of liaison which has nothing to do with conscious calculation” (194). How-
however, even given Dreiser’s directive to the reader to get off the moral high
ground, the novel others and exoticizes the love nest: “And there was that
other house in North Tenth Street, which he desired to make beautiful. . .
It became a second treasure-trove, more distinguished on the interior than
some rooms of his own home. He began to gather here some rare examples
of altar cloths, rugs, and tapestries of the middle ages. He bought furniture
after the Georgian theory” (180). Yet as beautiful as this collection is, it is
haunted by the reality that it is “other” than a home, and that even his fa-
milial home, as a refuge, is threatened by the market. Lara Baker Whelan
reiterates that “the threat of the Other speaks to the threat of the liminal,
or that which is poised on a boundary or abyss. Most critics agree that
the primary characteristic of the gothic is that it is ‘pervasively organized
around anxieties about boundaries (and boundary transgressions)’” (Wil-
liams, qtd in Whelan 100–101).6 The fact of Cowperwood’s double houses,
not to mention the doubling of his house’s attachment to his father’s house,
works to disunite the sense of the home as a monolithic material mainstay
against the market and turns it into a series of things consumed. As art
makes a space for Cowperwood outside the rush of his business life, it also
installs the market’s threat inside his home since it is his favorite thing to
buy. As Miles Orvell observes, “The artwork evokes a dreamy garden, the
idyllic shelter, the picturesque—anything but the sublime forces of nature
or the gritty struggles of city and industry” (136). However, in setting up
a dichotomy between well-decorated homes and the downtown business
centre, Cowperwood exposes his house and home to Gothic intrusions of
the market. Cowperwood says to an art dealer, who has “conveyed some of
his suppressed and yet fiery love of the beautiful” (182), that “art will be the
ruin of me. I’m inclined that way temperamentally as it is, I think, and be-
tween you and Ellsworth . . . you’ll complete my downfall” (183). In a Gothic
border-crossing chiasmus, Cowperwood uses the language of financial ruin
to describe his love of art and the language of a dream world to describe
some of his key financial desires and crises.

The home is an oxymoron that simultaneously occupies and evades space
as both a material and an ineffable construct and can be read as metony-
mized by Cowperwood’s art and furniture, which are a transportable yet
moorable manifestation of the home. As Catherine Jurca explains of Sister
Carrie, Dreiser “encourages us to see a connection between spiritual and
material shelter by prefacing a sustained critique of the ‘home atmosphere’
with a catalogue of the house’s furnishings” (101), which, as shown above,
he also provides in The Financier. Cowperwood’s father during the panic
not only mortgages his home, but he also secures loans “on his furniture” (Dreiser 230). One of the markers of Cowperwood’s downfall is that their new home has “none of the furniture which had characterized the other somewhat gorgeous domicile” (512). The panic pulls Cowperwood’s “rare” rug out from under the concept of “safe as houses,” which, as Todd Kuchta points out, is a phrase that has its origins in “money diverted from risky foreign ventures [that] was often channeled into safer investment in housing” (21). Although Lillian is horrified to think that “her Frank Cowperwood, her husband—the substance of their home here,” is going to prison, it is his Gothically undecidable role as a gambler that has put the substance of her home up for auction (Financier [2008 ed.] 408).

The frightening thing about the auction is the feeling that the objects never left the market, never really came home at all to acquire a stable value. It is as if objects have their values, fluctuating though they may be, indelibly marked on the back of them. During “sheriff’s sale” following Cowperwood’s failure and conviction, “the general public, without let or hindrance, was permitted to tramp through rooms . . . and examine . . . the pictures, statuary, and objects of art generally, which . . . were now scrutinized in detail and knocked down to the highest bidder” (512). Interestingly, it is during this sale that both of Cowperwood’s homes, his legitimate and illegitimate one, are merged through the sale of both their furnishings. Philip Gerber, describing the liquidation of the Yerkes estate for Mary Adelaide’s dower rights, uses language that brings speculative gambling into the Gothic ruin: “The newspapers offered their readers a running account of events, allowing the public to ‘eavesdrop’ while agents of the auction company entered 864 at will. . . . Collectors, art experts, and dealers joined them, sauntering about the mansion as if they owned it, openly speculating upon values, eyes alert for potential bargains. Even Mrs. Yerkes’s boudoir was invaded, and, suffering from neuralgia, she was in a gloomy mood as the work progressed” (95). The invaded boudoir and eavesdropping are telltale tokens of the Gothic, but most importantly, the home, thrown back to a world of “speculating” on indeterminate and unaccountable values, does indeed have a Gothically “gloomy mood.”

Conclusion

Homelessness and eviction at all social strata are themes of turn-of-the-century fiction and far from unique to The Financier. Stephen Crane’s “An Experiment in Misery” (1894) is the most acute example. William Dean Howells makes the reader tag along for the Marches’ almost punitive apart-
ment hunting in *A Hazard of New Fortunes* (1890), which, as Christopher Raczkowski says, “indicates that the modern sociality forming in New York is one in which any traditional idea of home as enclosed, secure, and definable is no longer available” (305). Edith Wharton’s Lily Bart, in *The House of Mirth* (1905), has to hotfoot it around town in a restless homelessness. Annette Benert alerts us to Lily’s conundrum that although she “lacks a house,” these “‘houses’ have also thwarted, tormented, twisted Lily’s life. She can not afford either to have, or not to have, a house” (36). In Frank Norris’s *McTeague*, the contents sale of Trina and McTeague’s bridal bower is “a long agony” ([1982 ed.] 274), in no small part because it invokes the return of their ghoulish consumption—“They haunted the house-furnishing floors of the great department houses” (154). In a financial panic, personal or public, the furnishings of the home become re-countable in the catalogue of loss.

Norris’s *The Octopus* provides a productive example that highlights the home’s dislocation among the account of its contents and compounds Dreiser’s disavowal that “we are individual, separate, above houses and material objects generally” (119–20). *The Octopus* shows that the objects are the home. Norris compels the reader to face the shocking visibility of the eviscerated home through Hilma’s treble exhortation to “look” in her statement: “‘Oh, oh,’ cried Hilma suddenly, ‘look, look there. Look what they’ve done’” (*Novels* 995). What they did is worth quoting at length: “A vast, confused heap of household effects was there—chairs, sofas, pictures, fixtures, lamps. Hilma’s little home had been gutted; everything had been taken from it and ruthlessly flung out upon the road . . . flung out into the dust and garish sunshine for all men to stare at, a mockery and a shame” (995). “Hilma, picking her way through the wreck of her home” (996), shows that the furnishings are themselves her home and their strewn state is her wrecked home.

By reading this example from Norris alongside *The Financier*, I suggest that the Gothic attempt to tally the incomprehensible events of the market into a rational account ultimately serves only to unveil the ontological incoherence of the home and its owner. Cowperwood Sr. reflects that “there was an air about his house and Frank’s now . . . as though someone had died in them. You could feel a sense of dissolution” (273); however, as in all Gothic tales, it isn’t just the ethereality of the ghost or other threat that is frightening, it is its physicality. Repressed financial accountability precipitates itself out of solution during financial crisis, reminding us that the market should be accountable; yet, like a half-tamed house pet, it maintains its wildness where it isn’t welcome. The market acts like a poltergeist, playing the home like a marionette. Upon learning that Frank is in trouble, Lillian thinks, “In this crisis . . . she was astonished, frightened, dumbfounded,
confused. Her little, placid, beautiful world was going around in a dizzy ring. It was as though the tables and chairs of her own home had begun to move of their own volition and without any exterior aid” (274–75). The failed Gothic attempt to account the impossible chaos that rises to confront the individual during panic and eviction, including the tabulation of assets and the piling and then scattering of furnishings, serves only to render the subject and its relation to the speculativity of the market unreasoned and inarticulable and the home’s materiality dispersed. At his most tender, Dreiser describes Lillian’s confrontation with Cowperwood’s failure and conviction, highlighting the self-estrangement of eviction: “Her fortieth year had come for her, and here she was . . . feeling innately that life ought naturally to remain grounded on a fixed and solid base, and yet [she was] torn bodily from the domestic soil in which she was growing and blooming, and thrown out indifferently in the blistering noonday sun of circumstance to wither” (319). The Gothic, although it deals in darkness and indecipherability, is truly terrible through its insistence on looking, on uncovering, on accounting, on finding the actual physical source of hitherto inexplicable phenomena. Dreiser’s consummate Naturalist trope, “the blistering noonday of circumstance,” makes the strings of the market, if not accountable, at least visible, thereby paving the way for popular American acceptance of the soothing balm Progressive Era market regulations could provide those bitten by the market.

Notes

1. See American Quarterly’s September 2013 special issue on the subprime crisis. Andrew Lawson audits the politics and aesthetics of displacement in Gothic language that aligns eviction and hauntings, ruins and ruination: “The opacity which disabled the working of the subprime market and the financial system also haunts these discursive and visual representations of the subprime borrower” (56–57). And again, “Financial engineering’ was magical thinking. The only way it could be sustained was through a willful blindness, or at least a studied indifference, to neoliberal suffering. The repressed returned, as it always does, from the outside, in the specter of the subprime borrower” (67).

2. As Gerda Reith chronicles, the Enlightenment era, arguably the harbinger of the Gothic, was confused that “gamblers made a decision which no reasonable human was supposed to be able to make—they intentionally gave up their most precious faculty [reason], their mark of humanity, for nothing more tangible than the vicissitudes of chance” (83). There is something “other” than human, something animalistic, about gambling. Marshall cites Lorraine Daston, Classical Probability in the Enlightenment (2003).
3. All citations of The Financier are of the 1912 critical edition edited by Roark Mulligan (2010) unless otherwise indicated; other citations explicitly refer to the 2008 edition.

4. Houston refers to Henry Dunning Macleod, political economy professor and author of Theory and Practice of Banking (1855). Her discussion shows his essentialist view of money as a natural resource subject to the laws of nature (73).

5. Walter Benn Michaels points out that the crux of the horror and Gothic genres is anxiety about property (89–90, 98).

6. Whelan cites Anne Williams, Art of Darkness: A Poetics of Gothic.
IV

Paranormal Longings and Warnings
The Haunted Narrators of Clovernook

Alice Cary’s Village Gothic

Dennis Berthold

Almost entirely ignored by literary scholars until the 1990s, Alice Cary’s reputation has gradually grown since Judith Fetterley and Marjorie Pryse credited her with inaugurating the tradition of American women’s regionalist fiction in the 1850s, some twenty years earlier than previously supposed (173). Born on the Ohio frontier in 1821, Cary drew on her personal experience as a member of “the farming class” (*Clovernook* vii) to compose sketches and tales about the region and people she knew. Shortly after moving to New York City in 1850 she collected these in the first and second series of *Clovernook, or Recollections of Our Neighborhood in the West* (1852, 1853). Most of Cary’s Clovernook tales develop the regional and feminist themes identified by Fetterley and Pryse such as local color, dialect, sentiment, and humor. American versions of the “village sketch” pioneered by British writer Mary Mitford. Others, however, such as her best-known tale “Uncle Christopher’s,” expose the cruelty and psychic stress of frontier life even as they realistically depict the farming families of Clovernook. Instead of exporting frontier Gothic metaphors to England, a transatlantic exchange Tamara Wagner has described in the novels of Frances and Anthony Trollope, Mary Shelley, and other British writers, Cary imported the erstwhile benign genre of the village sketch into the Ohio borderland and infused it with Gothic themes derived from personal experience: loneliness, alienation, depression, poverty, and death. Gothic tropes so infuse one story, “The Wildermings,” that Charles L. Crow included it in *American Gothic: An Anthology 1787–1916*, acknowledging the common ground shared by early Realism and the Gothic tradition: “Gothic literature can tell the story of those who are rejected, oppressed, or who have failed,” Crow writes in his preface, and while Americans “want to believe in wholesome families, the
Gothic can expose what many may know about, and never acknowledge: the hatred that can exist alongside of love, the reality of child abuse, even incest” (2). “Uncle Christopher’s” and “The Wildermings” reveal Cary’s sensitivity to the psychological toll of living on a rapidly advancing frontier where farms quickly replace Indian settlements and forests daily give way to cornfields. In this unstable region, hopes for financial success darken into personal experience with poverty, distant homesteads isolate families from community life, young women must choose between love and loneliness, and death stalks children as stealthily as adults. Cary places these harsh realities of rural life in the service of Gothic eeriness to give her otherwise two-dimensional sketches the spiritual and psychological desperation that, as Joanne B. Karpinski shows, preys on women in the New England village tales of Sarah Orne Jewett and Mary Wilkins Freeman.

Although we know little about Cary’s early reading, my research has uncovered an early literary influence that awakened her to the potential of Gothic fiction. Among a predictable and pathetically small collection of books available to Cary’s rural family, Mary Clemmer Ames, Cary’s only biographer, lists “a mutilated novel called the ‘Black Penitents’ with the last pages missing, which Alice regretted her whole life” (21). Unidentified until now, this “mutilated novel” was one of the most widely read Gothic novels of all time, Anne Radcliffe’s *The Italian, or the Confessional of the Black Penitents, A Romance* (1797). A classic tale of a thwarted bridegroom rescuing his beloved from a lonely convent and triumphing over the Inquisition, the novel titillates its readers with descriptions of unbridled lust, murderous violence, spectral manifestations, and pervasive uncertainty and unease. Since Cary apparently never finished the book, it is likely she associated unresolved anxiety with the Gothic, a dominant mood in the Clovernook tales, especially those narrated from the emotionally limited perspective of Cary’s predominant persona, a female character who grows from childhood to early adulthood over the course of the two volumes.

A second and more immediate influence on Cary’s Gothicism, also largely unexplored, was Edgar Allan Poe. J. S. Redfield, Cary’s publisher, issued the first two volumes of *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* and advertised them prominently in the back pages of the 1852 *Clovernook*. Their primary editor, Rufus Wilmot Griswold, was not only Poe’s professional acquaintance and literary executor, but also a literary advocate for Alice Cary and her sister Phoebe. He included their poetry in *The Female Poets of America* (1849) and, although married, enjoyed a romantic correspondence with Alice who was, in the words of Griswold’s biographer Joy Bayless, “swept off her feet by the attentions of her mentor” (215). At one point the two came very close to marriage, and Bayless speculates that Cary may have moved to New
York to be near Griswold: in one letter to him contemplating this journey she boldly wrote, quite passionately, “But I ‘Love with a love that is more than love’” (214), a nearly exact quotation from Poe’s “Annabel Lee” (“But we loved with a love that was more than love”). Although Griswold soon divorced his wife and married a wealthy New York woman, he and Cary stayed on good terms and in 1856, when he moved into smaller quarters, he loaned her Samuel S. Osgood’s 1845 portrait of Poe to hang in her parlor (Bayless 192). Clearly, Griswold and Cary knew Poe’s works well and must have discussed them at length around the time Cary was writing Clovernook, for Cary repeats the last eight words of the line from “Annabel Lee” in the second sentence of “The Sisters” (Clovernook 270), the first story in a cycle of eight tales about the emotional bonds between the two Hadly sisters and how they persist after the older one’s death.

Cary’s admiration for Poe was warmly reciprocated. In February 1849 Poe reviewed The Female Poets of America in the Southern Literary Messenger and lavished uncharacteristic praise upon Cary’s “Pictures of Memory,” naming it “decidedly the noblest poem in the collection.” He praised its “power of exciting the only real poetical effect—elevation of the soul, in contradistinction from mere excitement of the intellect or heart” (126), a key constituent of Gothic frisson and a central tenet of Poe’s aesthetics. Such an encomium from the infamous “tomahawk man” of American literary criticism was not only rare: it was prized, especially when it appeared in a well-regarded journal like the Southern Literary Messenger. True, Poe often treated women writers more generously than men; but even if we ascribe his praise to a well-meaning but patronizing sexism, within his universe of “female poets” Alice Cary stood out as one of the few to achieve Poe’s own high standards for poetry.

Cary may have learned from Poe how to create Gothic tension in works presumptively concerned with everyday life. Poe’s psychologically compelling tale “The Black Cat” grounds itself in the habits of urban life to unleash the repressed feelings that burst forth in an apparently unmotivated act of violence: the murder of a spouse. The story relies less on the fantastic or supernatural than what the narrator calls “a homely narrative” and “a series of mere household events” told as “nothing more than an ordinary succession of very natural causes and effects” (Poetry and Tales 597). Despite its strange coincidences and grotesque conclusion, nothing in “The Black Cat” demands a supernatural explanation. The story recounts utterly plausible and realistic occurrences familiar to most readers: alcoholism, poverty, wife and animal abuse, compulsive behavior and the guilt that follows, and the pervasive presence and fear of death. As in most Gothic tales, some plot elements remain mysterious, such as the narrator’s weird collection
of pets, the fire that consumes his house, and the appearance of the second cat with its “indefinite splotch of white” that morphs into an image of the gallows (601, 603). But none of these details are necessarily unrealistic or implausible. A writer for the Philadelphia Ledger, quoted in the Poe advertisement in Clovernook, noticed this quality: “There is an air of reality in all his narrations—a dwelling upon particulars, and a faculty of interesting you in them such as is possessed by few writers except those who are giving their own individual experiences” (np). It is precisely this “air of reality” that characterizes Cary’s Gothic and gives it a peculiarly American tone that distinguishes it from Ann Radcliffe’s outlandish plots or the baroque sexual inversions and domestic complications of Emily Bronte’s Wuthering Heights (1847). Teresa A. Goddu’s Gothic America situates the best-known American Gothic writers within their social and political milieu to demonstrate how “American Gothic literature criticizes America’s national myth of new-world innocence by voicing the cultural contradictions that undermine the nation’s claim to purity and equality” (10). As she sees it, the violence and conflict associated with Native Americans, slavery, race, market capitalism, women’s rights, and similar historical people and events drive the plots and characters in such Gothic writers as Charles Brockden Brown, Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Louisa May Alcott, and dissociate it from the British tradition that relied more on the fantastic and supernatural, such as John Polidori’s and Thomas Preskett Prest’s vampires, Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein’s monster, and the bizarre “sensation tales” that Poe parodied in “How to Write a Blackwood Article” (1838). Goddu’s approach explains how Realism and Gothicism coexist in American literature and provides a sound theoretical framework for linking Poe and Cary as twin practitioners of an early and distinctively American Gothic literature.

Understanding the blend of Realism and Gothicism in Cary’s works profits from the insights in Sigmund Freud’s essay on “The Uncanny,” whose German title, “Das Unheimliche” (1919), better represents his meaning, as Fred Botting implies by titling his essay on the uncanny “Homely Gothic” (113–34). “Heimlich” literally translates as “homely,” which in American usage invariably means “plain” or even “ugly,” but in more traditional British usage means “of the home,” “domestic,” “familiar,” or “intimate” (Oxford English Dictionary). “Unhomely” sounds ungrammatical to the American ear and is virtually a nonce word in British English—the OED added it in 1989 with only three occurrences, all between 1871 and 1892. If “unhomely” were a common word in English, however, it would mean something alien to domesticity and would involve a process whereby the familiar becomes unfamiliar, as a household pet in “The Black Cat” becomes an agent of retribution. The terror and anxiety evident in the American Gothic most of-
ten comes from the familiar made strange, the domestic made foreign, the heimlich made unheimlich. Translated as “uncanny” it also connotes the known—a “canny” person is a knowledgeable person—transformed into the unknown. This process of “defamiliarization” is an essential Gothic technique mastered by such twentieth-century American Gothicists as Shirley Jackson and Stephen King and is a staple of contemporary horror movies, where ordinary people metamorphose into monsters and commonplace activities such as double-dating descend into scenes of bloodcurdling mayhem. The uncanny, then, is an essential feature of American Gothic, where the family becomes “a place rendered threatening and uncanny by the haunting return of past transgressions and attendant guilt on an everyday world shrouded in strangeness” (Botting 11).

One of the clearest examples of Cary’s unheimlich Gothic occurs in “Uncle Christopher’s,” the well-regarded story from *Clovernook, Second Series* (1853). Its narrator is a young woman who accompanies her father on a winter visit to the farm of her uncle Christopher Wright and his family. When she enters the house to meet these relatives for the first time, her surreal description of them alienates her as much as any Gothic heroine entering a dark castle peopled by strangers. The mother and six daughters so closely resemble each other that “one could not tell them apart; not even the mother from daughters—for she appeared as young as the oldest of them—except by her cap and spectacles.” All seven are “very slender, very straight, and very tall; all had dark complexions, black eyes, low foreheads, straight noses, and projecting teeth; and all were dressed precisely alike.” They huddle together by the fireside, busily knitting long blue stockings, and they remain eerily silent while the father and uncle converse (*Clovernook, Second Series* 175). These seven women are less human beings than automatons, slaves of patriarchy and the means of production like the paper mill workers in Herman Melville’s “The Tartarus of Maids.” They have no individuality or purpose except to serve their father, the religious zealot Uncle Christopher, and to work mindlessly at repetitive mechanical reproduction, just like Melville’s identical young women. All but one of the seven women qualify as “old maids” who have missed their chance to escape the paternal prison and fulfill their prescribed destinies of marriage and motherhood. Their silence and severity mark them as victims of a domestic economy that forces them into celibacy and isolation as rigid and dehumanizing as the inquisitorial constraints in Radcliffe’s abbeys and convents. The quotidian reality of their situation—Cary repeats the stocking motif to emphasize the women’s incessant labor on everyday tasks—ensures no relief from their plight. The narrative almost imperceptibly shifts from an account of impoverished domesticity to an uncanny vision of life-in-death as
it blends Realism and Gothicism to expose the horrors of patriarchy, Christian fundamentalism, and rural isolation. Although Cary’s stated aim in her first preface was to show “sympathy for the poor and humble” (*Clovernook* vi), she remains sufficiently candid to expose the dire consequences of such conditions. As Elizabeth Schultz finds in her comparison of “Uncle Christopher’s” to Melville’s “Bartleby, the Scrivener,” in the stocking scene and others “Cary subversively alludes to democratic America where the press of tyrannous laws was apparent in the South’s chattel slavery and the deadening influence upon humanity in the North’s wage slavery, class inequities, and domestic abuse” (83), all themes that Goddu finds essential to the American Gothic and that surface again in the writings of Freeman, Rebecca Harding Davis, Kate Chopin, Frank Norris, Stephen Crane, and other Realists and Naturalists. No wonder that Fetterley, who values Cary’s detailed depictions of social classes, women, domesticity, and daily life, nevertheless finds in “Uncle Christopher’s” “Cary’s dual interest in realism and romance . . . it might be taken for a bad dream, were it not from start to finish so chillingly realistic” (Introduction 2802).

Gothic motifs run through both *Clovernook* collections and interfuse the uncanny with Realism. For example, Fetterley notes how “a profound sense of melancholy pervades the first volume of Clovernook sketches. Each of the first six stories in *Clovernook* centers on dying and death; moreover many others take place in October or November, a season Cary inevitably associates with mourning” (*Clovernook Sketches* xxvii). These harvest months nominally connote plenty and security, but Cary renders such comforting implications uncanny by making them the season of mortality, following Poe’s practice in “Ulalume” which takes place at “night, in the lonesome October. . . . In the ghoul-haunted woodland of Weir” (*Poetry and Tales* 89).

While Poe’s setting is deliberately vague, fantastic, and foreboding, Cary situates her Gothic motifs in detailed and realistic settings, a tonal contrast that renders their horrors uncanny and destabilizing. In “My Grandfather,” the opening story in *Clovernook*, the narrator recounts her first “consciousness of death” when she was a child, and, like Poe’s persona in “Ulalume,” she remembers “the twilight, as though it were yesterday—gray, and dim, and cold, for it was late in October, when the shadow first came over my heart, that no subsequent sunshine has ever swept entirely away” (13). Cary’s narrator is the one haunted, not the woodland or the autumnal setting. Even her grandfather’s mill, normally an image of prosperity, is “an especial object of terror” to her (18), yet it offers more comfort than her grandfather’s “cold forbidding presence” (19), which Cary grotesquely accentuates when the girl steals a peek at the dying old man’s face: “[I] was transfixed; the rings beneath the eyes, which had always been deeply marked, were
now almost black, and the blue eyes within looked glassy and cold, and terrible. The expression of agony on the lips (for his disease was one of a most painful nature) gave place to a sort of smile, and the hand, twisted among the gray locks, was withdrawn and extended to welcome my parents, as the door closed. That was a fearful moment; I was near the dark steep edges of the grave; I felt, for the first time, that I was mortal too, and I was afraid” (21). Realistic details lead to the girl’s innermost thoughts as Cary turns to analogy—“the dark steep edges of the grave”—to convey the sense of mystery and vulnerability that attends a child’s first experience with death. The Gothic imagery defamiliarizes her grandfather physically, and his last words, “Child, you trouble me” (24), alienate him from both the narrator and the reader. It is a profoundly unheimlich comment because it is so inappropriate, so unexpected, so cruel, and yet so intimate and domestic, taking place as it does in the old man’s bedchamber. After his funeral Cary uses details borrowed from Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” to confirm the reality and horror of death: the granddaughter views “the unsmiling corpse” (an inversion of Madeline Usher’s “suspiciously lingering smile”) and watches as the lid of the coffin is screwed down, just as does Poe’s narrator (Poetry and Prose 329). For both Poe and Cary, realistic details undermine religious and sentimental reactions to death, and even the narrator’s assertion that “Death is less terrible to me now” (26) offers cold comfort as she recounts her traumatic childhood encounters with a death as naturalistically described as any in a Jack London story.

In “Light and Shade,” which immediately follows “My Grandfather,” a ten-year-old girl refuses to play with seven-year-old Julia and then feels responsible when the younger girl dies shortly thereafter. The narrator—presumably, as in both Clovernook collections, a consistent persona for Cary—last witnesses Julia smiling in her coffin (33), an image that haunts her in the present and leads her to moralize that not “fasting, nor prayer, nor penitence, nor scourge, may ever wholly lay the ghosts of bad actions. When we least expect them, they open the doors of our most secret chambers, and come in” (31). As though the little girl is her mortal double, the narrator concludes that Julia’s “brief existence, bordering my own, [was] like a beam of beautiful light; but from her grave stretches a shadow that would reach me in the uttermost parts of the world” (33). Similarly, when the narrator of “The Pride of Sarah Worthington” remembers teasing her proud playmate Sarah Worthington about her fondness for an older man (44) and then, years later, reads Sarah’s obituary in the newspaper, she feels intense regret for exposing Sarah’s secret and never apologizing to her. The story attempts to exorcise these “phantoms that come up from the grave . . . and folding back the shroud, cry out to the dust for forgiveness. In vain! There
is no green hollow in the wilderness, no blank sands of the desert, that to me would not be haunted” (41). Neither religion nor storytelling brings relief to the narrator, and when she recalls “an old ruinous church,” she clearly dredges up a haunting symbol of tenuous faith (42–43). Cary’s almost imperceptible shifts between present and past in this story, as in others, mark the difficulty her narrators have in confronting “phantoms” such as smiling corpses, ruined buildings, darkness, and cold, all Gothic images that resurface in the adult consciousness and remind narrators of their guilt.

These opening stories of childhood encounters with death set the mood for “The Wildermings,” a tale whose elusive plot makes it even more unheimlich than “Uncle Christopher’s.” When a small family—“an old lady, a young man, and a child some fourteen years of age” (Clovernook 48)—moves into a vacant cottage beyond the local graveyard, Cary’s persona enjoys seeing smoke curling once more from the chimney, a conventional emblem of homely domesticity. After one brief visit to welcome the newcomers, she discovers that this is no typical family, for the relationships of all three are unclear. She later refers to the “old lady” as a “mother,” but whose mother she never says, and she never sees this “mother” unless she is also “the housekeeper, or one that I took to be her” who appears at the end (48, 51, 55). When the narrator realizes that the young man visits the graveyard at twilight and plays a flute over the grave of Mary Wildermings, “a fair young girl who died, more sinned against than sinning” (49), readers may surmise, without any explicit comment from Cary, that the young man is the child’s unwed father who has returned to absolve his guilt for leaving Mary without benefit of marriage. The phrase “more sinned against than sinning” comes from King Lear, act III, scene ii, line 60, and in the Victorian era typically denominated a “fallen woman,” seduced and abandoned by her lover and, though guilty of a moral crime, worthy of sympathy. It is unclear how the child came into the young man’s custody or where he went, but he may have returned to the scene of his transgression because the daughter is dying from a strange illness that links her to her mother. On the narrator’s second visit to the cottage, hoping to comfort the sick child, she finds to her “horror” the girl dead with her eyes “still unclosed.” As the “housekeeper” explains, “The child would never in life close her eyes—her mother, they say, died in watching for one who never came, and the baby was watchful and sleepless from the first” (55). Such a bizarre connection between mother and daughter qualifies as uncanny because it is so unexpectedly different from the usual traits that identify children and parents, a characteristic that even the village doctor, who has been treating the child but has never seen her sleep, considers “strange” (54). The relationships and behavior among all the characters in this story, including the narrator, are ambiguous, secretive,
and unexplained—in short, Gothic. The pluralized title implies that this is a tale of an entire family, and while other relationships are possible—the young man could be Mary’s brother and the old lady/housekeeper Mary’s mother, or even two distinct characters—the subterranean theme of sexual transgression and remorse runs deep through the tale and the narrator’s immature consciousness. Fetterley, although giving the story a more realistic reading than I do, finds “an uncanny resemblance” between the narrator and the child (Clovernook Sketches xxix), a perception that places Cary squarely in the emerging tradition of nineteenth-century Gothic with its emphasis on doubles, alter egos, and that most unheimlich figure of all, the shadowy doppelgänger. “The Wildermings” employs abundant and explicit Gothic imagery—the isolated cottage, a graveyard where ghosts are said to walk, the eerie sound of a flute coming from the graveyard at twilight, the mysterious deaths of Mary and her daughter, and the narrator’s horrifying glimpse of the child’s corpse with its eyes still open, a staple image in contemporary horror films. But it is the story’s intense focus on the narrator’s obsession with the strange family and its endurance in her memory that gives it a profound and far-reaching psychological significance and confirms the craft and power of Cary’s Gothic.

To be sure, Cary’s stories share the moral didacticism and Christian assurance of local colorists such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and sentimentalists such as Susan Warner, which cast the light of eternal life over Gothic darkness. In her conclusion to Clovernook Second Series, Cary praises William Blake’s powerful drawings in Edward Young’s Night Thoughts (1797) for portraying Death not as the stereotypical “skeleton reaper” but with a countenance mirroring a “sweetness and pitying gentleness” that offers to all “who have trembled with terror at his approach . . . the dearest rest in his embraces, as a frightened child has forgotten fear in wildest joy on discovering that some frightful being was only its mother, masqued for playing” (361). Nevertheless, even some of her most moralistic tales create images so ghastly and plots so bleak that they challenge any easy balm for mortality. Nowhere is this combination of earthly horror and heavenly peace juxtaposed more starkly than in “The Suicide,” a short cautionary tale in Clovernook Second Series. Isabel, a young woman who lives alone with her widowed father in a lonely “cabin in the woods”—another Gothic commonplace in American cinema—becomes involved in a summer romance that ends in “the old story” (283): abandonment and pregnancy. As the fall progresses, Cary employs scenic representation to convey what she “cannot write” (284): the nights growing darker, the oaks coming “out of the sharp frosts as if dipped in blood” (283), and the angry father whose hair turns white after expelling his only child from their home. Some months later, on a cold
March night, Isabel returns to the cabin in hopes that her father will re-
cant and take her in along with the newborn infant she carries in her arms.
In a powerful image of ultimate rejection, Isabel peers in at the window
“stealthily as if she were a murderess” (286) and sees her father looking at her
picture on the wall. Thinking that he now pities her, she prepares to enter
and confess her sins when, “all at once, her reviving energies are paralyzed,
and her fluttering hopes struck dead. A steady hand reverses the fair, girl-
ish face of the picture, toward the wall; then the man turns and for a mo-
ment the eyes of the two meet; and eagerly, yearningly, the child bends for-
ward; but the father shrinks away. It was but for a moment, yet that was all
too much. The overstrung nerves gave way; and, laying the baby at her feet,
with a moan, that had in it, ‘My God, I am forsaken!’ she walked blindly
and deaftly back the path which she had come; for she did not hear the voice
that called after her, again and again, ‘Isabel, Isabel!”’ (287). Too abject to
expect forgiveness, Isabel trudges through the woods to a “deep and slugg-
gish pool” where the “black waters, in the wild winds of the days and the
ights that followed, streamed over the white face, that, after a time, came
up, as if still pressing toward the light, the long tresses of the woman who
had been so wretched” (287). What “The Suicide” lacks in psychological sub-
tlety it makes up in Gothic horror and an attendant moral complexity that
challenges Christian smugness, for it inculpates the self-righteous father as
much if not more than his erring daughter. He now lives alone in “a lone-
some old house, supposed to be haunted,” a “fitting habitation” for “unquiet
spirits . . . to slip from the shroud, or the deeper darkness that is below the
shroud” (281). Although he is now raising Isabel’s fatherless son, when the
two are together, the narrator notices that “some invisible and living thing
seemed standing between them” (282), clearly Isabel’s spirit hovering over
the little family like a protector and a reminder. The narrator understands
what the father has only learned through remorse: “The soul may be dark-
ened from its original beauty, yet still it is precious,” she concludes, “else in
heaven there would not be such joy over sinners that repent. . . . Merciful-
est of all, when the wicked woman was brought before him, was he who
was without sin, saying, ‘Neither do I condemn thee’” (288). Gothic tropes
encourage Christian forgiveness without blinking at the grim realities of
sexual transgression, pride, self-righteousness, greed, anger, selfishness, and
other human shortcomings that have driven conflicts in Gothic literature
since Horace Walpole published The Castle of Otranto (1765). By uncovering
these follies and fears in the lives of common folk rather than royalty and
aristocrats, Cary recognizes that all human beings are necessarily haunted
creatures, and while eternal life remains a universal promise it cannot pre-
vent the earthly pain and suffering endured by both sinners and their judges.
Like many later realists, including Mark Twain, Henry James, and Jewett, Cary indulged herself by writing ghost stories. She included two in the 1852 *Clovernook*, “The Phantom Hunter” and “Lydia Heath at the Sumners,” another in *Clovernook Second Series*, “Elsie’s Ghost Story,” and a four-story series for *The Ladies’ Repository* in 1855 simply titled “Ghost Stories.” While all of these rely on the worn devices of the “explained Gothic”—superstitious storytellers, unconvincing deathbed apparitions, specters that turn out to be real people—their structure of nested narratives complicates their plots and invites readers to determine for themselves whom to believe, a stratagem evident in such Gothic classics as Brown’s *Wieland* (1798) and *Edgar Huntly* (1799), Thomas Isaac Horsley Curties’s *The Ruins of the Abbey of Fitz-Martin* (c. 1805), and Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818). “Ghost Stories. Number II,” for example, opens with Cary’s usual persona recalling the recent demise of Amos Hill, a local scamp known for cruel jests and inveterate teasing of children. A few days after Amos’s death the narrator’s aunt and uncle Jenny and Nathan Baxter visit her and gather around the fireplace as Nathan relates his evening “watching” over Amos’s corpse, a rural custom most famously described in Jewett’s “Miss Tempy’s Watchers” (1888). Two of Amos’s rough comrades watch with Nathan and shock him by opening the coffin and dealing cards on the dead man’s face. When all three men hear chains rattling and dragging, the two card players leap out of the window and Nathan, certain “that the evil one was come to carry off Amos, body and all,” burns the cards and spends the rest of the night standing in the doorway “ready to run” if the devil approaches in person (76). When her husband’s tale is met with skepticism, Jenny, as if to reinforce belief in the supernatural, offers her encounter with a haunted bedchamber at an inn where she once worked. After a few paragraphs she begins quoting an old housekeeper’s story of how the room came to be haunted, giving voice to an offstage narrator who tells the most convincing ghost story of all. It seems that a callous rake abruptly left his paramour after one night at the inn, where she pined away and died. Of course her ghost remains to strangle anyone who stays in the room overnight. Nathan concludes his wife’s story on a cheerful note, for it was in that room he first met her, initially mistaking her for the ghost as she sleepwalked into the room and lay beside him in his bed, but then he embraced her as if their love exorcised the spell of a woman wronged. This web of four distinct narrators and stories within stories distances readers from the comforts of the fireside circle and provides multiple eyewitnesses who lend credibility to the tale. Innocuous as this and the other ghost stories may be, they evidently drew concerned comments from readers of the *Ladies’ Repository* that prompted the editor to defend the tales with a comment exposing the narrow line between a
Naturalistic and Christian Gothic that Cary had to toe: “A few have, perhaps, been scared from the reading of them by the ‘ghost’ title. All that is very natural. There are some people who are always imagining there are ‘ghosts’ where there are none, and thus get frightened out of their propriety at a shadow. These articles, by the way, we think, are admirably calculated to rectify many foolish errors, and at the same time they inculcate many useful lessons” (“Editor’s Table” 319). Cary understood that she had to leaven her Gothic tendencies with conventional morality to retain readers and find publishers, a delicate balance she achieves in her best Clovernook stories.

In general, Cary employs just enough traditional Gothic motifs to create horror, the grand effect that Poe considered essential to any successful tale, while interspersing them with a deceptively calm Realism that, on reflection, actually makes the Gothic elements all the more unsettling. It is like opening the door to a familiar room and finding a pool of fresh blood on the floor. Further, by using the subjective point of view of a young woman remembering childhood events, and thus plunging into her own distant memories to achieve self-understanding, Cary goes beyond Poe, who is almost never autobiographical, to show how the Gothic is present in everyone’s life, even in the pastoral village of Clovernook. She exposes the repressed guilt, fear, and violence that haunt the daily life of ordinary people not only in the stories I have discussed but in many of the more overtly realistic ones in the 1852 *Clovernook*, such as “The Moods of Seth Milford and His Sisters,” “Annie Heaton,” “Peter Harris,” “Margaret Fields,” and the brilliant final cluster concerning Ellie Hadly, who never recovers from the mysterious premature death of her sister, Rebecca. Similarly, “Uncle Christopher’s” and “The Suicide” in *Clovernook Second Series* alert readers to the muted Gothicism of “The Two Visits” and “Charlotte Ryan,” tales of childhood death, thwarted love, and loss of self.

Ames’s biography opens with a ghost story that Cary related to her friend Ada Carnahan in 1869. The Cary family had just completed a new house across a ravine from their previous home. One afternoon while they were still living in the old house, the family looked out and saw Cary’s thirteen-year-old sister Rhoda holding baby Lucy in the open door of the new house. As the family watched, Rhoda, who had actually been upstairs watching Lucy, came down and joined them in observing the apparition. They continued to watch as the woman with the child began to “slowly sink, sink, sink into the ground, until she disappeared from sight” (18). Rhoda died a year later in November, followed by Lucy in December. Cary continued: “Lucy has been seen many times since by different members of the family in the same house, always in a red frock, like one she was very fond of wearing. . . . Since the apparition in the door, never for one year has our family
been free from the shadow of death. Ever since, some one of us has been dying” (18). Cary, not given to supernatural explanations and striving to write detailed, credible accounts of life in early Ohio, understands that ordinary people really do experience apparitions, visions, and other unexplained events because she did so herself. This distinguishes her Gothicism from the early British deployment of demons, witches, and other supernatural elements and presages the more psychological and Naturalistic American Gothic of Freeman, Jewett, Ambrose Bierce, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and many others. Like them, Cary recognized that the uncanniness of life on the advancing borders of the American west, where hopes for regeneration and success often outran the harshness and forbidding loneliness of a new and boundless country, offered rich materials for the Gothic writer. In her two Clovernook volumes, Cary expresses these contradictory emotions in unadorned yet complex plots, images, and motifs that combine personal experience with the enduring yet malleable tradition of Gothic fiction.

Notes

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The Ghosts of Medical and Domestic Violence in Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s  
*The Gates Between*  
Lisa A. Long

*The Gates Ajar*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps’s 1868 novel of mourning and the American Civil War, was undoubtedly her most successful work of its time. The novel’s protagonist, Mary Cabot, soothingly offered grieving, post-bellum readers a fully embodied vision of the Christian afterlife. The phenomenal success of *The Gates Ajar* led Phelps to pen two thematically related sequels. The second novel, *Beyond the Gates* (1884), featured another Mary who spends substantial time in heaven, describing its distinctive features for readers in what I have argued elsewhere are the emerging paradigms of modern physics.1 In this essay, I turn to the third novel, *The Gates Between* (1887), whose male protagonist, Dr. Esmerald Thorne, is too heavy with sin and doubt to ascend directly to heaven upon his death. Rather, he haunts his earthly neighborhood, coming to terms, eventually, with the beastly behavior in both his personal and professional lives that prevents his salvation.

In *The Gates Between* Phelps both circumvents and exploits the tenets of earth-bound Naturalism as Thorne transitions to the afterlife, particularly the genre’s focus on clinical objectivity and brute force. Throughout the “Gates” series, Phelps eschews more spiritual renderings of heaven, emphasizing that it is a place where the perfection of one’s earthly body makes complete, empirical knowledge possible. Yet the very scientific Dr. Thorne’s violent death and journey toward heavenly salvation is shaped by his domineering, hotheaded behavior. Upon closer inspection, Phelps’s fictional nerve specialist perhaps not coincidentally resembles Dr. S. Weir Mitchell, the famous neurologist, rest-cure doctor, and fellow novelist with whom Phelps struck up a lively correspondence in the 1880s.2 Mitchell’s writing can also be read in a Naturalist vein—in fact, two of his novels are
Long

named Characteristics (1892) and Circumstance (1901), evoking the theories of heredity and environmentalism that underlay Naturalist and medical praxis. He also wrestles with the possibility of a clinical objectivity always undermined by the human foibles of the doctors.

If one reads Dr. Thorne as a surrogate for Mitchell and other medical men of his time, Phelps, like Charlotte Perkins Gilman after her in “The Yellow Wall-Paper” (1892), clearly indicts Mitchell’s professional mistreatment of women. Phelps even writes that Thorne has verbally abused his long-suffering wife and suggests that he may have physically abused her as well. In depicting spousal abuse, she participates in one of the “most well-known Gothic clichés,” as Bridget M. Marshall and Monika Elbert put it (9), and also prefigures Gilman’s tactics by consolidating patriarchal power in the figure of the doctor-husband who represents the inescapable control of women in both public and private realms. Indeed, the imagery of domestic abuse offered in this novel leads one to question the nature of Phelps’s late-life relationship with Herbert Dickinson Ward, a theological school graduate and aspiring writer seventeen years her junior whom she married in 1888, shortly after this novel’s publication. Her biographers suggest that Phelps may have married so late in life (at forty-four) precisely because her ill health made her increasingly reliant on medical professionals (Kessler 64). Her remaining correspondence outlines a hesitant courtship with Herbert and, unfortunately, a quickly deteriorating marriage; the two were living separate lives long before Phelps passed away in 1911. Phelps’s ambivalence about her approaching marriage is evident in The Gates Between; Carol Farley Kessler argues that the novel includes Phelps’s very first male protagonist and inaugurates a new era in Phelps’s representation of women and marriage, where women no longer look to other women for support (39) but, rather, succumb to marriage to “imperious” men (64).

I argue that her fictional portrayal of courtship and marriage provides insight into the violence that Phelps saw at the core of both traditional medicine and marriage. Thorne, like Mitchell, is a confident and forceful nerve specialist who treats primarily female patients; yet, in order to enter heaven, he must abase himself to his spiritually superior wife and son, as well as the Force—whether a personified god or natural phenomenon remains oblique—that shapes his circumscribed, humiliating journey toward salvation. María Dolores Narbona Carrión observes that Phelps effects a gendered “inversion” where Thorne eventually becomes a “typical Victorian woman”: insignificant, overwrought, watchful, and domestic (119). While Dr. Thorne is a powerful man when alive, the ghost Thorne shares more in common with the vulnerable Gothic heroine. Finally repentant, he is reformed into Phelps’s vision of a heavenly man stripped of his dam-
aging vocation, and the Gothic horror of domestic abuse and imprisonment turns into the Christian dream of conversion and domestic felicity in a holy afterlife.

Dr. Thorne is already a ghost of sorts when he first appears on the printed page, given his striking resemblance to Dr. Mitchell, with whom Phelps was corresponding in the 1880s while she was writing the second and third “Gates” novels and he was publishing some of his first novel-length fiction. *The Gates Between* begins with Thorne telling us that he is forty-nine years old and that the events of his death take place on “the twenty-fifth of November of the year 187—” (1). According to the timeline of the book, Thorne is forty-five years old when he meets his future wife, thirty-three-year-old Helen, and forty-six when he marries her a year later. Mitchell was forty-six in 1875, a widower who also married at that age (his second wife, Mary Cadwalader). Mitchell was, then, forty-nine in 1878. Phelps would have been thirty-three in 1877; thus, though she does not align the ages of Thorne and Helen exactly with Mitchell’s and her own, she does imagine the two characters as roughly commensurate in age to theirs. Dr. Thorne’s backstory also resonates with Mitchell’s. As the son of a chemist and the grandson of a surgeon, Thorne is “born and bred, as the children of science are . . . [and he] shuts the pressure of his special education like a clasp about his nature, and locks it down with the iron experience of his calling” (4). Thus both nature and circumstance have fated Thorne to a life of science and hierarchical observation. Mitchell, too, came by his profession honestly as the son and grandson of successful physicians. Thus, like Thorne, he “thinks the thought of his father, who does the deed of his father’s father, who counters the heredity of his mother”—the latter, a gendered inheritance linked to emotion run amok.

Mitchell was, of course, the inventor of the famous rest cure for hysterical women, and Phelps writes of how Dr. Thorne has also “seen the best and the worst and the most of women. The pathological view of that complex subject is the most unfortunate which a man can well have. The habit of classifying a woman as neuralgic, hysterical, dyspeptic, instead of unselfish, intellectual, high-minded, is not a wholesome one for the classifier. Something of the abnormal condition of the *clientèle* extends to the adviser” (5). Phelps’s scorn is palpable here and also in a letter she wrote to Mitchell responding to his *Roland Blake* (1886), a novel with a scathingly negative characterization of an invalid woman. Suffering from a number of ailments herself, she asked Mitchell to write of “the other kind of invalid sometime,” for the disdain evident in his novelistic incarnation gave her a “heart-ache” (11 February 1887). Indeed, their correspondence ended when Mitchell both continued to press his services upon the insomniac Phelps and derided the
homeopathic remedies to which she subscribed. She firmly rejected his offer of a rest cure in Philadelphia (November 1887). And she writes defensively that her “frailty” (as he apparently called her belief in homeopathy) will never seem a “failure” to her, “for it was the harm [traditional medicine] did me that converted me to this” (16 February 1887). As Andrew Smith writes, like British authors of this era, Phelps suggests that medicine was “inherently perverse and dangerous,” as the public perceived it as torn by “conflicting impulses: the desire to help, but also the desire to do harm” (11). That she wrote *The Gates Between* at precisely the same time that she was engaged in this exchange with Mitchell seems no coincidence.

In fact, she moves beyond disapproval to suggest that the behaviors the nerve doctor sees in his female patients are only projections of his own symptoms. The iron-clad “man of science” is, in reality, an excitable, petulant human capable of causing forcible harm to the women under his care—including his wife. In this way she participates in the fin-de-siècle “Gothicisation of a certain kind of medical practice” that acknowledges the “proximity of the normal and the pathological, with what is a covert debate about masculinity” (Smith 8). Phelps needed to look no further than Mitchell’s own novel of a young Civil War surgeon, *In War Time* (1884), to find the weakness within the doctor. Though of good Anglo-Saxon stock, Dr. Ezra Wendell is overemotional, morbidly self-absorbed, and hyperaesthetic. Most damning, his weak human nature costs his patients their lives; Mitchell claims that the shifting climate of Wendell’s mind left him “without much steady capacity for resistance, and [he] yielded with a not incurious attention to his humors,—being either too weak or too indifferent to battle with their influence” (*War Time* 16). Mitchell offers an even more critical depiction than Phelps of the clinician and his battle with his all-too-human nature—one that can be read as at least partially autobiographical and which Phelps praised in her correspondence as showing “courage” (27 February 1884), as it aligned with her own sensitivity to the “weaknesses and the nobilities of the race [of doctors]” (25 January 1884).

Phelps’s Dr. Thorne admits, “I had a nervous temperament to start on” and continues, almost dryly, “I had never been what would be called an even-tempered man” (28). These are failings to which Mitchell confessed in his own papers. In a letter, Phelps asks Mitchell, “Why should you have the blues over your story [*In War Time*]?” and begs him, “Do not say you will write no more doctors” (18 November 1884). While the letter to which Phelps responds has not survived, we can surmise from these comments and by the encouraging tone of Phelps’s epistle that Mitchell was feeling discouraged—even depressed—over the state of his writing. In a letter to his son, Mitchell writes: “I have on me my Sunday mood which is grim
enough & has been so for years—Yet why I can hardly tell—since on the whole life ought to satisfy me—but does not—Indeed I have had great luck to have had to work always for otherwise the sensitive side of me would have so grown that I might have come to be a morbid sort of man.” In *The Gates Between* Phelps attributes her doctor’s irascible nature to his work: as a nerve doctor; he becomes a “receptacle of human confidences,” an endlessly “absorbitive and absorbing sponge,” taking on the illnesses of his patients whom he can then blame for his suffering (18). He is initially drawn to Helen because she is “radiant,” “healthful,” “vivid,” and “calm,” the healer who “ministers” to the doctor who perceives himself as the one “who suffered the whims and longings of weakness” (19).

By Mitchell’s 1901 novel, *Circumstance*—written after his professional reputation as America’s rest-cure doctor was secured—the weak-willed doctor of *In War Time* had been replaced by Dr. Archer, a “wholesome” character (47) thwarted by a new villainess. The cunning Mrs. Lucretia Hunter is a woman from the lower classes with a “serpent-like power” who exerts her influence over an upper-class family (180). Dr. Archer becomes the fortune-hunter’s main antagonist, defending the family against her nefarious plans to defraud them. Further, she is unwilling to follow Dr. Archer’s orders and subscribes to the spiritualist beliefs of which Phelps wrote with such ardor—beliefs that were nurtured while Mrs. Hunter lived in Andover, Massachusetts, Phelps’s hometown. Though I do not think that Mitchell’s depiction of Mrs. Hunter constitutes a wholesale critique of the educated and well-connected Phelps, one could argue that he may have been subtly twitting her in this characterization.

While Mitchell’s Dr. Archer emerges triumphant, Phelps dramatizes the ultimate result of unchecked power and constant demand on a nervous male temperament. In offering her response to Mitchell’s *In War Time*, Phelps confesses, “The saddest thing about the profession [of medicine] is that it inculcates a kind of self-defense that may become almost brutal in the kindest man; to save himself from being spent and wrecked by sympathy, or its correlative, thoughtfulness, he may force himself in a coat-of-mail that bruises—if not kills—a patient” (18 November 1887). Phelps suggests that the objective clinical stance cannot be sustained and is, rather, so degrading that Gothic cruelty results in the observer. Thorne reflects that he does not think he was “more self-confident or even more willful than other men to whom is given the autocracy of our profession, and the dependence of women, which accompanies it” (5–6). Yet Phelps suggests that giving willful men such god-like power over women inevitably breeds brutality in them. Thorne’s medical training overdevelops his “will,” making it “abnormal like a prize-fighter’s bicepital muscle.” In having to enforce his
opinion in every situation, Thorne adds, “his will-power grows by a species of pummeling” (22). While Phelps uses the boxing metaphor to emphasize doctoring as a muscular endeavor, the fact that she likens medical prescriptions to physical pummeling by a muscle-bound prizefighter suggests that there is a physical component to the force of the doctor’s cures.

Indeed, in her personal correspondence she suggests that willfulness is endemic to the gender. Even her young suitor, Herbert, also plagued by illness in the 1880s, is not as weak as one might think. During their courtship, Phelps wrote to Herbert’s aunt, who apparently had warned Phelps of his “recklessness,” contending, “I have brought up four brothers and I know a young man’s life well enough to have learned to bear what I cannot understand in the inherent folly—I know no other word for it—of the masculine nature. They will, and that’s the end of it! And then the consequences have to be borne.” Phelps adds that “only suffering teaches them” (qtd in Bennett 87). Her Dr. Thorne has the irritable temper of the male invalid Phelps’s young husband harbored, and the domineering constitution of the male doctor—and spends virtually all of *The Gates Between* “suffering” as he comes to terms with his misbehavior.

The “rising tide” of romantic love that overwhelms Thorne initially promises relief from this needless suffering (21). His wife, Helen, is “strong enough—and sweet enough—to fit a key into [the] lock” of his scientific/professional fetters (4). However, he merely trades one overwrought enthusiasm for another, for his “love” similarly put him “in chains” (246, 17). He further speaks of love as he does of illness and religious faith—as a sort of “delirium” or fever-dream, which he had formerly “mock[ed]” (14). It makes him like any “typical, unscientific fellow” (31) and blunts his faculties rather than sharpening them—Thorne finds himself “chloroformed with joy” (31). Dawn Keetley remarks that with the rise of companionate marriage, we also get the rhetoric of “romantic love as an involuntary reaction,” making it Naturalist (366). Marriage, then, is the “uncontrollable consequence of inexplicable forces of attraction” (Keetley 366).

One might argue that Thorne’s initial infatuation with Helen relies on the gendered scripts of his culture and the force of his sexual desire. Helen is initially otherworldly, an angelic vision entering his life as “some slender creature, shining, all white gown and yellow hair and soft arms and sweet curves comes gliding” (6)—“who possesses and holds” him “rapt and rapturous” as under a spell (7). Like other male Gothic subjects of fin amor, Thorne is eventually “consumed with physical desire” that places him in the “feminine position: he values his body and emotions over power” (Hendershot 47). Helen is almost beatific, mastering him: “I stood conquered before this slender woman whose eyes, like the sword of flame turned this way and that,
guarding the barred gates of the only Eden I had ever chosen to enter” (23). Of course these descriptions of Helen have sexual connotations: the “slender,” “sweet,” “soft,” “curve[d]” woman is surely barring the “gates” to carnal delight as well as romantic love; these “gates” keep “the possessed male body” at bay and alienate him from masculinity and his ability to be “self-possessed” (Hendershot 44). His denial of “Eden” also cements his disdain for traditional Christianity and the presumed perfection of the afterlife. Finally, his passion for Helen allows this competitive, controlling man to be “beaten by” her (24)—something, eventually, he will not stand.

Still, Helen’s eventual ability to inspire Thorne’s conversion suggests that feminine power can ultimately, even permanently, mend masculine ways, and this hope is reflected in Phelps’s courtship with Herbert. When Thorne first encounters Helen, he has injured his knee. She assesses his injury “with a little authoritative wave” of her “firm, fine hand” (12). When he protests that she is too weak to help, she assures him, “Don’t be afraid to lean on me. I am quite strong. I am able,” and she assists him home “as if [he] had been a wounded child” (13–14). Clearly, Phelps is switching roles here, making Helen the calm, reliable healer and Thorne the scared and weakened patient. Phelps similarly writes in her letters of her desire to “be of use to [Herbert]” (qtd in Bennett 85). In fact, it is only after having the strength to nurse him back to health while he was stranded, sick and alone in a boarding house, that she can write confidently to his aunt that it has “given me some hope that I might be of some service to him this year making him a stronger, healthier man” (qtd in Bennett 87).

While his initial desire for Helen is overwhelming, so, eventually, is Thorne’s subsequent irritation with her and his abuse. We now count a variety of behaviors as domestic violence: “emotional violence, spiritual assault, psychological damage, sexual violation, verbal abuse, intellectual battering,” among them. But as Susan Koppelman reminds us, “Underneath all nonphysical forms of violence is the ever-present threat of physical violence, of fists on flesh, and, even, the threat of murder” (xvii–xix). And we discover that Thorne is eventually just as contrite about his verbal abuse as anyone who has physically abused. Early on Thorne tells us that he “cannot tell the precise time when it became possible” to be “irritable” to his dear wife (32). In this way, the novel conforms to what Massé terms the “marital Gothic,” “texts that begin rather than end with marriage” where the passionate husband becomes “the revenant of the horror his very presence was supposed to banish” (7). Thorne claims that he moves from being “worshiper” of a “goddess” because, in marrying her, she had “become myself,” and rather than rising to her high level of behavior he dragged her to his worst depths through “the force of my own gravitation” (33). Again,
the scientifically inflected, Naturalist language of force suggests that domestic abuse, like love, is a phenomenon beyond any one person's control. Thorne's rhetoric escalates, as he goes on to confess that he often becomes “uncontrollably angry”—a behavior he likens to getting drunk—and recalls the night when he began to speak “with actual roughness” to his wife (36).

The site of their most violent moment is, symbolically, the “warm, red library, with heavy curtains and an open fire” (38) where Helen waits for him to return from work each evening in a “gown of white wool trimmed in ermine” (39). The red comes to signify the heat of Thorne’s temper; the white ermine, Helen’s purity and willingness to die before being sullied. Indeed, she ends the scene of abuse with a pallor matching the white of her dress, and the “look of a statue,” “carved there, as something that must stay” (48). Lisa Surridge reminds us that, while the “ acquiescent response” of the battered woman to abuse is not admirable from a modern perspective, in the nineteenth century it did assure the reader’s sympathy. It exerts a sort of power of its own when, after Thorne’s death, Helen’s last look of stunned recognition ghosts and tortures him. Kate Ellis argues that from its inception, the Gothic novel was the place where domestic abuse could be explored as it represented the new middle-class home as “an enclosed space that should have been a refuge from evil” (xiii), but instead became a “prison” where “violence [was] done to familial bonds that is frequently directed against women” (3).

This climactic scene begins as Thorne enters the house for a ten-minute dinner in the midst of a stressful, overbooked day of work. He later reveals that he has lost a patient that day, as well as $10,000 in a financial panic. Helen’s efforts to soothe him with wifely interest and chowder are met with cruel rebuffs. He claims that stopping home to see Helen, who worries about him, is a “foolish waste of time” (41), criticizes the meal, and tells her that she “cannot do the first thing for [him]” (44). Helen’s most galling sin is that she is “always having opinions of her own against his” (47). In this case, her mother’s intuition tells her that their one-year-old son is seriously ill, but Dr. Thorne insists he is well and violently berates Helen for disagreeing with his professional opinion. He ends with the cruelest cut: “It is a pity you can’t trust me, like other men’s wives! I wish I’d married a woman with a little wifely spirit!—or else not married at all” (47). As women often do in narratives of abuse, Helen repeatedly tries to “ placate” her husband, and her clumsy (in his mind) attempts to please Thorne only fuel his rage (Koppelman xxi).

In the very next scene, Thorne is killed in a gruesome buggy accident. The imagery associated with the crash suggests that physical abuse may have been involved in the marriage. Phelps uses corporeal terms to de-
scribe Thorne’s emotional abuse: he “burst” into the room that “shook beneath [his] tread” (39) and he “jerked” a question out (45); he “exploded” in anger (46); “slammed” the door; ran “fiercely” into the night (47). Like Helen, who is always eager for the doctor’s return at night, the female horse, Donna, is “uneasy” at standing and waiting for Thorne, and he resolves to “get that whim out of her” (45). Donna is a “powerful creature” who pulls and drags “fiercely” at the weight she must carry (49). When Donna begins to run away with him, Thorne succumbs to the “elemental instinct by which a man must manage his horse, come life or death” (49). He is taken with an “overpowering rage. I did not mean to strike her,” he confesses. “No driver, even if an angry one would have done that.” And yet he does. The horse feels herself “insulted” and, in “anger,” overturns the buggy and kills Thorne (50).

While Thorne’s wife had silently taken the euphemistic “bludgeons that bruise the life out of women’s souls,” the horse is allowed to express anger and fight blows with blows (83). As Koppelman reminds us, killing a batterer is not properly understood as revenge—it is often a form of self-defense (xxii). Surridge adds that while wife abuse was recognized by nineteenth-century publics and courts, the “increased scrutiny of marital conduct . . . existed in tension with the establishments of the middle-class Victorian home as a domestic sanctuary” (2). Fiction writers of the era resolved this dilemma by deflecting “marital violence from the body of the woman onto the body of a domestic animal,” particularly the dogs and horses over which men held “legal and proprietary control” (4). Thus they made metonymic connections between overtly beaten animals and secretly beaten women (4). In this way, Helen is shielded from the indecency of being actually hit in front of us, or of exhibiting anything but stoic acceptance of her lot; the female horse bears the indignity of Thorne’s blows and symbolically exacts murderous revenge on him, allowing his wife to keep her hands clean of the crime. Rather than becoming the “female fiend” of sensational fiction of which Keetley writes—women who are “propelled” on their murderous paths “by an exaggerated unwillingness to accept the obligations of a wife”—Helen stops just there (365). Turned to stone at the moment of abuse, she remains a true woman. By the 1880s, popular fiction was working out the “drawbacks of indissoluble marriage and its potential for breeding violence” (Keetley 345). Given Phelps’s impending marriage, perhaps one can see her working out the likely trajectory of married life to the domineering doctor-husband by exploiting Naturalist and Gothic tropes: she assumes that even the best marriages will eventually devolve into violence.

Thorne’s death symbolizes that he has succumbed to his weak, human temperament, which he has externalized as his opinionated wife and obstreperous mare. As the horse runs she becomes angrier, more “frightened,”
the rushing wind “demoniac” (258, 59). As he is about to crash he thinks, “I am driven to death” (51). While he is, of course, literally driven to death, his statement, coming close on the heels of confessions of his irritable nature and domestic abuse, suggests that self-destructive violence is inherent in his masculine nature. The struggle with the horse is figured in Naturalist form as “the mad conflict between the brute and the man” (49). He loses control—of his horse, his wife, his own self, and thus he is killed. In the end, his buggy crashes into the oncoming vehicle driven by a female patient characterized by her “sweet trustfulness” (52) and her young son—a stand-in for the destruction of his own family.

Given his encoded crimes, one can read Thorne’s subsequent entrapment in limbo as a form of imprisonment—a just punishment for his abuse. The title of this particular “Gates” novel tips us off, as the Gates are not “ajar,” as in the first novel, nor is our main character “beyond” or through the gates. Thorne is “between”—barred both from life and from heaven. Like domestic women, he is unheard and unnoticed. In her correspondence with Mitchell, Phelps describes the domestic confinement that accompanies her invalidism as a “cell-life” (3 February 1884); she becomes “more or less a prisoner, and can carry out no plans except those of patience” (27 February 1884). And like both a domestic invalid and an incarcerated criminal, Thorne initially also exists outside the flow of human life. Even after death, his movements are limited. He encounters an invisible “obstruction” or “barrier” when he tries to return to his home, finding himself “beaten back” from his street (106). He takes heel as “manfully” as possible, recording the “helplessness,” “hopelessness,” and “humiliation” he endures as someone whose “freedom” was now “confined” (107). One could argue that Phelps enacts a sort of restraining order, as Thorne is prohibited from coming into contact with Helen. The first time he is allowed even a glimpse of her, he is “stricken back” and “fettered to the ground” as a “power like a mighty rushing blast gainsaid me and smote me where I was” (145). Once he gains entrance to heaven, he feels “like a felon” enduring an “endless punishment” for his mistreatment of Helen (183). Thus Phelps turns spousal abuse into an almost unpardonable sin warranting extreme suffering.

The true horror of this ghost story is the ghost’s physical proximity to the living but his inability to communicate with them—particularly his regrets to his wife. The typical spousal “cycle of abuse” (tension building—incident—reconciliation—calm) is arrested by his death. His inability to return to Helen to affect reconciliation intensifies his emotions; Thorne reflects, “I loved her more because I had been cruel to her than if I had been kind” (103). The need to communicate with her and turn the wheel of the cycle becomes a “mania” with him, a “fixed idea” that is the main source of
his misery (150–51). After his salvation, Thorne finds heavenly employment visiting human homes where he seeks to make warring couples aware of the “preciousness and poignancy of words,” raising awareness about verbal abuse (214). He uses the force of a “man’s experience and a spirit’s power to make an irritable scene in loving homes held as degrading as a blow” (214). Like many rehabilitated individuals, Thorne becomes the heavenly version of a peer counselor, using his experiences to help others.

The elements of the traditional ghost story carry additional weight when viewed through this lens. Thorne can ring an electric bell at his agent’s office and spook the night watchmen; dogs know he is there, while he remains invisible to humans. Finally, he is perceived by the living as merely “a gust of wind,” blowing papers off a desk (89). Thus Thorne has lost his force; no matter how loudly he bellows at the living, “Don’t you hear a word I say? . . . Don’t you see me . . . ?” he is now unable to make any impression on those he was formerly able to bully (90). Though he feels, like Phelps’s other “Gates” protagonists, that his physical form is healed upon his death, he discovers that his soul is in disorder and this leads to his complete alienation from both earthly and heavenly realms. Phelps’s imagery suggests that death, for unbelievers, is devolution, as Thorne is reduced to “a desolate and outcast creature . . . a dumb thing in a deaf world” (120). In heaven he is a “hurt animal” (166–67) in contrast to the buoyant, healthful, joyous creatures around him. The once mighty doctor is brought low, taking “charity” from more fortunate spirits in heaven.

In his soul sickness, Thorne rages against the “unknown Force which overruled me” (117). Phelps is cagey in the way she connects the “natural law” (120) that rules the afterlife indirectly with a Christian God. After all, Thorne is now the one being physically and emotionally manipulated. Thorne eventually believes that some entity is purposefully acting upon him, addressing it in archaic form: “What art Thou, who does withstand me? I am a dead and helpless man. What wouldst Thou with me? Where gainest Thou Thy force upon me? Art Thou verily that ancient Myth which we were wont to call Almighty God?” (121). The “Power not [him]self” answers by “environ[ing]” him and moving him through the city against his will. Like many Gothic characters, Thorne’s body is “possessed, a body inhabited by an alien other” (Hendershot 43). Yet the devout Phelps is careful not to turn God into a vengeful batterer even though, like a typical, Gothic husband, God strips Thorne of “voice, movement, property, and identity” (Massé 12). The force that directs Thorne’s steps has the infinite capabilities of an immortal but is expressed in scientifically inflected Naturalist rather than biblical language: it is “a blast of Power Incalculable; it was like the current of an unknown natural force of infinite capability” (106). Though
Phelps’s ultimate reversion to Christian answers might seem to conventionally undermine the forces of Naturalism, I argue that her depiction of God relies on the amorality of Naturalist logic to maintain his righteousness. Once Thorne gains entrance to heaven but is still not a believer, he observes of other heavenly residents that “a great central purpose controlled them . . . a powerful and universal Law had hold of them; they treated it as if they loved it” (168). For those who find heavenly existence “as natural as life” (138), the benevolent power exerted by a heavenly force does not chafe but rather ennobles. There is no moral ambiguity here; the force associated with the Christian God (it never comes directly from Him) is “right,” and it is a divine, disembodied, depersonalized phenomenon that reforms miserable sinners. Thorne’s soul is healed only when he succumbs to a friend’s advice to “go with the current to-day, it sets strongly. Question it not. Resist it not. Follow and be swept” (199).

Thorne is rehabilitated as a kind, thoughtful partner and father, and a Christian man resigned to his new state and “released” into eternal life: “I yielded because I could not help it, not because I would have willed it; and with that dull strength which grows into the sinews of the soul from necessity, sought to adjust myself in such fashion as I might to my new conditions” (157). Thus the “sinews” of the submissive soul are strengthened rather than those of the brutalizing body. Kessler reads the novel as the “heavenly reform of an inconsiderate husband,” and notes that the leading Woman's Journal offered the book at a subscription premium to their large female readership (57). Technically, Thorne is not dead and Phelps holds out the hope of a “live,” reformed husband. The “calm” that descends upon him once he is “unmanned” in heaven, accepts Jesus’s divinity, and is finally allowed to reunite with his wife will be eternal, we hope.

The primary vehicle of Thorne’s conversion and growth is his infant son, known only as Boy, who dies at about the same time that Thorne does and is placed in his care. This archetypal “boy” represents a male child’s potential for wonderful growth when he is placed in the right environment. Initially, Thorne is so disconnected from his son (and obsessed with his wife) that he does not even recognize the child when Boy arrives in heaven. But, eventually, caring for Boy gives his heavenly life purpose: “Whatever my views about a spiritual state of existence, there always was the boy,” he tells us. He is reborn in heaven as a “living father” to his child (165) and begins to put Boy’s future prospects before his own. Since Phelps’s characters maintain something of human form and sentience, they are shaped by the heavenly atmosphere. Phelps emphasizes through repetition that Thorne’s new “circumstances” shape his heavenly state and allow him to eventually accept Christianity. In describing how the heavenly environment acts upon
Boy’s development, Phelps uses plant imagery: “His intellect, his character, his physique lifted themselves with a kind of luxuriance of growth, such as plants show in tropical countries; he blossomed as a thing does which has every advantage and no hindrance; nature moved magnificently to her ends in him” (187). Boy’s chronological growth is preternatural in this environment, and his spiritual evolution soon surpasses his father’s.

In her correspondence with Herbert’s father, editor of the Independent, William Hayes Ward, Phelps often referred to her future husband as “your boy” or “our boy” (84). When Herbert began to spend summers near Phelps’s vacation home in Gloucester, she wrote of her increasing interest in him, commenting in August 1884, “Your boy is a fine young fellow,” and continuing a year later, “Your boy interests me. I wish I were able to see him oftener” (qtd in Bennett 84). By the Christmas of 1885 Phelps refers to Herbert as “our boy,” taking a proprietary stance toward him. She also writes of her interest in “his religious position. . . . He needs the something that all motherless young people need—I have been through all that and understand” (85). Clearly, referring to Herbert as a motherless “boy” echoes the novel’s reference to Thorne’s motherless (in heaven) Boy. He represents all motherless children and becomes identified with his gender and age—he is not just male, but young and male, and Herbert’s youth was clearly his distinguishing feature for Phelps at this time. “I am so much older—” she laments to Ward Sr. in 1885, though by 1888 she proclaims to Herbert’s aunt, “I can do something for him which all the ninety-and nine ‘girls he leaves behind him’ cannot do;—I am so old he must respect my judgment whether he follows it or not;—I have quite adopted him this winter” (85, 87). Interestingly, in allying Herbert with her fictional Boy, and also making his distant father Boy’s primary support (rather than his more “natural” mother), as well as a sufferer confined by his [soul] sickness, Phelps absorbs the doctor-husband into her own being, in this way possessing him and neutralizing his power. In adopting her own “boy” through marriage, perhaps Phelps hoped that Herbert would save her from the life of invalidism into which she had fallen.

Writing The Gates Between on the cusp of marriage and in declining health, Phelps traces the seemingly inevitable Gothic ends of medical treatment and matrimony: initial sympathy, competence, and care falling into thoughtless brutality. Like others before and after her who have been members of marginalized and oppressed groups, she turns to the promises of a Christian afterlife to provide the reformations she seeks on earth. Yet characteristically unorthodox in her approach, Phelps turns Naturalist force to her own ends; in moving it from earth to heaven, Phelps is able to trans-
form Gothic fiends into holy ghosts who offer positive models of love and healing to readers still living behind the gates.

Notes

1. See Long, “Physics and Faith.”
2. Carol Farley Kessler and Jennifer Tuttle have also noticed the connections between Dr. Thorne and Dr. Mitchell.
3. Phelps suffered a number of setbacks in the 1880s that contributed to her permanent invalidism. Her beloved brother, Stuart, died in 1884, leaving her with the sole care of her invalid, dominating father. That same year she suffered the “first acute illness since her childhood” and found herself unable to leave Andover (Kessler 73). Then in 1886 she lost Mary Briggs Harris, her great friend and personal physician.
4. Given that in the early 1900s Phelps began requesting the return of her correspondence in order to destroy it, it is difficult to determine the precise nature of her marriage to Herbert. See her 2 February 1903 letter to Mrs. Spofford (rpt in Bennett 127).
5. Mitchell’s most recent biographer, Nancy Cervetti, claims that “anyone who knows Mitchell is invited in the opening pages to make the connection between the author and the protagonist” (91).
6. Cervetti claims that Mitchell did not respond well to criticism of his writing, surrounding himself with a “fortress of intimate friends” who “filtered or refitted negative comments,” and a wife who offered a “‘warm bath’ of honeyed words and glowing praise” (162).
7. Marital violence absorbed Phelps this year, as she also published “Jack the Fisherman” in 1887—a story that explicitly depicts alcoholism and long-term domestic abuse in a lower-class home, and ends with the titular Jack beating his wife to death.
8. Lenore E. Walker was the first to articulate a version of this social cycle theory in The Battered Woman (1979).
The Spirit of Revolt
Hamlin Garland’s Paranormal Writing

Daniel Mrozowski

If these supernormal events are illusory, then all the events of my life are illusory.

—Hamlin Garland, *Forty Years of Psychic Research*

Hamlin Garland might seem an unlikely advocate of the paranormal. When remembered by literary history, he is presented as an early Naturalist or a popular sentimentalist. He championed a form of mimetic writing that he called “veritism,” a Realism inseparable from the local, written by writers native to those places, and his commitment to this style in his own fiction resulted in earnest depictions of the hardships of Midwestern farmers. Yet his paranormal research, largely ignored or forgotten, runs as a consistent vein throughout his entire career, from the 1890s populist to the 1930s memoirist, and the sizable archive of books and articles he produced on the topic speaks to more than an abiding passion. From the very beginning of his professional life, Garland found in paranormal research an intellectual framework of rigorous skepticism paired with personal observation that spoke to his literary theories. Invited initially by the radical publisher Benjamin Orange Flower to act as a skilled observer of séances in the 1890s while he was reporting on the populist conventions leading up to the 1896 presidential election, Garland managed, amidst a robust calendar of travel, lectures, and writing, to squeeze in what seems to be a séance every few nights for nearly forty years.

The interest in paranormal phenomena traced a lineage through the table-rappings of the Fox Sisters in the 1840s, the rapid development of American Spiritualism in the 1850s, the explosion of Spiritualist journals and newspapers in the 1860s, and the popularization of occultism exemplified in the mass-marketed Ouija boards of the 1890s. By the early twentieth century, luminaries such as William James and organizations like the American Society for Psychical Research (ASPR) had codified interest in paranormal activity into a significant intellectual pursuit energized by two intertwined
questions: first, whether or not mediums had actual powers, and second, whether or not those powers offered proof of an afterlife or of psychic abilities. Garland himself would direct these debates as an official representative of the ASPR, but these debates also shaped Garland as a writer invested in accurately representing the lives of those largely ignored in Eastern literary circles.

The intermingling of progressive politics and supernatural studies was not unusual in nineteenth-century America. Cultural historians have suggested that paranormal practices like spirit communication often found a home in leftist circles, in part because those elements offered alternative models of power as well as coherent vocabularies to help talk about what Sally Morita calls issues of “invisible causation.”2 This chapter locates Hamlin Garland’s writing within a circuit of populism and the paranormal charged with two impulses that animated his research with mediums: to prove the existence of unseen forces constraining individual lives, and to illuminate extraordinary capacities within everyday people.3 It is my contention that Garland crafted his paranormal writing in such a way as to legitimate and spread the practices of psychic research, and that this craft relied on a combination of techniques and tropes that might best be elucidated through the rubrics of the Gothic and American literary Naturalism.

Studies of the paranormal were rich spaces of epistemological uncertainty, situated between the seemingly miraculous capacities of new technologies like the wireless telegraph and the mimetic frustrations of realistic writing. A discernable spirit world itself seemed no less fantastical than some of the radical innovations provided by Darwin, Edison, Bell, Marconi, and others; telepathy seemed plausible in a world where reptiles could be older than God, voices came out of the ether, and light stretched on forever. For organizations like the ASPR, spirit phenomena would probably be explained via a natural force as yet unseen and unaccounted for, and that explanation would come from scientific methods and not clerical exegesis. For a writer like Garland committed to verisimilitude, paranormal experiences seemed in excess of both the naive sentimentalism of Spiritualism and the dismissive accounts of the scientific establishment. These experiences demanded representations that could enlarge the census of forces in the world. As one of his characters suggests in The Tyranny of the Dark, “We assume that we’ve corralled and branded all facts, when, as a matter of history, there are scattered bunches of cattle all through the hills” (257).

Though paranormal writing from Garland to William James to forgotten observers like Edmund Gurney often attempted to define their representations against the thrills of early Gothic texts, I think we can best approach this type of writing through the impulses of the Gothic as articulated by
contemporary critics. Current accounts suggest that Gothic texts register the possibilities of a larger reality outside the realm of human senses and customary modes of perception. For example, Linda Bayer-Berenbaum argues that Gothicism is more than the “gimmicks” of its traditional tropes, particularly as the genre “insists that what is customarily hallowed as real by society and its language is, but a small portion of a greater reality of monstrous proportion and immeasurable power” (21). This underlying principle of nineteenth-century Gothic production informs Garland’s psychic research, particularly as he sought to revise standardized depictions of reality through the recognition of forces as yet unmeasured. In dramatizing scientific arguments and investigative strategies, Garland’s writing relied on acts of exposure not for sensational thrills or the uncovering of fraud, but rather to enlarge the notions of human possibility. This reliance marks his writing as most Gothic in its expressions of what Charles Crow usefully calls the literary form’s “skeptical, ambiguous view of human nature and of history.” The Gothic, according to Crow, moves beyond tropes of ruined monasteries and damsels in distress as it “exposes the repressed, what is hidden, unspoken, deliberately forgotten” (*American Gothic* 2). As this essay suggests, Garland’s paranormal writing often leaned on the Gothic tropes of dark villains and doom-tinged damsels, but it primarily drew its power from Gothic acts of exposure, turning a certain kind of darkness into a certain slant of light.

Garland’s paranormal writing sought to make scientific methods and arguments legible and transportable, largely as a means to reach an audience unfamiliar with psychic research but sympathetic to scientific investigation. Paranormal studies often posed stunning questions about the afterlife, telepathy, and subliminal selves that gestured toward the same anxieties animating the typical themes of Naturalist fiction, including a deterioration of autonomy and privacy, a fascination with morbid psychology, and a clash between belief and post-Darwinian skepticism. As Eric Carl Link outlines, American literary Naturalism explored themes growing out of contemporary philosophical and scientific communities investigating “the world operating under the aegis of natural laws” (*Vast* 19). Throughout his paranormal projects, Garland withholds any final declarative interpretation, outside of an insistence on those natural laws; instead, he offers a whole repertory of methods and theories in order to allow others to mark and measure their own experiences with unseen forces. As Keith Newlin describes, Naturalist works tend to move toward a thesis or an argument that requires evidence; that thesis might be in service to Single Tax policies, Darwinian atavism, or utopian socialism, but, for critics like Newlin, Naturalist texts transform these theories into dramas both tragic and comic. Garland dramatized a key Naturalist and Gothic dialectic, between the sublime, the grotesque, and
the uncanny and the ordinary, the plain, and the familiar, that he found endemic to paranormal experiences.

As Crow recounts in his survey of the American Gothic, only certain versions of literary history describe an opposition between literary Naturalism and the Gothic. Every American writer who came of age in the later half of the nineteenth century seems to have produced some combination of the two, from the ghost stories of Mary Wilkins Freeman to the conjure tales of Charles Chesnutt. Fred Botting suggests that a “Gothic strain” often energized Realist works as artists shifted toward psychological motivation over supernatural explanation in their representations (12). Yet few writers maintained an interest in the paranormal that might compare to Garland’s lifelong passion, and the subsequent practice of psychic research, combined with his devotion to veritism, created habits of attention that altered his work. Though the Gothic has come to stand as a dark undercurrent to the optimistic myths flowing through nineteenth-century American culture, Garland’s paranormal writing turns that critical energy toward a progressive hope: through annotated perception, one might find and record an amazing capacity of human beings that defies traditional notions of their powers and determined limits.6

In order to pursue this promise, this essay considers three major publications recounting Garland’s experiences; I treat these texts not only as discrete objects, but also as key scenes of articulation in what was a lifelong, unfolding project.7 Across a novel, The Tyranny of the Dark (1905), a loosely fictionalized collection, The Shadow World (1908), and a memoir, Forty Years of Psychic Research (1937), Garland deployed a blending of Naturalist and Gothic techniques and tropes that helped dramatize his experiences with mediums. Garland staged séances as a habitual confrontation between observer and observed. These represented scenes are dark and normalized, chaotic and codified, mysterious and ritualized. Ultimately, Garland could not or would not represent the reality of the paranormal; rather, in the dialectic movement between the sublime and the banal organized in his sittings, the writer found only confirmation of the power promised within his own systems of realistic observation.

The Tyranny of The Dark

Hamlin Garland was a seasoned psychic investigator with nearly fifteen years of experience when he wrote The Tyranny of the Dark, the first substantial translation of his research into narrative, in 1905. The novel follows the development of a love triangle between Morton Serviss, an Eastern biochemist, Viola Lambert, a beautiful Western medium, and Anthony Clarke,
a darkly charismatic preacher who hopes to marry Lambert while using her as the central evidence for a book espousing his Spiritualist faith. The novel moves from Colorado to New York City, culminating with the skeptical scientist converted both to the reality of psychic activity and to a marriage that saves Viola from the clutches of the morbid Clarke. *Tyranny* serves as an example of how Garland dramatized paranormal research through sensational thrills and didactic exposition as a means to spread its techniques and habits of mind to interested readers.

The novel contains classic Gothic tropes, including a Romantic hero, a distressed damsel, and a seductive villain, and Garland creates suspense through the hint of family secrets and moral corruption. The narrative relies on ambiguity stemming directly from the central questions of psychic research: Are Viola’s powers indicative of an undiscovered country of the biological mind or of an afterlife? To contain this ambiguity, Garland leans on the effusive language of what Peter Brooks calls “the melodramatic imagination”: a language of “heightened moral alternatives” that uncovers deeper conflicts, masked by reality, through a coherent and clarifying vision. The deeper conflicts of *Tyranny*, structured between a vigorous West and its frontier faith and a polite East and its hesitant skepticism, reach allegorical proportions when dramatized through the heightened conversations of the clergyman and the chemist.

In pursuit of both comfort after the death of his wife and proof for his “burning book” of spiritual revelations, Anthony Clarke traps Viola Lambert in the gravity of his own collapsing faith. “Like a vampire in his cave” (66), the villain feeds off her abilities, placing the sunny young woman in “mental slavery” (92). Yet Clarke appears tragic in his grief, both master and servant to the dark, and his efforts are dangerous and pathetic. In direct contrast, Morton Serviss is a paragon of sane health. Garland makes use of the metaphoric resonance of his profession as a specialist in microscopic germs, those unseen elements of biology shaping human destiny, but the chemist also serves as the sympathetic character accentuating the strangeness of true believers like Clarke. His youthful vibrancy and natural pragmatism pose a proper point of observation on psychic phenomena, free from the emotionality of bereavement or the pure egotism of personal survival.

Yet Serviss’s initial responses to Viola’s powers are as blindly pantomimed as the roaring faith of Clarke. Garland’s novel suggests that modern science has ossified in the face of mounting evidence for extra-normal capacities. As Serviss himself admits, “We are at the limits of the microscope” (31). Psychic studies, according to the novel, represent an impasse confronting modern science between the desired immediacy of revelation and the incremental
evidence of real conviction. The chemist’s conversion to paranormal research becomes meaningful not only as a resolution of that impasse, but also as an ethical challenge posed by Clarke. When the villainous preacher confronts the heroic scientist with a valuable question as to whether “the life beyond the grave [is] of less account than the habits of animalculae,” the novel suggests clearly that the conflicts of psychic research cannot be left to zealots or ignored by professionals (32).

These conflicts are not only epistemological or ontological; Clarke reigns over violent séances in which sedate parlors are transformed into “battlefields” and the medium struggles with forces “as if a strong hand clutched her throat” (90). The stakes for Serviss are explicitly moral. Viola Lambert is caught between her duty to a mourning mother and her need to be “loved and valued for her own natural self, entirely free from the touch of spectral hands” (84). Her “invisible tormentors” are a male triumvirate made up of her deceased grandfather, father, and brother. Viola figures as the stereotypical medium, a woman naturally “weaker” in will and hence the perfect screen for spirit projections or the subliminal exertions of a mesmerist. Viola’s “controls” are either apparitions of the dead or submerged personalities, depending on the interpreter, but Garland also stretches the notion of “control” to include a host of connotations concerning unseen forces controlling human lives, from geography to tradition, from biology to history. The moral register of Viola’s predicament shifts the questions of the novel away from the specific reality of psychic phenomena toward a larger question of human agency: can we act freely in a world of forces beyond our immediate control?

Viola might be wrong about the source of her abilities, but she is no fraud, and she seeks neither money nor publicity, two benefits that would stain her reputation irrevocably. Though the ‘spirit’ of her domineering grandfather frightens her, her suitor, Clarke, poses the real threat as he hopes to feature her in a public display celebrating Spiritualism: “Her consent! What she desires or what I desire is of small account. We are both in the grasp of invisible forces” (185). Control and consent might be key words in the vocabulary of mediums and spirit communication, but they are also coded terms for ways to talk about slavery and imprisonment, compulsion and obsession, and agency and free will in a post-Darwinian world. Tyranny exemplifies the ways a male novelist might imagine and contain fears of disenfranchisement through the generic figure of the female medium, and the novel translates these charged issues of agency into a readymade cultural language of love, as Serviss stands prepared to save the incapacitated Viola. Yet even as the narrative threatens to resolve itself in the simplistic terms of a marriage plot, the questions of the paranormal disrupt the sym-
metry of a Morton-Viola courtship. If the skeptical chemist exposes her faith as false, it might crush her self-identity; but if he proves her powers to be real, his own attraction becomes darkly perverse. In the recognizable terms of eugenics, Morton’s sister summarizes his plight: “Morton cannot consider a girl of questionable pedigree, no matter how rich or charming she may be. We believe in stock—not in family, but strain” (109). This taint might be religious madness or psychic sensitivity, but regardless, issues of control and consent contaminate all the choices in the novel, suggesting that no one, from female medium to male investigator, is outside the grasp of invisible forces.

In the clarifying melodrama of the courtship between Serviss and Viola, the novel provides the possibility of a sanctuary from the tyranny of the dark. After a visit to the Serviss home, described as “beautiful and honest and sane” (331), Viola finds that her “only hope of release lay in the strong, bright, self-reliant, humorous people she had just left” (332). As the novel establishes that the scientific community and the religious faithful are both abdicating ethical authority in favor of clinging to ideology and superstition, only an enlightened middle class “afar from isms” (109) and indifferent to the “one-time burning question of heaven or hell” (110) might serve as a space for such authority. The novel carefully constructs a version of middle-class authority built on a foundation of measured intellectualism and disciplined politeness. Viola’s “repulsive,” “abnormal side” is an abjection that must be cleansed through the sieve of secular humanism (276). As it dramatizes a style of paranormal research, the novel locates a locus of middle-class values inside that project that lauds itself for its qualities of mercy. As Serviss declares, “I am not one to needlessly destroy a comforting faith” (400).

With his paramour and star witness lost to the side of the light, Clarke slips into despair and commits suicide; without any post-mortem appearances, the preacher’s death ironically bears proof for Serviss that Viola’s abilities must be subliminal or biological in origin. Now converted to the cause of psychic research, the chemist asks Viola’s mother for permission to marry her daughter. The novel concludes, in a heavily symbolic gesture, with the triumph of the middle class as Morton demands the medium’s consent to his own control: “There are to be no other ‘guides’ but me” (439). The paranormal, infused by genetics or spirits, can be contained by the white middle-class male figure of a proper psychic investigator.

Yet the narrative ends with considerable ambiguity, particularly as it asks piquant post-Darwinian questions about ethical values. As Serviss troublingly suggests, “If the theories I hold are true if the soul of a child is no more than the animating principle of the ant or the ape (and this I can-
not deny) then of what avail is human life?” (354). The trappings of the novel, from romantic courtships to scientific procedures, from dark secrets to burning obsessions, seem trite compared to this fundamental question. With the clarifying help of its melodramatic conflicts and Gothic excessiveness, *The Tyranny of the Dark* attempts to expand and probe the boundaries of post-Darwinian ethics, and though the novel offers a variety of bulwarks against nihilistic anxiety, from romantic love to species pride to religious tradition to scientific ritual, its lingering sensations suggest that no option truly satisfies.

**The Shadow World**

In the climactic moment of *The Tyranny of the Dark*, Viola, hoping to escape the darkness of Clarke into the brighter world of the middle-class Servisses, consents to a sitting in the home study of Morton, “a test séance in which her love and honor were at stake” (283). As the participants group themselves about the table “as for whist,” Viola requests difficult conditions, including white tape sewn fast to her cuffs and then looped to her ankles and nailed into the floor behind the chair (283). Morton holds a silk thread that runs around her wrists. The study door is locked, and the gaslights and electricity are turned off. The megaphone of a phonograph is used for a “spirit horn.” The gathered folks sing, hold hands, and wait, chatting about the X-ray machine and psychic researchers like William Crookes. After a time, they hear a series of tappings followed by table movement and slate writing. The voice of the medium’s grandfather manifests and gives speeches about coming revelations. Finally, the sitting reaches a crescendo of volatile action: books are hurled around the room, a banjo is plucked on the wall, and “the entire library seemed crowded with tricky pucks” (305). With the group innervated, the display seems to offer ample evidence that the exhausted medium is no fake.

Two elements from this climactic scene are crucial: the truth about the paranormal remains undecided, and the mechanisms of control and confinement dominate the observations. As his represented séances resist revelation, Garland lavishes descriptive attention on the investigative conditions themselves, the reiterated sequence of bindings and limitations wrapped around the figure of the medium. As these two elements will repeat across the forty years of his research, Garland’s paranormal writing might best be understood not as individual literary objects, but as moments in the formation of an archive of experience. He often worked through the framework of two discourses, modern professional progressivism and paranormal research, interested in the construction and interpretation of archives as a
means of solving problems. Data processed into corrective facts might re-
solve abuses in the meat industry, corruption in finance, or the enigma of
survival after death. Both discourses fostered a print culture actively seek-
ing readers who could serve as audience and participants, that is, consum-
ers and producers of content information. If Morton Serviss models this
conversion from dismissive skeptic to informed researcher, how might read-
ers follow his path?

In the summer of 1908, Garland announced a contest for the readers
of Everybody’s Magazine: $500 for the best story that described a paranor-
mal experience. From April until September 1908, the magazine, an en-
gine of middlebrow progressivism that had attracted a “who’s who” gallery
of American literary Naturalists from Frank Norris to Jack London, pub-
lished Garland’s “The Shadow World” series, recounting his years as a psy-
chical investigator. When hundreds of letters from readers attested to their
own encounters, Garland and his editor hatched a contest that would serve
a dual purpose: to stir reader interest and participation and to gather more
proof of what Garland called a “mystical sub-current of psychical events”
that ran “beneath the commonplace stream of human affairs” (“The ’Shadow
World’ Prize Winners” 665). Ghosts and dreams were barred, but instances
of mental telepathy were welcome. Only twenty-four of the hundreds of
submissions met the rigorous research criteria including sworn affidavits,
and when “The ’Shadow World’ Prize Winners” appeared in the December
1908 issue, only four of the stories made print.

The series follows a curious dinner party from a skeptical first séance
through more than thirty-five experimental sessions. During the proceed-
ings, the participants ask Socratic questions that allow Garland to articulate
various theories concerning extra-personalities, astral bodies, and mental
telegraphy, while leaving open any final interpretation. This purposeful limi-
tation lends the articles the quality of a loosely fictionalized instruction
manual, and “The Shadow World” series can be read as a Trojan Horse,
smuggling scientific arguments and laboratory procedures in the belly of a
story hinting at occult revelations. Every question is met by a litany of the
names of scientists and their qualifications, accolades, and experimental ex-
periences; people who are now minor footnotes in history are afforded the
reverence awarded paradigm breakers.

The narrative is not just annotated for the sake of an aura of authority;
these citations act as an indexical history of the movement, disseminating
its models, its pioneers, and its problems to an audience normally outside
the circuit of scientific conversation. The reader feels plugged into a trans-
national network of exchange in experiences, from the conversion to the
cause of famous chemists like Sir William Crookes to the trailblazing foun-
dation of the English Society for Psychical Research. Professional science had turned its back; professional mediums clouded the pool; true believers could not be trusted. Amateurs, armed with Garland’s methods, could produce a trustworthy mass of evidence.\textsuperscript{13}

Yet his own recounted experiences contain very few convincing descriptions of psychic phenomena. Details of weird disembodied giggling, unprompted touching, and conversations with dearly departed friends are never particularly gripping.\textsuperscript{14} The experimental procedures, the aesthetics guiding the eye to the object and not the object itself, are what receive the deepest amount of attention. That Garland feels compelled to detail these restrictions says a great deal about the debates of the reality of psychic phenomena, but it also tells us something about the ready-made language of literary Realism and a cultural obsession with rules and limitations that found great expression in those artistic modes. Garland offers confirmation not of supernormal powers of mediums but the powers of accurate observation of the novelist.

What garners the most direct sensual descriptions in all the accounts? The bonds, ties, and restraints placed on the mediums. Across all of his psychic research, Garland is most fond of the silk twist, a type of knot that had a “certain virtue” as “it is almost impossible to untie, even in the light” (49). The intensity of the constricting conditions used to bind the medium quickly takes on sadomasochistic overtones. His favorite medium, a Mrs. Smiley, is tied with lady’s stockings, luminous stars are pinned to her hands and feet, her dress is knotted and then tacked to the floor, her knees are covered in newspaper, she is gagged with a kerchief, and a string is run from her hands to Garland’s own. Eventually, two iron rings used to fasten railway cars together confine her wrists. Despite being “bound like a criminal,” the medium manifests spectral hands and jugs of water levitate through the air (218).

The prize-winning amateurs in the November 1908 issue of \textit{Everybody’s} exemplify the approved style for psychic research. It seems no coincidence that the published accounts are all from the viewpoint of people of the same relative social class, including a businessman and his engineering student son, a government employee and a professor, a veteran journalist, and a woman of “cultivation and high social position.” This roster of middle-class observers related manifestations that followed the structure that Garland detailed, and the top prize went to the woman of cultivation for clear reasons: the sessions were held in private, the members of the circle were of good social standing, no professional mediums were involved, they practiced “modern methods free from bias,” and, most importantly, they kept a “sane and wholesome attitude toward life” (669). Her experiences might
have been an appendix to Garland’s series: middle-class professionals with artistic sympathies talk psychic phenomena around a dinner table, spending eight years in experimentation as a form of after-dinner entertainment. Yet this narrative confirms nothing but a kind of joyful strangeness lurking in the back parlors of even the most respectable homes. Her story records table-rappings, object levitations, astral lights, and even the manifestation of a stinky ectoplasmic man. As the intimacy of the group grows, the manifestations become more sensual and suggestive. A younger sister has her hair pins pulled while her “heavy, dark tresses were shaken down like a veil all around her.” Silk skirts are continually rustled, legs are brushed (possibly by a cat), and an animal with soft fur butts at a woman “under the table, like a goat” (669). A woman is even dragged under that same table by some poltergeist-like force, only to be shot out like a cannonball after five minutes, giddy and unharmed.

What is startling about these descriptions of an “unaccountable” and “miraculous” paranormal world is how profoundly mundane it really is. Periods of waiting for phenomena are filled with the small gathered groups singing and clapping in unison. People get hungry or tired, and even drunk. And when the spirits either as psychic projections or as visitors from another plane or plain old hoaxes emerge into these rooms and onto the page, they deliver information of the most quotidian sort. Remembered days of childhood, fights held in private, missing toys. One is reminded, in the trivial accounts of the dead, of attacks made against Realist writers, that theirs was a lifeless, airless cataloguing of minor facts. In *The Shadow World*, the séance becomes not a site of revelation, but rather a space in which even the sublime ripping asunder of the veil of death or the screen of human consciousness might be calmly, even humorously, catalogued by readers armed with Garland’s techniques.

*Forty Years of Psychic Research*

In the last decade of his life, Garland turned to the memoir form as a means to meditate on both the literary achievements of his generation and his own engagement with transforming invisible forces into prosaic facts. Over five books, Garland recounted forty years of literary friendships and aesthetic arguments, reaffirming his career as a staunch defense of regionalism and Realism in American art, and he devoted an entire volume to a kind of alternative history during the same period. Within *Forty Years of Psychic Research* (1937), Garland describes slate writing, mental telepathy, psychometry, and a host of other paranormal events with the same style and attention he affords tea with Henry James.
Garland revised decades worth of official reports, personal diaries, and private letters in order to produce what he called “a plain narrative of fact” (*Forty v*). Read as a whole, his memoirs suggest that psychic experimentation and Realist short stories share the same impulse: a form of artistic perspective on everyday, local occurrences that reveals the spectacular or the supernatural within them. For Garland, the work of transcribing observed psychic phenomena differs little from recording the lives of Midwestern farmers. The same methodological faiths apply: through careful annotation, through an avoidance of ornamentation, the writer/recorder might slip the yoke of language and produce proof of its referent. He even finds a word to describe the paranormal or the supernatural that resonates with his concerns: *the supernormal*. This label suggests the contradiction that organizes Garland’s version of the forty years’ worth of phenomena he witnessed: these experiences offered a composite portrait of an ordinary America while at the same time giving a glimpse of an extraordinary current running just underneath and off-center. For Garland, the normal always held the potential to become super but only if one knew where and how to look for it.

The many cases recounted in *Forty Years* transmit a distinct sensation of similarity. In a typical case, one might easily mistake the narration as the opening moments of a Naturalist novel: the family members are “intelligent and industrious. Its members were all laborers in near-by shops. . . . The home was plain, the furniture threadbare but well kept by the mother” (10). Repeatedly, Garland enters some private home in a Midwestern city, ostensibly for a sitting, yet always followed by his relentless recording of the furniture worn threadbare by the diligent ministrations of a tired, defiant, and *supernormal* mother-medium. Garland’s most famous book, the 1917 Pulitzer Prize-winning *A Son of the Middle Border*, hints at one of his most enduring focuses: the mothers of Midwestern farming families. And as mediums were overwhelmingly women, the cases—with their continual insistence on not just rules and regulations but literal bondage “silk twist” knots, thin pins nailing down dresses to the floor, gags, and blinders—are rich with a tapestry of actual and symbolic confinement. The objects of the experiments in *Forty Years of Psychic Research* are not so much the spiritual projections themselves but the women who are caught up in them, trapped by powers they do not want or cannot control, poked and prodded, even if gently, by men like Garland. These scenes do not have to be pushed too hard before they become intense cultural metaphors for the unseen forces constricting the lives of working-class women in the early twentieth century: rules of respectability and sexual propriety, dour domestic economics, and religious and intellectual restrictions linger alongside the physical knots tying them to a chair. Jean Holloway called this Garland’s “sympathetic con-
siderations,” his imaginative empathy for women caught in bondage and isolation (187). Yet one wonders whether Garland, in this psychic memoir, is obsessed with the fate of these women or with those ties that bind them.

What can we learn from these narratives, with their obsessive cataloguing of knots and bindings, their continual anxieties over accuracy, their deep descriptions of home interiors? Even the author-investigator suggests that he is, after decades, still undecided on the whole affair. But we do learn quite a bit about the how and why of psychic research. Read alongside the memoirs, *Forty Years of Psychic Research* becomes another primer on literary Realism: class details, saturated settings, emphasis on the qualities of the light, the weather, the mood. People gathered together to eat and then sing and then talk. People wait. Ghosts seem to appear, lifting books and then putting them away. Voices sound, talking about minor memories and tiny mysteries. And outside the window, men and women walk home from work. This primer suggests just how strange the projects of Realism really were: Hamlin Garland the populist materialist and Hamlin Garland the psychic investigator relied on the same type of aesthetics, developed out of observations of both discontented farmers and backroom mediums. That he felt the burden of proof for both types of people suggests how deeply hidden much of American life remained.

Yet what remains resistant in the psychic research, what seems powerfully and historically contingent, is the specificity of the social relationships. Garland would sit with these mediums and psychics, primarily but not always women, for hours, days, even weeks at a time. Often they would hold hands, or sit with legs pressed together. Secrets and private expressions were exchanged. A kind of fervent hope akin to faith energized the rooms with the expectation that something extraordinary would happen. And on occasion, something inexplicable would occur: a voice would speak in an impossible accent or describe a repressed personal secret, or a heavy table would flip over. In the intimate specificity of the social relationship between medium and writer, perhaps a different kind of art form was achieved: a way of being in the world that spoke not to the reality of psychic phenomena but to the need for that reality; a kind of escape from the drab rooms, the dusty streets, the threadbare clothing. Something supernormal.

As Garland wrote in “The ‘Shadow World’ Prize Winners,” “This fund of evidence makes it certain that the human body is a much more complex and marvelous machine than any of us had hitherto imagined it to be, and it has given all its readers a profounder realization of the essential mystery of life” (665). His paranormal project was not written in the spirit of revelation and death, but rather in the hope of a shared inheritance of widespread mysteries governing the human body. Though it is common to describe both
the Gothic and American literary Naturalism as modes of critique for certain versions of American optimism, from enlightenment self-improvement to imperial triumphalism, Garland levels that critical attention in service of a very different yet no less powerful form of populist optimism concerning the capacities of people. Whether those capabilities were biological or psychological in origin, a blessing or a burden in orientation, Hamlin Garland, through a lifelong project, confirmed that they were both super and normal and only traceable through the binding limitations of his version of a Gothic-inflected Naturalist prose.

Notes

1. For more on the cultural and literary history of Spiritualism, see Faust; Kerr; and Sword.

2. Sally Morita describes the ways in which an interest in “invisible causation” as exemplified in spirit communication helped shape nineteenth-century reform debates about a variety of related political issues. Ann Braude historicizes mediumship and Spiritualism as modes of public power within women’s rights debates.

3. Ronald E. Martin defines this era of cultural history as obsessed with “the idea that reality was in essence a system of forces” (xi); this idea found expression in imaginative writers as a form of “naturalistic alienation” (xv).

4. Deborah Blum’s popular history offers an introduction to the many people involved in psychic research.

5. See Keith Newlin’s introduction to The Oxford Handbook of American Literary Naturalism (6).

6. Lewis O. Saum suggests that Garland rarely evinced the despair of the “grim determinism” of stereotypical and old-fashioned accounts of literary Naturalism; rather, Garland maintained a “sanguine persuasion” that sought a reformist positivism when confronting even the most wretched conditions (47).

7. Garland published two other psychic works that are beyond the scope of this essay, Victor Olmee’s Discipline (1911) and The Mystery of the Buried Crosses (1939).

8. Though lists of Gothic conventions are legion and often encyclopedic to the point of taxonomic exhaustion, the introductory essays by Jerrold E. Hogle and David Punter in the Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction and A Companion to The Gothic, respectively, are superb sources on the classic tropes.

9. In her excellent cultural history, Molly McGarry outlines the development of this cultural assumption about young female mediums as “passive, guileless, and incapable of producing feats of skilled speech or writing through normal means” (32).

10. For more on the construction of the middle class as an essential feature of Naturalist texts, see Howard (Form and History) and Davies (“Naturalism and Class”).

11. David Punter’s description of the Gothic villain fits Anthony Clarke well. As Punter writes, the villain is “the most complex and interesting character in Gothic
fiction,” a figure “manipulating the doom of others while the knowledge of his own eventual fate surrounds him like the monastic habit and cowl which he so often wore” (*Literature of Terror* 9–10).

12. As Keith Newlin notes in his invaluable biography of Garland, this ambiguity led to more than a few negative reviews, as readers hoped for answers to the novel’s paranormal questions (*Hamlin* 273).

13. Garland borrows liberally from a 1905 book by Joseph Maxwell, a medical doctor serving as the Deputy Attorney General at the Court of Appeal in Bordeaux, France, published in English under the title *Metaphysical Phenomena: Methods and Observations*. Writing specifically for a lay audience, Maxwell outlines the material conditions for supernatural communication.

14. Garland captures this tension eloquently in his own diary: “We then went to Dr. Turner’s to a sitting. Not much happened but what did happen was remarkable” (92).

15. John Kucich suggests that cross-cultural spiritual confrontations are often productively disruptive, while “spiritualism within a monocultural context is often striking in its ordinariness” (xxii).
V

Spectral Landscapes and Locations
Noted for her publication of “Life in the Iron-Mills” (1861) in the *Atlantic Monthly*, Rebecca Harding Davis wrote over ninety pieces (including thirteen serialized novellas) for *Peterson’s Magazine*.1 Founded by Charles J. Peterson in 1842, *Peterson’s* competed with *Godey’s Lady’s Book* and reached a circulation of 165,000 by the 1870s, one of the largest of its day (Mott 309). In its pages, Davis constructed Gothic mysteries with sensational plots that critiqued myriad social issues, particularly the plight of women in a patriarchal culture.2 In “Rebecca Harding Davis’s ‘Second Life,’” Ruth Stoner argues that Davis’s *Peterson’s* work “contains some of the most subversive literature written in the nineteenth century—radical declarations of women’s status as chattel and portraits of women’s sexual repression” (44).3 More recently, Sharon M. Harris suggests that *Peterson’s* offered Davis “a wide audience” and an “opportunity to speak immediately to the political issues of her day” (“The Anatomy of Complicity” 310). However, despite Davis’s attention to contemporary concerns, these stories continue to be neglected in assessments of her long career.4

Serialized in six installments running from January to June in 1863, “The Second Life” is a sensational Gothic mystery that also anticipates the concerns of Naturalism. In *American Gothic* (2009), Charles Crow uses “Life in the Iron-Mills” (1861) as an example of “the Gothic-naturalism paradox,” noting that it both “anticipated” Naturalism and contained “its own Gothic elements” (103).5 For Crow, “Gothicism and naturalism are both devoted to shaking bourgeois complacency, revealing unsettling truths that society tries to conceal from itself” (102). Common tropes include “a universe of vast forces that can overwhelm and terrify the individual,” “the kinship of humans and beasts,” and images of entrapment (102–3). “The Second
Life” illustrates many of these overlapping concerns. As Teresa Goddu suggests, “The gothic registers its culture’s contradictions” (2–3). Davis marshals Gothic conventions—an imperiled heroine, a spectral summons, figurative and literal imprisonment, complicated bloodlines, and even a vampire—to examine cultural anxieties about race, inheritance, and female sexuality. Further, like writers considered in Donna M. Campbell’s “Women Writers and Naturalism,” Davis anticipates the concerns of Naturalism, “including a frank treatment of sexuality, the primacy of heredity, including race, as a motivating factor in characters’ actions, and the power of natural and mechanical forces to determine the course of human lives” (229–30). Describing the classic approach to Naturalism that categorizes women writers by gender as “women writers” and male writers by genre as “naturalists” (223), Campbell argues that a reconsideration of “women writers and certain features of their work, such as . . . the trope of the female body as spectacle, might serve to stretch the definitional boundaries of naturalism itself” (223, 224). According to Campbell, “women’s bodies function as spectacles of desire” in Naturalist texts in which “the protagonist performs for an audience of male spectators, speaking someone else’s words or remaining mute, a stance that permits her to serve as a focal point of the male gaze without disrupting the audience’s fantasies by the expression of her own personality” (232). Noting Pizer’s view that “studies of naturalism must recognize its strain of social protest,” Campbell suggests that “the figure of the disabled body” is also a form of spectacle that “evokes issues of social justice,” a point that extends the boundaries of Naturalism to include texts like Davis’s “Life in the Iron-Mills” (234–35).

Drawing on Campbell’s analysis, I suggest that Davis’s version of the Naturalist Gothic calls attention to the female body not only as spectacle but also as specter—a living ghost that haunts the narrative, destabilizes the spectator’s gaze, and raises questions about social justice. In this sense, the specter provides a link between the Gothic tradition and Naturalism and, much like the disabled body, opens a space for recognizing elements of protest and social critique in Naturalist novels. In “The Second Life,” Davis uses the figures of the specter and the spectator to foreground injustice, providing a powerful reminder of cultural anxieties that resist easy solutions and clear-cut narrative closure.6

“The Second Life” focuses on the narrator’s efforts to find his lost love after she appears to him twice as a spectral figure calling for help. Self-described as “a hard man” (33) and a “cool spectator” (35), the narrator, John Lashley, has his first vision of his childhood sweetheart, Esther Paul, in 1858, forty years after their last meeting: “I saw a woman, half-crouching . . . a meager, starvation-bitten face, averted from me; but I saw it clearly—knew
it, in the bright light. The figure was old and haggard, dressed in a rusty shabby suit of black. She moaned” (34). With a well-placed dash, Davis suggests the gap between what John sees and what he thinks he knows. In a literal sense, John sees the figure and recognizes it as Esther, yet as his narrative reveals, he cannot know her story. Quoting the adage “where no gods are, specters rule,” John initially makes no effort to explain “a world of influences outside of this, invisible—good or uncanny” (33). As the narrative unfolds, Freud’s association of the uncanny with the home seems particularly relevant; for Esther, family relationships are dangerous, and the home becomes an unfamiliar space associated with sexual desire and entrapment.7

The Gothic plot focuses on family, tracing the lives of the Lashleys over forty years and two generations; the important characters are three brothers (John, Clayton, and Robert), their unnamed mother, an orphaned cousin (Esther Paul), and their descendants (Robert’s daughter Emmy and Esther’s son Pressley). John tells the story sometime during or after the Civil War when he is over sixty years old; however, the main story arc takes place some years earlier, in 1818 when John and Esther are young and in 1858 when he returns to Virginia. Constructing a plot that spans multiple generations allows Davis to use the imperiled heroine to create an unsettling account of what happens when the hero does not come to the rescue and the heroine cannot rescue herself—she degenerates in a Naturalist plot of decline. Far removed from Wilkie Collins’s beautiful woman in white, Esther is old and haggard, indicating her life as an outcast. Gesturing to the need for individual action and reform, Davis suggests her audience’s complicity in this trajectory; like John, her readers are spectators. When John recalls that Clayton raped Esther on their wedding night, he notes that “it was a strange story, unreal,” before shifting to the present. Noting the everyday people around him, John asks a rhetorical question: “What could these smug merchants, or their dressy wives know of such passions? Know? There was not one of them to whom these things were not real and commonplace. Every one of those newspapers held a dozen such histories” (125). With this link to the newspaper, Davis positions her audience as voyeurs, consuming stories like Esther’s without acting.

The key event in the 1818 plot is Esther’s marriage. Though they grow up like siblings, John and Esther fall in love; however, when John leaves briefly, Mrs. Lashley, from her deathbed, forces Esther to marry Clayton. John flees to California where he spends the next forty years as the typical capitalist “bent on making money,” earning his fortune through “honest, far-sighted speculation” (33). Meanwhile, Esther is raped and unable to divorce Clayton. When Clayton disappears and circumstantial evidence points to violence, Esther is tried and then acquitted of his murder. Facing a community be-
lieving her to be guilty, Esther allows Robert to adopt her son, Pressley, and she disappears. Both Clayton and Esther are presumed dead.

The key event in the 1858 plot is Esther’s spectral summons, which sends John to Virginia. Throughout the voyage, John experiences “a sense of mighty, latent difficulty to combat, to overcome: of subtle forces, against which I had to struggle; they—always unseen” (35). This unsettling sense of determinism persists throughout the novella. In a sensational coincidence, he accidentally meets Esther’s son during the trip. Pressley has fallen in love with Robert’s daughter Emmy, but Robert refuses to “suffer blood so foul . . . to mingle with his own” (127). Mystery surrounds Pressley; he travels with “an ape or a human being” (129). John receives his second visit from Esther when he glimpses Pressley’s companion for the first time: “a horrible, vague shape that might have been bestial or human . . . clutching: always clutching: the same unceasing motion” (206). John hears “a low, awful sigh, as some one [sic] stifling to death . . . ‘John Lashley, help! help!’” (206). John vows to find Esther and prove her innocence, not only to facilitate Pressley’s marriage but also to begin his own “second life” with her. In the final installment, readers learn that “vague shape” is Clayton, a vampire-like figure who consumes others’ lives. When Clayton reappears and then conveniently kills himself, both couples marry on Christmas Day.

With this conventional Gothic resolution, Davis restores the domestic order, eliding anxieties about narrative authority, race and biological inheritance, and female sexuality that permeate the novella. However, as a spectral figure, Esther haunts this conclusion, her story suppressed in the gaps. As Avery Gordon argues, “The ghost is not simply a dead or missing person, but a social figure . . . one form by which something lost, or barely visible . . . makes itself known or apparent to us” (8). Arguing that the “spectres, rather than spirit, of an age define it,” Fred Botting suggests that “the uncanny announces the doubleness of modernity: fantasy irrupts into reality. . . . At the same time, in giving form to the disturbing locus of otherness, dressing it up as a monster or vampire, modernity partially stabilizes anxiety with objects of fear, exclusion, or repugnance. Modernity thus constitutes and polices its boundaries on the basis of the exceptions, the others or monsters, it excludes: workers, women, deviants, criminals . . . are produced as the antitheses . . . establishing modern norms of bourgeois rationality, heteronormative sexuality, racial integrity, social and cultural cohesion. . . . For all attempts to contain and define otherness, the relation remains ambivalent” (8). At times the voice of rationality, John envisions himself as a spectator, coolly narrating events from an objective distance, a position in sharp contrast to his brutish, degenerate brother and Esther’s ghostly presence. As June Howard demonstrates, a defining
characteristic of Naturalism is the presence of the spectator and the brute. The brute is a figure for the “brutal doomed characters of naturalism,” and the spectator, a figure for “the perspective from which those characters are viewed, that of the observant and articulate naturalist in close conference with his reader” (Form x). The spectator can describe the degenerate brute’s experiences from a safe distance, allowing readers to “explore determinism” without becoming “submerged in it” and risk “becom[ing] the brute” (104). At the same time, “the privilege of the spectator . . . is necessarily vulnerable; fear and desire . . . constantly disrupt the design of safety” (x). Davis explores this vulnerability through the doubled characters of John and Clayton. Though John repeatedly insists on their differences, his preoccupation with bloodlines, capitalistic consumption, and sexual appetites suggests otherwise.

In the first installment, Davis introduces John as narrator and, to some extent, editor; along with his experiences, he filters information from other characters as well as court documents and newspaper articles about Esther’s trial. Though a first-person narrator, his account is akin to the Naturalist gaze characteristic of many late nineteenth-century texts. By privileging his objectivity and distance, he is able to speak with a kind of cultural authority that justifies his narrative choices. Throughout the narrative, he is preoccupied with facts, yet leaves several gaps. The opening focuses on his credibility as a rational capitalist: “I am a hard man. . . . Hard, selfish, money-making” (33). Anticipating (and perhaps heading off) contemporary criticism of sensationalism as “preaching to the nerves,” Davis foregrounds John’s role as a spectator: “It was not for the purpose of baring my own nerves and tendons I wrote this story. What it purports you to know of my past history, I will tell in the regular hackneyed way; no more. I will try and tell you all the story as a cool spectator would have done” (35). Davis reinforces this point through a metafictional reference: “In novels, men tremble and weep when the great crisis of their lives come on them: I did neither: smoked my pipe, went into the schedules of my business with a clear head” (35). Despite this claim for objectivity, John’s remarks raise issues about narrative control and its cultural power. How will he choose details and justify their inclusion? What counts as a “fact” for the purposes of his narrative of events? Further, with this self-reflexive comment, Davis encourages us not only to question John’s status as narrator but also the meaning of generic conventions themselves. As Peter K. Garrett argues, the “Gothic opens an internal dialogue between perspectives, posing alternate versions” (3). With these multiple perspectives, the “Gothic also enables self-conscious reflections on the form and function of narrative itself, the individual acts and social transactions through which fiction exerts
its force” (3–4). As many scholars have demonstrated, both the Gothic and Naturalism are fraught categories, inviting multiple definitions.

Through an unreliable narrator, Davis encourages her audience to attend to gaps, silences, and ambiguities in the narrative. From his perspective looking back on the 1818 and 1858 timelines, John often contradicts himself. Initially claiming that he will “attempt to account for none of the supernatural or mysterious character in these facts” (33), he then implies a religious explanation; the “strange” story has “some things in it” that he does not “understand,” including “voices that spoke out of the other world; mysterious forces that drove men to do what they would not . . . and the same God . . . working under all and through all” (33). He continues in a more cynical tone: “Strange chances enough. . . . They did not bring the lost years to me again, or recompense me for them—it was too late. But they brought good to others: and for me—there are other lives to come” (33). This passage evokes the title and foreshadows the ending. Who gets a “second life” and what does that life mean? Then, he dismisses the need for an explanation at all, claiming “the thing was real. I did not trouble myself to account for it for one moment, nor to wonder at its strangeness” (34). Eliding definitive explanations for the vision, this incongruous opening raises questions about John’s role as spectator and his ability to account for Esther’s spectral presence.

Anticipating Naturalism’s emphasis on deterministic forces, Davis introduces the possibility that environment and biological inheritance have shaped John’s destiny: “Circumstances may have moulded me into John Lashley . . . or the iron may have been in my blood” (33). Emphasizing bloodlines, he reports, “My mother was a Hilkott. They were a flinty race. She—but let the dead rest” (33). Like his later description of Esther’s rape, John elides his mother’s experience with a dash, never mentions his father at all, and limits readers’ access to information about his inherited tendencies. During the trip to Virginia, John meets Donnell, a childhood friend. In a striking conversation emphasizing inherited characteristics, Donnell playfully guesses other passengers’ origins, noting “the different types” that demarcate the differences “between the sluggish, farmer-moulded, deep-blooded Pennsylvania, and the clear-cut features of the Connecticut thinker” (36). When Donnell labels him as a western Virginian, John encourages his interest by referring to “Indian blood” and noting the “trail of savage blood in them [western Virginians] to make them a new race almost, totally differing from the planters of the East” (36). Donnell reports that “the [Lashley] family had strongly-marked traits. Large, brawny men, with tough muscles, yellow complexions, broad, black eyebrows, and steely gray eyes . . . that used to glow and burn under the bushy brows like some stilled animals” (37).
With their “yellow complexions,” the Lashleys may be mixed race, with “Indian blood” or even African ancestors. Readers learn that John and Robert fit the family type while Clayton is “a stray, . . . a fair-haired, blue-eyed, milky scoundrel, his mother’s own son” (37). Descriptions of Clayton and his mother also emphasize inherited, animalistic traits: “The same blood ran in their veins . . . as slimy and cold as stagnant water” (121). With his “thick lip, the thicker eyelid, the tigerish, sensual eye,” Clayton is the product of both his genes and his upbringing; his mother “pampered his soul by selfish pleasures” such that his “soul and body grew diseased, rotten” (122). These passages reinforce Donnell’s point that “there’s a good deal in blood,” but it is difficult to determine exactly what that “blood” might reveal (36).

As Harris observes, “in the South, residual culture is most markedly evident through its attitudes toward ‘blood’” not “only as a marker for African Americans” but for others as well (“Anatomy of Complicity” 305). In this sense, John’s preoccupation with blood links him to “a past rooted in slavery and archaic patriarchal conventions” (309). With his dark hair and yellow skin, John has racialized traits, yet so does Clayton with his “thick lip” and “thicker eyelid.” Indeed, based on the physical descriptions alone, it is difficult to determine who the racial “Other” might be, an ambiguity that allows readers to project their own anxieties into the narrative.

Reinforcing their shared bloodline, both men treat Esther as a sexual object and Naturalist spectacle of desire while her story remains in the gaps. Foreshadowing her role as an imperiled heroine, Donnell notes the “queer old blood” and “queer old houses,” claiming that he could tell “tales . . . that would make your veins cold” (36). With “great rambling rooms, close, dark halls and entries,” the “strangest house” belongs to the Lashleys and suggests “a ghost story” and “queer legends” (37). However, Donnell cannot continue, noting that he would “rather not tell the story” because “it’s a horrible thing to rip open” (39). He comments: “It’s that woman that troubles me. I’ve tried to reconcile her story with her as I knew her when she was a child, and I cannot do it” (39). Referencing the “damning story,” he describes Esther as “one of the foulest things that creeps God’s earth” (39). Under-scoring her position as a haunting presence, Davis shifts the narrative from Donnell’s dialogue to John, who simply states “I heard her story” without providing any details before the end of the installment. Here, Davis uses the serial form itself to position Esther’s story in the literal gap between issues of the magazine.

As spotty details emerge, Esther’s story suggests both the imperiled heroine of the Gothic tradition and the female body as spectacle associated with Naturalism. The second installment combines John’s memories and his interpretation of Donnell’s version; explaining that he is “awkward” in his
“new vocation,” he continues, “I must . . . narrate the history of Esther Paul and those Lashleys, shut up by the great hills into their solitary home, with their dumb ways, cold speech, and fierce blood, come down from an Indian fighter hot with passion; and, saddest of all, their faint belief in a God overhead, or a hell beneath” (121). Esther is the classic imperiled heroine, a motherless orphan facing violence and imprisonment at the hands of a family member. Esther “had a hard life of it” because John’s mother “cowed and trampled her under foot” (121). For Esther, home becomes a dangerous, isolated space. Described as “a cold, sensual snake,” Clayton is a threatening figure; as a child, Esther was “the victim of his cruel spite,” but as a woman, she is “beautiful” and “something else” as Clayton “[gives] her something more terrible than hate” (122). Clayton is not the only dangerous man in Esther’s life. In a revealing passage, John characterizes his own quasi-incestuous attraction for Esther in animalistic terms—“a simple, savage instinct . . . such as prompts the lion to its mate” (121). Exemplifying Campbell’s point that “a second version of the trope of the body as disturbing spectacle is that of disabled characters” (234), John describes Esther as a “weak, lame girl” (121) who could potentially “overcome her woman’s weakness” and “share” John’s “masculine strength” (121). At the same time, “As a sister—yet no sister,” Esther is a sexual object for possession: “she was mine; why was not my vital nerve in her? If she loved me, she would grow like me—be me. . . . When she halted, panting, exhausted, . . . I would clasp her tired, trembling little body, bathe the swollen feet, cover the hands with passionate caresses” (121). Esther is a sexual object and a spectacle of desire for both brothers. Further, through his sexualized description, John implies that his relationship with Esther may have taken a sexual turn before her forced marriage to Clayton, a point I revisit below.

Davis makes it clear that the imperiled heroine is not rescued; instead, home becomes the site of a Naturalistic nightmare, a space of violence and crime. In another striking parallel, Esther’s life with Clayton begins in the very space she had planned to share with John as his wife, their “home in all the world” (123). As John describes it, “the old story of the woman bound forever to a corpse was nothing to this. In the very room, sacred to her pure womanly love, he [Clayton] forced his presence, his embraces on her, holding her with his pale, snaky eye, his whiskey-poisoned breath on her lips. And so—the end” (124). With a well-placed dash, Davis foregrounds John’s inability to narrate Esther’s experience; indeed, he erases all of her ensuing experiences. The reference to the woman and the corpse may have reminded Davis’s readers of Polidori’s “The Vampyre” (1819), which ends with the protagonist’s sister married to Lord Ruthven, a vampire who consumes her blood and leaves her corpse behind on their wedding night. After only
a few weeks of marriage, Esther becomes a ghostly figure; she behaves “like an automaton” and seems “stricken with age,” returning John’s gaze “with one that meant nothing—a vacant, idiotic stare” (124). Esther provides a powerful reminder of the dangers of female sexuality.

Reinforcing this point, Davis has John introduce several written texts with details about her trial to suggest that a patriarchal legal system is unable to provide justice. When John reunites with Robert, Esther is “a black shadow” haunting each conversation, producing “a sudden pause in every story, a something darkly understood, omitted, a knowledge hinted at only by an abrupt silence” (209). Claiming that the “papers need no explanation,” Robert gives John “damning proof” of her guilt, the “record of the trial” (209, 210). Robert believes that Esther was “saved . . . only by a quibble of the law” and “her youth and magnificent beauty” (210). Throughout the trial section, Davis emphasizes the ways in which a trial depends on storytelling, drawing its outcome from the jury’s perception of the facts.

Like John’s narration, these documents provide conflicting versions of events and raise questions about the possibility of justice; in this sense, the trial section reveals that there may be little difference between the legal narrative and the Gothic tale in which it is framed. Featured in a trial that becomes a “sensation” for the locals, Esther is both specter and spectacle: “This strange beautiful woman was of a different race from them; they did not know her; she was uncanny, outside of their human sympathy. To be accused was with them to be guilty” (294). Again foregrounding the inability to “know” Esther, Davis questions the construction of a definitive courtroom narrative capable of demonstrating guilt or innocence. Some time after their marriage, Clayton takes Esther to an isolated inn in Pennsylvania. A “close shut-in hamlet,” the village is an “obscure retreat” where Clayton “could better torture Esther” (293). Esther seems “deranged” and is accused of murder when Clayton disappears (293). The transcript suggests a terrible crime, evidenced by “a violent struggle” (295). Mrs. Chandler, a key witness, describes Esther in ghostly terms: “She looked as if she were keeping herself down . . . her face white as if she were bleeding inwardly to death,” and on the day of the murder, Esther was “stiller and paler than usual . . . quiet as death, just dumb, like an animal” (294). During the days preceding the murder, Mrs. Chandler believes that Esther was “gettin’ madder and madder” while her daughter Margot thinks Clayton was a “fiend . . . gettin’ her under his foot” (294). The two women also disagree about how to interpret Clayton’s tone on the night of the alleged murder: “We couldn’t hear what he said, only he was taunting her like, or coaxing, we couldn’t tell which. Margot thought one; me t’other” (294). They find Esther near a creek, “looking like a mad-woman” holding “a long sharp knife, cov-
ered with blood” (295). Margot corroborates her mother’s testimony, “adding her evident conviction of the ill treatment given to the prisoner by the deceased, which she dwelt on out of pity, yet which only added to the proofs of her probable guilt” (295). Thus, evidence of abuse only serves to provide a motive, and Esther’s “cold, quiet composure” undermines “whatever doubtful pity had been evoked by the tale of cruelty practiced upon her” (295). Through the trial section, Davis suggests that the legal process, with its claims to find the truth, is simply another form of narrative, subject to ambiguity and competing interpretations. Davis reinforces this point through references to the insanity defense, notoriously difficult to prove in the nineteenth century. When questioned, Esther claims that she attempted suicide and that Clayton fell into the creek when he tried to stop her. The jury’s perception of Esther is a key issue: with a successful insanity plea, “her full and free acquittal would have been secure; but . . . her demeanor was calm, self-possessed, and composed” (295). For the jury, “no one doubted her guilt,” but “averse to hanging a woman . . . from circumstantial evidence,” they found for an acquittal (295). Though the legal process produces the correct result, it is unable to tell her story in a fashion that establishes her innocence in the eyes of the community. Esther leaves the courtroom as a free woman but with “as black a curse as Cain’s clinging to her” (295). Thus, both the law and the community are deterministic forces that shape Esther’s destiny and facilitate her decline.

The grim reality of her situation is apparent when John, “haunted” by the “low, hopeless cry . . . of one in mortal agony” (297), finds traces of her in Pittsburg. Davis’s descriptions of “the black cursed city” of “foulness and impurity” suggest Naturalism’s emphasis on urban settings and echo her critique of such an environment in “Life in the Iron-Mills.” Though he “walks the streets at night like a madman” among “wretched forms,” Esther’s “never [comes]” (297–98). He finally learns about a woman that Pressley helped when she “was low with typhoid . . . brought on by starvation” (298). John finds Esther’s home, a “shanty of one room” off “a narrow alley, foul, stifling with impure smells and smoke” (298). Suggestive of a tomb, this “underground chamber” is “clean . . . but with the black damp oozing through wall and floor” (298). No longer an imperiled heroine, Esther is an urban survivor. In this crypt-like, Naturalistic space, John constructs a religious explanation for Esther’s spectral appearance. “No believer” and “a doubter always” (210), John imagines that Esther must have questioned God, asking, “Was this well done, oh! God?” (299). After reading marginal notes in her Bible, John claims that “He [God] had made use of unknown powers and voices—agencies for which I could not account—it did not trouble me” (299). Though John believes he has “wakened to a new healthy life” (299),
this religious justification seems fleeting at best. Earlier recounting his own “maddening doubt,” he asks, “Of what use had it been to her soul or mine to be thus tormented? Was the question ever answered? Time will show” (211). The unsettling ending denies an easy answer.

Prefiguring one of the primary concerns of Naturalism, the final scenes emphasize death, decline, and atavism, raising additional questions about Esther’s story and reinforcing disturbing parallels between John and Clayton. Finally reunited with John, Esther is “weak” and “on the verge of death” (349). She looks like a ghost with her “lips wan and cold” and her “white forehead” (349). When she finally speaks, she suggests that John summoned her: “You were dead, John. Am I dead now? Are we both dead—” (349). He answers her with a telling line, first calling her “Sister, Esther” and then noting that “we were one, loving truly, purely passionately” (350). He asks, “Are you my wife now?” and she replies, “I have been your wife always” (350). He refers to her as “my wife in the sight of heaven!” (349), and in one of the few lines of dialogue directly from Esther, she claims that “years ago . . . this man [John] and I were husband and wife in God’s eyes” (427). This textual evidence strongly implies that they could have had a sexual relationship even if Pressley is not the product of that relationship.

Further, in perhaps the most subversive element of the text and an unsettling reminder about female sexuality, Davis provides contradictory dates for Pressley’s birth, suggesting that John, like Clayton, may have had a sexual relationship with Esther. According to John’s first version of the story, “ten years after their marriage,” Clayton “took her and her child to a little inland town in Pennsylvania” where she “murdered him” (210), and no one contradicts this date. However, when John later summarizes documents about the trial, he provides a different date: “in the summer of the year 18[1—],” Clayton takes “Esther and her child, Pressley, then an infant of a few months old,” to an “obscure retreat” where they remain until his disappearance (293). Whether a slip of the pen or a clue for careful readers, these contradictory dates strongly imply that Esther had a sexual relationship with John. The couple visits their “home in all the world” unchaperoned in September 1818 (123), and if Pressley is already a few months old during the summer of 1819, then he could have been conceived sometime before her marriage in October 1818. The impression that John is Pressley’s father is reinforced by his comment that “this boy . . . might have been her son and mine” (127) and his consistent use of “my boy.”11 Similarly, in an assertion of patriarchal authority, Robert often misidentifies Pressley as “my son” (209).12 Both phrases reinforce the ambiguity surrounding Esther’s sexuality.

The last piece of the plot crystallizes when the identity of the vampire figure is revealed. Davis anticipates later understandings of the vampire as a
metaphor for sexuality, racial otherness, and consumption. “Something . . . no man must look on,” Clayton is Pressley’s mysterious companion. Associated with sexual deviance and degeneracy, he is a “brutal wreck” with “a bent, apeish form . . . covered with coarse, tight hair” (427). Reinforcing other racialized descriptions, Clayton has a “flat, retreating head” and “hog-like lips” and is “not an ape, but worse, a groveling, sensual idiot” (427). Recalling the description of Esther as an “automaton,” when Pressley finally returns, he seems “without his soul . . . inanimate, weary . . . his eye indifferent, lifeless” (353). To John, Pressley “look[s] as if some vampire-bat had been sucking” his “blood and soul out night after night” (352), and Pressley himself admits, “I belong to a vampire, fresh from glutting itself in graves. . . . My fate is fixed” (353). Like the vampire tale of “the woman married to a corpse,” Esther is still legally married to Clayton, and in keeping with the ideology of female self-sacrifice, she nurses him during his last days because, as she puts it, “God has given me this task to do” (428). Once again, Esther is trapped, “caged with her foul charge,” where she cares for him alone until he finally kills himself with a knife to the heart (423–24).

With Clayton’s death, Davis unravels the complicated plot, ending on Christmas Day with two marriages hastily described in the final (and shortest) chapter. At first glance, Pressley and Emmy’s marriage restores order, seemingly resolving anxieties about bloodlines and inheritance, while John and Esther’s marriage allows the narrative to end on a tenuous note of closure, tempering the concerns about atavism, sexuality, and consumption exemplified by Clayton, John’s vampire double. However, this conclusion is problematic at best. Biological determinism suggests that Robert’s concerns about blood have not been resolved; Pressley and Emmy are first cousins, with their genetic link in the Lashley-Hilkoit blood line that produced Clayton’s gambling, criminal behavior, and eventual madness. Now heir to an estate “the size of a German principality,” Pressley shares the genes of a speculator and a gambler.

In the last line, John reports that “Esther Lashley and I began our ‘second life’” (420). On one hand, this line may refer to their brief time together before death or their “second life” in the afterlife, both problematized by John’s contradictory statements about religion and the overwhelming sense that providential design arrived too late for Esther. On the other hand, the title also gestures to the story that we never hear; when Esther finally tells “all her story,” Emmy only relates Esther’s observation that Emmy has “the Lashley blood” like John (349). As a liminal figure, Esther is, quite literally, the “second life,” the specter that remains in gaps, haunting the narrative from the shadows and destabilizing the spectator’s attempt to account for her experience. As doubled figures, both John and Clayton consume Esther.
Indeed, John’s capitalistic ethic of consumption—exemplified by his interest in “the turns in the money-market” (35) as well as his desire for Esther’s “tired, trembling little body” (121)—finds its logical expression in Clayton’s vampirism. Throughout the novella, Davis appropriates Gothic and proto-Naturalist conventions to suggest that Esther’s story is “real and commonplace,” located in the “histories” that her readers encountered in daily newspapers but, as spectators like John, could never really know. A fascinating and often contradictory piece that invites multiple readings, “The Second Life” suggests both the continued relevance of the Gothic throughout the nineteenth century and a more nuanced lineage for American Naturalism than classic accounts, which have traditionally focused on male writers, provide.

Notes

1. See Rose, “Bibliography.”
2. Davis frequently uses Gothic tropes to examine the plight of women in a patriarchal legal system. See Renfroe, Introduction.
3. Though she does not discuss “The Second Life,” Stoner notes in passing Davis’s “obsession with inheritance” and use of “mystery” as “a metaphor for the Victorian ‘mystery’ of women’s bodies” (45).
4. Rose, Harris, and Pfaelzer provide brief readings of a few Peterson’s stories. More recently, Harris’s “The Anatomy of Complicity” explores the Civil War context of Davis’s Peterson’s contributions. Put Out of the Way, a novella challenging relaxed criteria for civil commitments, has received the most attention. See Mock and Dowling, respectively.
5. Davis’s obituary notes that “stern but artistic realism . . . suggested a man of power not unlike Zola’s” (“Rebecca H. Davis” 13). Gilbert and Gubar suggest that “Life in the Iron-Mills” “brilliantly dramatized the socioeconomic implications of environmental determinism” several years before Zola “began publishing what were called ‘naturalistic novels’” (918), and Harris argues that “at its core, ‘Life’ is clearly naturalistic” (Davis 28). Davis’s kinship with the Gothic tradition has been largely ignored. Rose, Pfaelzer, and Harris note in passing that Davis wrote Gothic stories. For an analysis of Gothic tropes in “The Locked Chamber” and “A Story of Life Insurance,” see Harris, “The Anatomy of Complicity.”
6. Since the publication of Derrida’s Specters of Marx, scholars have examined how spectral figures provide a call for justice. See Gordon, Ghostly Matters. For the ghost as a potentially transformative figure in women’s writing, see Harde, “At Rest Now,” and Carpenter and Kolmar, Haunting the House of Fictions.
7. See Freud, “The Uncanny” (1919).
8. In her Peterson’s fiction, Davis often uses male narrators who are associated with authoritative and presumably objective cultural discourses such as law, medicine, and business.
9. Likely targeting Collins’s *The Woman in White*, H. L. Manse critiqued the sensation novel for “preaching to the nerves instead judgment.”

10. As Ellis argues, the Gothic explores “the home as a place of danger and imprisonment” (x).

11. John shifts from “this boy” (127) to “my open-hearted boy” (129) and continues to use versions of “my boy” for most of the narrative (130, 204, 206, 207, 426, 427, 430).

12. I thank Sharon M. Harris for this point about Robert.
Frank Norris portrays darkness as an apt metaphor for the human condition in his 1892 poem “Crepusculum.” Written and published while Norris was a student at the University of California, Berkeley, “Crepusculum” subverts the staid metaphor of life’s passage through the light of day, culminating in twilight and death. Norris embraces instead the melancholy, fantasy, and anguish of the night as a more fitting reflection of human experience. Challenging sentimental conventions that rendered life as light, he proclaims:

O Blind! The Day’s not yet, this Life of ours
Is still the night’s slow retinue of hours;
It’s sorrows, nightmares, phantasms of shade;
It’s pleasures, dreams, that only form to fade (5–8)

The poetic expression of twilight imagery and phantasmatic forms of darkness to convey mortal trials, motivations, and desires increasingly came to overshadow Norris’s literary art and philosophy. The image of anxious figures that “blindly grope” through the night sets the scene for the exploration of Naturalistic themes in the mode of the Gothic romance (“Crepusculum” 9). Twilight imagery was not an aberration in fin de siècle culture. Indeed, crepusculum thematics were diffused throughout literature, art, music, and philosophy. In the reactionary treatise, Degeneration (1892), with which Norris was familiar, Max Nordau pronounced a prevailing “twilight mood which finds expression . . . in all sorts of odd aesthetic fashions,” including Naturalism (43). Norris’s creative application of darkness can also be seen as a broader manifestation of the nineteenth century’s “extraordinary fascination with night,” and the evolving genre of the nocturne that
proved a source of enchantment, sensationalism, and consternation from the 1870s onward (Sharpe 81). Art historian Alexander Nemerov proclaims that Norris “favored turning out the lights,” depicting an “impenetrable darkness [that] represented a primordial sensuality, violence, and death” (48, 43). In accord with Nemerov, I suggest that Norris’s attentiveness to nighttime settings and themes reflects broader cultural strains, including the local context of artistic production in Northern California in the 1890s. Norris’s pre-occupation with the bewitching nature of the moonlight and the formidable impression of darkness in his 1899 novel *McTeague*, demonstrates the influence of tropes from the contemporary art world and the Gothic, especially those that confront mysterious forces and the revelation of atavistic, avaricious, and grotesque characters.

From the astronomically inspired landscape of the California mines to the temporal vistas of Polk Street, Norris employs the symbolic qualities of the nocturne to frame his tale of brutish degeneration. The nocturnal landscape, a predominant Gothic convention according to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, is a significant feature of *McTeague*’s aesthetic (*Gothic Conventions* 9). The novel opens with McTeague’s recollection of his occupation as a car-boy at the Big Dipper Mine in Placer County, California. In daylight, he reminisces about years spent trundling heavy cars of ore in and out of the mine’s subterranean tunnel, as if birthed by the ominous pit itself. As a structural framework, McTeague emerges from the darkness, and it is back to this darkness that he descends. Charting a marital relationship christened by ether to McTeague’s monstrous and lycanthropic metamorphosis under the moon, the plot’s tragedy is underscored by the deepening darkness of the night. Norris cultivates the dreamlike and hypnotic aura of the nocturne to capture the mysterious power of nature, man, and the city, and to compound his own Naturalistic brand of romance.

In “A Plea for Romantic Fiction,” Norris advocates for romance as a type of writing that explores the abnormal, the exceptional, and the troubling (*Novels and Essays* 1168). The trope of darkness, typical of the Gothic novel, has historically been used to explore psychological perturbation, including the aberrant depths and duality of the human self (Sedgwick, *Gothic Conventions* 11). In *McTeague*, darkness is utilized symbolically to explore ethical dualism or the contest over evil and atavistic reversion. Reimagining Norris’s fiction in relationship to strains in American art and urban fiction that exploited the polyvalent symbolism of twilight and darkness for sentiment and sensation casts the author as an ardent purveyor of the Gothic romance that confronts “the black, unsearched penetralia of the soul of man” (Norris, “Plea” 1169).
Critics have located Norris in the tradition of the American Gothic or dark romance, typically situating him in relation to his literary predecessors. Susan Prothro McFatter discerns a “gruesomely ironic Poesque humor” in *McTeague* and argues that Norris’s Gothic parody is amplified in the “unnatural environments” of the stultifying dental parlors and the womb-like caverns of Placer County (119, 132). The novel is envisioned as a tale of the grotesque and arabesque for the distinctive urban and desert landscapes of the West Coast. Eric Carl Link perceives Norris’s Naturalist romance evolving from writers such as Nathaniel Hawthorne, aptly capturing the extraordinary, “epistemological uncertainty,” and the monstrous (*Vast* 66–67). McTeague has been described as an alienated and even Satanic protagonist, traversing the topology of the “city of dreadful night,” the dark tunnels of the mines, and inimical desert terrain, suggesting the ability to read Norris as a proponent of both urban and ecological Gothic (Link, *Vast* 145; McFatter 131). In the foreboding threat of the “morgue wagon,” the “apparition of a white-lipped woman” recoiling with horror, and the characters’ night terrors and phantom visions of bloated corpses, Norris utilizes familiar Gothic trappings, while developing the symbolism of darkness and moonlight to render the natural forces and spiritual horrors of degeneration (10, 175, 189).

The form of the romance permitted competing philosophical perspectives to be suspended and left unreconciled. It allowed for the exploration of liminal and mysterious forces that could at once be justified by the discourses of science, religion, and the vagaries of fantasy. Norris’s repeated return to the imagistic and figurative potentialities of night and the nocturnal provided a mutable symbol through which the dualities of evolutionary science and religious sin, enchantment and horror could be fully explored. Deviating from previous critical inquiries that have traced the literary antecedents of Norris’s Gothicism, this essay advances a consideration of the influence of the nocturne in visual culture and focuses more explicitly on local and contemporaneous iterations of darkness, twilight, and the fantastic.

Norris has been described as a “painterly novelist” who couples expressive flair with an ultra-realistic, shockingly surgical style (Graham 25; “Mr Norris’s” 24). In what Don Graham terms “aesthetic documentation,” Norris sutured detail from art, literature, and sculpture, as well as psychiatry, medicine, and newsworthy events (3). Despite the fact that Norris did not pursue his career as a painter, Graham and William Dillingham have made a persuasive case for his indebtedness to art and his lifelong “aesthetic habit of mind” (Graham 5; Dillingham 6, 107–8). That he should draw from the wealth of visual imagery and nocturnal genres representing the night therefore seems plausible. The influence of the transatlantic phenomenon of the
nocturne in painting and illustration, as well as its appropriation by artists of the San Francisco Bay Area and Monterey Peninsula, provides a context for Norris’s Gothic romance.

In 1897, the same year he completed *McTeague*, Norris praised his artist-acquaintance Charles Rollo Peters in an article for *The Wave* titled, “A California Artist: Charles Rollo Peters and His Pictures of Monterey Moonlights.” Here Norris promoted Peters’s nocturnal landscapes and nuanced depictions of the moon’s mutating phases of luminosity. The artist was a San Francisco native who was studying at the Académie Julian in Paris when Norris enrolled there in 1887. Like Norris, Peters was trained in the French academic tradition. However, his work displayed an indebtedness to James McNeill Whistler, an artist of “moonlights” or “night pieces,” later more formally termed nocturnes. In 1890 Peters moved back to San Francisco, settling in Monterey in 1895. In the 1890s, the tonal style became dominant in art communities of the region. Exhibiting the influence of Whistler and landscape painter George Inness, its advocates—including Peters—kept precise records of moonrises (Jones 5). In the 1870s, Whistler’s nocturnes had a transatlantic impact on the art community when his depiction of London twilight in the painting, *Nocturne in Black and Gold: The Falling Rocket*, was castigated by the critic John Ruskin. Whistler defended his unconventional style, which strayed from descriptive realism in its broad swaths of dark paint and intangible outlines and subject matter, in the 1878 legal trial *Whistler v. Ruskin*. Following the embellished and theatrical trial, *The Falling Rocket* was sold to an American attorney in 1892. The painting toured the United States in 1893, resulting in a popularizing of the nocturne despite pointed critical attack (Siewert 39; Sharpe 105).

Contradicting the exalted view of California as the “Land of Sunshine,” tonalistic art flourished in Northern California, adopting the dark rhetoric of Whistler, as well as the foggy atmosphere of the Bay Area (Nemerov 43). As art historian Wanda Corn explains, tonalists exploited “evocative half-lights, bathing their intimate scenes in the light of dusk, dawn, or mist” (1–2). Their works ranged from murky and moody to the night’s shimmering luminosity. Monochromatic color palettes included a gamut of grays, a spectrum of brown from “snuff-brown” to “tobacco juice” and even “pea soup” and rich cobalt blue to represent the night’s shades (Corn 3). Tonalist-inspired painters depicted the fog, haze, sunset, twilight, and moonlight of the region, emphasizing its melancholic qualities, romance, and mysterious nocturnal landscapes. The fog and windswept dunes of turn-of-the-century San Francisco provided the atmosphere for Norris the painterly author to
set the scene of a Gothic romance and express the “lugubrious airs” of the city’s inhabitants (*McTeague* 5).

A radical tonalist palette invokes the mood for *McTeague*’s harrowing tale of decline and degeneration. In accordance with this atmospheric aesthetic, Norris renounced the gaiety of daylight, abandoning radiant sunshine for a more melancholy and increasingly oppressive backdrop. The muted colors of San Francisco foreshadow the novel’s somber turn of events, shifting decidedly in the second half of the novel to scenes set in the inky blackness of night and the blinding pallor of the desert. As Dillingham has suggested, Norris’s descriptions “vividly capture the moment, but generally in subdued shades, in shadows and light, in black and white” (19). Though he claims that Norris’s artistic training induced him to “fear the riotous potentialities of color,” it seems equally likely that Norris’s writing was inspired by tonalist trends and the haunting nighttime imagery of his contemporaries (Dillingham 18).

The bleak palette of the text is established in Norris’s opening description of McTeague’s monotonous and tedious routine. The “thick gray soup” consumed at the car conductor’s coffee joint, the cheap tobacco smoke from McTeague’s porcelain pipe, and the stale steam beer he gorges himself upon represent the diffused tonalities of the protagonist’s environment (5). These doleful colors blend seamlessly into Norris’s depiction of the San Francisco Bay. During their early courtship, McTeague calls on Trina, inviting her for a walk in view of the “dirty, muddy shore of the San Francisco Bay” (48). The landscape traversed by McTeague and his soon-to-be betrothed is illustrated with tonalist shades. Norris portrays “immense salt flats, here and there broken by winding streams of black water” and “strangely discolored . . . by enormous stains of orange yellow” (48). The pair spy the Golden Gate, “a bleak cutting in the sand-hills” (49). Across this solitary landscape, “the sky hung low and brown” (49). Exploiting the mists, windswept dunes, and snuff, umber, and brown colors of the tonalists, Norris sets the rather lamentable scene for the couple’s first, consensual, kiss. From the muted colors of McTeague’s Sunday respite, the car conductor’s coffee joint, to the stiflingly oppressive quarters of the Dental Parlors, Norris traces the dentist’s (d)evolving relationship in dismal hues, culminating in the funereal wedding ceremony. The somber landscape foreshadows the decline of the characters’ marriages, civility, and humanity, and the half-light of the day transposes into the fantasy and grotesquerie of the night.

In *McTeague*, Norris betrays a particular attentiveness to the temporal rhythms of Polk Street, employing his often-used refrain “from dawn to dark” to trace the shifting patterns of light and his characters’ metamor-
phases. He portrays the cyclical panorama of San Francisco, and the manner in which it lives, breathes, and sleeps. Lunar phases and the waning of the light strongly influence the characters’ emotions, instincts, and desires. His anthropomorphized Polk Street, much like the slumbering San Francisco in the posthumously published *Vandover and the Brute* (1914), awakes about seven o’clock (7). The dawn hours are populated by “heavy-eyed night clerks” and roundsmen “returning to the precinct police station to make their night report” (8). As the street’s routine subtly fades into supper hour, “one by one a multitude of lights, from the demoniac glare of the druggists’ windows to the dazzling blue whiteness of the electric globes,” grow thick until, finally, “Lights were extinguished” (9). The action of the novel predominantly takes place in the “night’s slow retinue of hours,” whence the characters’ dreams and nightmares are enacted. Befitting the paradigm of the literary and artistic nocturne, Norris employs the deepening mystery of the moonlight and ominous darkness for developing the plot of his Gothic romance. Moonlight and darkness are used to enhance McTeague’s degeneration and bestial transformation, which reads simultaneously as whimsical fairytale and Gothic horror. Norris captures Polk Street’s nocturnal habits and twilight manias, and traces McTeague’s movement from dormant creature to nocturnal predator. The thematic of darkness is employed to emphasize themes of instinctual desire, sexual awakening, obsessive-compulsive behavior, and brutish degeneration.

Norris’s direct relationship with Charles Rollo Peters, as expressed by his interview with the painter for “A California Artist,” provides evidence of the author’s familiarity with nocturnes. Studying twilight effects and depicting the poetry of the night, Ambrose Bierce titled Peters the “Prince of Darkness” (Shields 72). Recognized by Norris and art critics in the East as a “quintessentially Californian” painter, Peters contemplated the moon, the coastline, and the relics of Spanish colonial architecture by night, sketching in black and white, and revivifying the somnambulistic images in his studio the following day (Shields 68). Despite Peters’s association with the blackness of the night, his nocturnes were also rendered in hues of blue, brown, and violet. In the article, “A California Artist,” Norris’s imagination is piqued by Peters “vari-tinted” moonlights, from the low, red moon to the yellow moon of the afternoon and the pure white moon of midnight (9). The enchantment of these subtle harmonies stands in contrast with the more jarring element of Peters’s work; the strong, sonorous notes created by expansive sweeps of somber paint. Norris celebrates Peters’s use of “enormous flat masses of shadow.” He is particularly awed by one painting hanging on the wall of Peters’s studio that depicts “a single huge broad ‘note,’ as it were, simple, strong, conveying but a single impression, direct as
a blow.” Peters’s moonlights, “painted very broad and flat, as though with Brobdignag brushes,” suggest an oppressive aesthetic for the deterministic rendering of brute natural forces and underscore the fatalism and tragedy of McTeague (see figure 1).

A nocturnal creature, McTeague emerges from the darkness of the mine as a young car-boy to become a ponderous and lethargic dentist, whose manias, wits, and faculties, when awakened, become increasingly sharpened at night. From the beginning of the novel, McTeague is associated with sleep. His dental parlors double as a bedroom, and the whole place “exhaled a mingled odor of bedding, creosote, and ether” (7). Pivotal plot points occur during the twilight and nighttime hours, including deadly and transformative events that compel characters to their fatal ends. Trina learns of the winning lottery ticket upon the family’s return from the evening vaudeville show. Zerkow murders Maria and takes a deathly plunge into the river, and Trina is visited twice at the schoolroom by McTeague under the shadowy cover of darkness. McTeague takes a job as a night watchman patrolling the city under the moon, and as he steals away across Placer County, he works the night shift at the Big Dipper Mine. It is at night, as McTeague moves south across the desert, that he becomes both hunter and hunted.

Norris is attuned to the potential of the nocturne to represent themes of vice and degeneration, but his work also registers an awareness of the poly-
valent symbolism of moonlights to represent reverie, mysticism, and innocence. In *McTeague*, Norris charts this spectrum of darkness and illumination, from sentimentality to sinister fairy tale to the deeper, darker shadows that harbor something much more foreboding. Norris’s dark artistry becomes most effective when the atmospheric effects represent the internal threat of the blackness of the human soul and reveal the biological pessimism of atavism or reversion.

During the nineteenth century, representations of moonlight represented innocence, virtue, purity, and the sublimity of nature, even as writers and artists probed the shadowy urban underworld. In *McTeague*, Norris addresses this mutable symbolism, if only to satirize the picturesque vision of pure “moonlights.” He presents this innocuous vision of the moon in the burgeoning relationships between Trina and McTeague and between Miss Baker and Old Grannis. During McTeague’s bungled trip to the theater with the Sieppes, a female performer, standing in the footlights, begins to sing: “Oh, how happy I will be, / When my darling’s face I’ll see; / Oh, tell him for to meet me in the moonlight, / Down where the golden lilies bloom” (59). Norris describes this chorus, intimating the budding romance between Trina and McTeague, as of a “feeble originality,” suggesting his distaste for what seems to be a maudlin and overly sentimentalized use of moonlight imagery. As Norris explains in “A Plea for Romantic Fiction,” “It is very easy to get the impression that Romance must be an affair of cloaks and daggers, or moonlight and golden hair,” but the true Romance is a “more serious business” (1165). It includes not merely the stage settings and “clap traps,” but the more pervasive and unified symbols that work in tandem with the mysteries and machinations of man’s soul and biology (“Plea” 1165).

The superficial aura of nocturnal enchantment is woven throughout Trina and McTeague’s budding relationship. McTeague compares the long hours he passed alone with Trina in the dental parlors to “all the charm of secret appointments and stolen meetings under the moon” (20). This ethereal illusion comes immediately after the couple’s marriage as they pass the evening looking out into the darkened street and watching “the moon coming up over the glass roof of the huge public baths” (141). Some nights, the pair would even “look at Mars or at the moon through the street telescopes” (112). Evoking (while modernizing) images of serene contemplation and the divinity of nature, such as Caspar David Friedrich’s *Man and Woman Contemplating the Moon* (1824), Norris presents nostalgic pictures of the couple merely to shatter their sentimental rapture as the character’s inner darkness takes physical form.

As Norris undermines the innocent enchantment of the moonlight through
the course of his naturalist novel, he also perverts the image of the night as fairyland. In Whistler’s “Ten O’Clock” lecture, delivered in London in 1885, the painter described the moment “when the evening mist clothes the riverside with poetry, as with a veil . . . and the whole city hangs in the heavens, and faireyland is before us.” The metaphorical use of fairyland to describe hazy starlight and twinkling lights was heightened with the widespread development of electric light and its attendant use as public spectacle. Communication technology scholar Carolyn Marvin has demonstrated the ways in which electric light was intentionally deployed to create architectural entertainment and adorn performers’ costumes, manifesting a fairy tale environment (165). In *McTeague*, however, the lights are “dazzling” and “demonic,” and the electric-light pole looks like “an immense grasshopper” (9, 49). The blinding lights and insectile infrastructure, as well as crudely lit gas globes, set the stage for *McTeague’s* macabre fairytale characters, immersing the reader in the scene of a Gothic romance. Norris distorts fairy tale tropes to plot McTeague’s degeneration.

Trina’s innocent and striking features conjure Alfred Tennyson’s Sleeping Beauty from his extended poem “The Day-Dream” (1842), a fitting parallel as McTeague subdues the girl with ether in his dental chair. Trina’s pale earlobes and bloodless and anemic face peer out from “heaps and heaps of blue-black coils and braids, a royal crown of swarthy bands” (17). Describing Sleeping Beauty’s luscious locks, Tennyson writes: “Languidly ever; and, amid / Her full black ringlets downward roll’d” (245). It is this passive beauty, asleep in the dental chair, that awakens McTeague’s infernal desires. Like the fairytale prince, finding the girl “absolutely without defense,” and his desire aroused, he sees the potential to break the spell with one charming kiss (*McTeague* 22). Instead, the dentist kisses her “grossly, full on the mouth” (22). Unlike the prince, whom Tennyson describes as “lighter footed than the fox,” McTeague experiences a disturbing animalistic metamorphosis, “the sudden panther leap of the animal, lips drawn, fangs aflash, hideous, monstrous” (245; 21). He senses again this atavistic mutation and second self as he is invited to sleep in Trina’s room, “his lady’s bower” (46). As he surveys the room by candlelight, he feels “hideously out of place,” an “intruder” with “enormous feet,” “colossal bones,” and “crude, brutal gestures” (46). In contrast to the prince who steals agilely past the bleached skeletons of nameless failed suitors to awaken the kingdom, McTeague fears that he will “crush the little bedstead like an egg-shell” (46). His intimidating size and lumbering movements in Trina’s diminutive chamber portend his moonlight transformation into a grotesque figure with lethal aggression.

When Trina’s knowledge and desire is finally awakened, she is aware of “a spell, a witchery, ruled by chance alone, inexplicable a fairy queen en-
amored of a clown with ass’s ears” (53). Here Norris references Titania, the queen of the fairies, and Nick Bottom, whose head is hideously transformed into an ass, from William Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. An intertextual inspiration here may be Henry Fuseli’s painting *Titania and Bottom* (c. 1790), wherein the characters are illuminated in the enchanting rays of moonlight against a deep, flat, mass of black shadow. Like Fuseli’s other Gothic nightmares, in the lower right-hand corner of this painting he features a hooded figure holding a menacing changeling, and the sensationalist elements in this image invoke the macabre process of transformation.

*McTeague’s* storybook beast again emerges out of the shadows at the kindergarten to demand more money from Trina. Set against his enormous jawbone and square-cut head, “The moonlight made deep black shadows in the shrunken cheeks” (199). As McTeague passes through the courtyard, the moonlight rests “like a layer of snow upon his massive shoulders,” and, with a “vicious twinkle coming into his small eyes,” he assumes the posture of the trickster wolf of folktale lore (199). McTeague innocently implores, “I’m starving. I’ve got nowhere to sleep. Will you give me some money, or something to eat? Will you let me in?” (199). Trina fancies that she saw the “brassy glint” in the eyes of the cunning wolf, perhaps echoing Charles Perrault’s *Little Red Riding Hood* or the “The Story of the Three Little Pigs” from Joseph Jacobs’s 1890 *English Fairy Tales* (199). In these sinister descriptions of McTeague, a late nineteenth-century readership might draw a parallel with the devious wolf of Gustave Doré’s illustrations. As a dark artist of fantasy, gothic, and the grotesque, Doré illustrated mid-nineteenth-century reprints of fairy tales and fables. His depictions of the wolf included the intimidating form of the beast in his intimate encounter with Little Red Riding Hood and in *The Wolf in Shepherd’s Clothing*. Doré, inspiring Henry James and Lafcadio Hearn, was known for broadly employing the mystical and foreboding qualities of moonlight and shadow in his artistic interpretation of the languid Sleeping Beauty; *Jaufré the Knight’s* dark woods; the “mysterious moonlit nights” from the legends of King Arthur in Tennyson’s *Idylls of the King*; the forest glade in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; the gloomy environs of London; the moonlight visitation of Poe’s raven; and a sketch exhibited in San Francisco in the 1870s titled *Moonlight* (Zafran 99, 143–74). Though toying with the allure of pure moonlight’s enchantment and fantasy, Norris draws increasingly from a visual archive of sinister imagery that provides a more malleable creative and experimental atmosphere through which to explore themes of duality, transformation, and the primeval nature of his characters. His work strides away from Realism into the shadowy territory of Gothic Naturalism, exploring libidinal desires, neuroticism, violence, and the dissolution of the civilized self. It is in the dialectic
of fairyland and nightmare, light and darkness, that Norris’s grotesque figures emerge. In his painterly sets, Norris indulges in the dark single broad note, “direct as a blow,” that can represent ruinous descent and the inimical force of nature.

Purveyors of nocturnes and night imagery often assailed “the boundaries of realist art” and expressed “greater frankness” about themes such as squalid poverty and sexuality (Sharpe 7). In contrast to the bright exposure of daylight, the urban Gothic plumbed the depths of darkness to reveal a hidden history of city life, depicting a rogue’s gallery of river thieves, fallen women, drunkenness, and beastly debauchery. The dark side of life in works such as Helen Campbell’s *Darkness and Daylight; or, Lights and Shadows of New York Life*, was incongruous with the world of sunshine or the moonlight fairyland of the illuminated city. Revealing the dark depths of criminal circuits and tenement districts that lay as if concealed under the surface of the city was something that “only a Zola could describe deliberately” (Campbell 102). With Zolaesque brutality, Norris extended the thematics of darkness to exploit the tropes of the insidious gaslit city to “lay bare the fearful mysteries of darkness in the metropolis” (Foster 69). As author Geraldine Bonner claimed of Norris, “He is a romanticist of the savage type . . . He likes the darkling by-ways of the Barbary Coast” (4). According to Bonner, “He writes fierce, dark tales of the lawless beings who dwell in tenements . . . The haunted inner chambers of Chinatown, thick with opium smoke and dim with mystery, appeal to his sense of the horrible” (4). In fact Norris did seem to exploit the lurid potentialities of the dark city, melding both mysterious, fantastical imagery and the urban Gothic in his grim naturalistic portrait.

Attuned to Polk Street’s waxing and waning rhythms, the action of *McTeague*’s plot takes place predominantly between the hours of dusk and dawn. The characters form nocturnal habits, developing into veritable twilight manias. For McTeague, Trina, and Zerkow, the nighttime hours bring sleeplessness, instinctual desire, and a tumultuous flow of thoughts. At night, McTeague “lay awake for hours under the thick blankets of the bedlounge, staring upward into the darkness, tormented with the idea” of his beloved (19). “Night after night he lay broad awake” as Trina also “lay broad awake for hours in her little, gaily painted bed . . . torturing herself with doubts and questions” (52). The characters are encouraged to stay awake far beyond dusk as they learn about the winning lottery ticket, and soon the inhabitants of the Dental Parlors and the tenement-like quarters of the city hauntingly “toiled and planned and fretted” away the hours of the night (87). The obsessive-compulsive nature of the characters, as described by Karen F. Jacobson, is intensified by darkness, urging instinctual, hereditary, and pri-
mordial traits to the fore, and suggesting the operation of some external, lunar pathology. At night, Maria would wake to “find Zerkow gone from the bed, and would see him burrowing into some corner by the light of his dark-lantern” (137). Zerkow’s obsessive search for the hundred pieces of gold plate culminates one dark night as he slits Maria’s throat and jumps into the river, clutching a sack of tin pots and pans. Like the urban exposés that lifted the roofs from urban dwellings for the voyeuristic reader to peer in, or those quasi-journalists that shone light or a magnesium flash into dark corners to unveil hidden horrors, Norris allows us to glimpse the characters’ own interior maladies at night. Mirroring the labyrinthine “gritty maze of back yards and broken sheds” of the city, like the sordid wilderness of Van-dover and the Brute’s San Francisco, the psychological disorders of the characters develop, and their dark, second nature begins to take control (Mc-Teague 184).

Norris writes, “When it is night and dark and one is awake and alone, one’s thoughts take the color of the surroundings; become gloomy, sombre, and very dismal” (190). The characters’ thoughts and actions begin to adapt to the characteristics of the night as the nocturnal predator becomes dominant. McTeague’s atavistic sensibility sharpens as he becomes a night watchman, then as he stalks Trina, emerging out of the shadows like a fairytale beast. By the light of a gas jet without a globe, and the yellow eyes of a black cat, McTeague appears and with “ape-like agility” beats his wife to death (205). This scene is reminiscent of the “ape-like fury” by which Robert Louis Stevenson’s Mr. Hyde tramples Sir Danvers Carew on a night “brilliantly lit by the full moon” (37). Like Mr. Hyde, McTeague’s animal nature begins to consistently “growl for license,” and he becomes “the quarry of mankind, hunted, houseless, a known murderer, thrall to the gallows” (Stevenson 129). Banished to nocturnal shadows, McTeague resumes his occupation as a chuck tender on the night shift at the Big Dipper Mine. In this role, he can only look upon the mountains at night, under a moon “very low, and canted on her side like a galleon foundering” (214), evoking the nautical scene in Albert Pinkham Ryder’s 1887 Moonlight.

As McTeague flees San Francisco, we see Norris deploying night imagery in a shift from an urban to ecological Gothic mode. The inimical desert landscape resembles a tonalist nocturne as suspense builds in the narrativization of predator and prey. In the gathering twilight, Norris describes the “blue-gray shimmer of the moonlight,” the “browned and broken flanks” of the Panamint hills lying “quiet and familiar under the moon” (227). Overtly expressing his painterly style in these final desert scenes, Norris depicts the stars burning “slowly into the cool dark purple of the sky” (235). Even the scorched landscape of the desert, agonizingly traversed
by Mac and Marcus, is cast in the rich dark blues of Peters’ nocturnes, a
color scheme that would be echoed in Frederic Remington’s desert noc-
turnes such as *Moonlight, Wolf* (c. 1909) in the decade following the publi-
cation of *McTeague* (208).

In the nocturnal territory of the desert, McTeague’s animal instincts are
heightened. He questions, “What lower faculty was it that roused his sus-
picion, that drove him out into the night a score of times between dark and
dawn, his head in the air, his eyes and ears keenly alert?” (215). Throughout
the novel, Norris associates the growling, gnawing, and biting McTeague
with the dog and the wolf. Whereas Vandover’s lycanthropy has been ex-
plained as a symptom of “general paralysis of the insane,” *McTeague*’s beastly
imagery is suggestive of werewolf lore’s corporeal transformation on moon-
lit nights (Pizer, *Norris* 36–38). Adhering to the characteristics of the Gothic
monster described in Sabine Baring-Gould’s nineteenth-century *Book of
Werewolves*, McTeague also betrays the sunken eyes, broad and hairy hands,
the jutting jaw of the carnivora, inflamed natural passions, and the intense
cruelty that characterize the lycanthrope (6). In *McTeague*, Norris may be
instituting lycanthropy as a metaphor for the power of nature.

Norris’s nocturnal landscapes evoke the ecoGothic’s dismantling of the
binary between the human and natural worlds, and represents humans “at
the mercy of larger forces of nature” (Smith and Hughes 6). In *McTeague*,
the sentimental moonshine and the glaring artificial light of the Brobding-
nag gold tooth are counterposed with the immensity and enigmatic power
of the night and its lunar rhythms. Civilization is rendered oblique, trans-
figured, and the evil forces that come into play during the struggle for sur-
vival come to the fore. As James L. Caron and Markku Salmela point out,
in these boundless representations of nature, “the human being is made part
of the landscape,” and the environment is no longer “conquered by culture”
(Caron 371; Salmela 200, 206). In the darkness, McTeague develops the
senses of the predator, and like the Indian who is represented as “a forlorn
and solitary point of red, lost in the immensity of the surrounding white
blur of the desert,” the “civilized” characters of *McTeague* all similarly “van-
ish” (to use the late nineteenth-century rhetoric applied to Native Ameri-
can peoples) predominantly into darkness (216). In the stark blankness of
the night and of Death Valley, the dazzingly obverse environment of de-
privation, there can be determined a “crisis of representation” characteristic
of the ecoGothic whereby the realm of the human cannot be distinguished
from the forces of nature (Smith and Hughes 2).

Norris’s attentiveness to the night sky as fitting scenery for his Naturalist
ideology and to narratives that blurred the lines between Realism and ro-
mance is also evident in *Vandover and the Brute*. In both novels, alchemis-
tic night skies overshadow ultimately inconsequential figures. For example, on board the Mazatlan, Vandover surveys the sun setting “behind the black horizon in an immense blood-red nebula of mist” (119). Directly preceding the demise of the ship, and the violent end of several of its passengers, Vandover perceives the smoke from the steamer hanging “like a great veil of crêpe,” with a “sickly half-light . . . spread out between the sea and the heavens,” a “prolonged minor note” in the air (127). Upon the approach of the rescue ship, the Cape Horner, “a couple of rockets left a long trail of yellow against the night . . . and presently Vandover made out her lights, two glowing spots moving upon the darkness, like the eyes of some nocturnal sea-monster” (146). A nineteenth-century readership, likely familiar with the nocturne in its various artistic forms, as well as salient images like those of Whistler’s, may distinguish the transgressive potential signaled by Norris’s dark sets to confront the liminality and mystery of the human condition as governed by natural or supernatural precepts.

The nocturnal aesthetic expressed by James McNeill Whistler and Northern Californian artists such as Charles Rollo Peters; the visual culture of fairyland fantasy; and purveyors of the Gothic therefore arguably shape the contours of Norris’s Gothic Naturalism. The cloaking of precise, descriptive detail in these works of art produces the mysterious and transformative effects that Norris identifies in Romantic fiction. As John Siewert suggests of Whistler’s art, the “essential subject” of the nocturne is the “threshold between description and subtle dissolution,” paralleling the tension in literary Naturalism between Realism and the more imaginative and symbolic projections of Romanticism (47). McTeague similarly suspends the tension between the forces of science and sinful possession, hereditary inheritance and infernal agency, biology and the supernatural, thus complicating the reader’s attempt to strictly categorize the text in the genres of Naturalism or American Gothic. Painting the dark imagery of the night, Norris transforms the commonplace through the culturally familiar thematics of the nocturne, wrenching the characters from the everyday into the mystical realm of the moonlight to chart the “downward and duskward” descent of McTeague and his grotesque extended family (Nordau 425).

Notes

1. All references to McTeague come from the Norton edition.
2. Although published after Norris’s death, the novel was drafted between 1894 and 1895.
3. This perspective is also perhaps expressed in Norris’s critique of Romantic Japanese poet and fellow Les Jeunes associate Yone Noguchi, whose dreamy mus
nings and philosophical contemplations of soul and spirit found expression in poems such as “The Invisible Night” and the later verse inspired by Whistler, “On ‘Nocturne, Blue and Gold, Old Battersea Bridge.’” See Graham (76).

In his 1903 essay “The Terrible and Tragic in Fiction,” Jack London questions the negative critical assessments of what he designates “fear-exciting tales” and “terror tales” written in the Gothic mode (Portable 468). London observes that such narratives are caught in a “paradoxical tangle” where readers (and editors) privately relish these stories but publicly disparage their aesthetic merit. Discussing Edgar Allan Poe’s career most extensively and referencing the writings of Charles Dickens, Robert Louis Stevenson, and others, he observes that various works in the Gothic tradition have enthralled legions of readers for generations. London asks, “Is it true that the complex, self-conscious people of to-day do not delight in the things which inspire terror? or is it true that they are ashamed to make known their delight?” (470). He asserts the latter is the case. “The public,” London claims, “is afraid of fear-exciting tales and hypocritically continues to enjoy them” (472). Readers and editors tend to comply with the protocols of propriety associated with elevated literary tastes. They discount the visceral imagery, primal terror, and forbidden desires endemic to Gothicism.

These disavowals are not surprising. The disorder, irrationalism, and divergent sexuality of Gothic fiction are blatant threats to decorum, logic, and hetero-normativity. While these contrived literary preferences enable public displays of acceptably sophisticated and reasonably composed judgments, the wild trappings of Gothicism lack the cultural capital reserved for well-mannered “daytime” stories—preferably focused on the stylishly shod and economically comfy set. After all, the Gothic’s baseness and perversion, its focus on raw lust, blood sucking, murder, and vengeance typify the extreme cravings and conditions the cultivated reader should be well above.

“A person reads such a story,” London writes, “lays it down with a shudder,
and says: ‘It makes my blood run cold. I never want to read anything like that again.’ Yet he or she will read something like that again, and again, and yet again, and return to read them over again. Talk with the average man or woman of the reading public and it will be found that they have read all, or nearly all, of the terrible and horrible tales which have been written. Also, they will shiver, express a dislike for such tales, and then proceed to discuss them with a keenness and understanding as remarkable as it is surprising” (470). Socially tolerable subjects frequently fail to quicken what Lon
don termed “the deeps” of our being, while forthright depictions of fear more readily arouse our primal psychic nerve. “Deep down in the roots of the race is fear,” London argues. “It came first into the world, and it was the dominant emotion in the primitive world. To-day, for that matter, it remains the most firmly seated of the emotions” (470). Gothicism offered London an efficiently compelling means to dramatize fear and explore other crucial aspects of human psychology—sadistic tendencies, extreme aggression, survival instincts, the desire to dominate—and various perceptual and moral distortions born of isolation, obsession, egoism, and our evolutionary legacy. It also gave him the chance to address mounting anxieties of his era: the genocidal consequences of imperialism, the rapacity of capitalism, and the post-Darwinian status of Homo sapiens.

In many respects, the Gothic itself is a fleetingly spectral and grafted presence in London’s work, but as Jay Williams decisively documents in Author under Sail, ghostly imagery and references are important features of the author’s corpus from the beginning of his career. “In story after story,” Williams points out, “the Northland—that place where London found himself, he says—is pictured as a graveyard, a ghostly landscape filled with dread” (“Desk”). Closely studied, much of his purported “adventure” writing is creepy. London splices Gothic elements into his writing to enhance its thematic scope and contour its sensational effects. And readers sensitive to his deliberate use of Gothic tropes are better prepared to gauge the rhetorical strategies he uses to sharpen thematic tensions. They will also be in a better position to enjoy his work, for London unabashedly strove to reach a wide audience, and the genre was an ideal vehicle to enlighten and entertain—even if readers were reluctant to admit their enthusiasm.

Jerrold E. Hogle acknowledges that from its beginnings the Gothic has been a “highly unstable genre” (1). In the preface to the 1765 second edition of his The Castle of Otranto, Horace Walpole urges a synthesis of the imaginative and probable forms of romance (Hogle 1). The absence of abbeys or castles in London’s writing may deter some from seeing his Gothicism, but among the genre’s commonly used settings, Hogle lists locales the author commonly uses: “primeval frontier,” “island,” “urban underworld,” and
“factory.” Within these spaces, “or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the char-
acters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story” (2). Similarly, London’s characters are frequently haunted or controlled by their pasts, often in the form of an inner Darwinian other—a vestigial pres-
ence that enigmatically shapes behavior. This atavistic other lurks within, dis-aligned but embedded mysteriously within (and beneath) a conscious and rational ego. Though this essay focuses specifically on how London uses Gothic tropes to amplify his Naturalism in “An Odyssey of the North,” “Love of Life,” The Call of the Wild, “The White Silence,” John Barleycorn, and The Sea-Wolf; Gothicism pervades his canon’s evolutionary emphasis, even if only a handful of his works might pass as conventional Gothic tales.

More attuned to Naturalism’s sociopolitical Realism, though, most crit-
ics are apt to gloss over the varied Gothic elements that London incorpo-
rates into this work. This inattention is somewhat peculiar because London’s praxis is generally aligned with one of the formative explanations of Natu-
ralism offered by Frank Norris. Naturalism, to Norris, is a synthesis of Re-
alism and Romanticism in which writers abide by the factual circumstances of physical reality while exploring human subjects in extremis. Norris asserts in “Zola as Romantic Writer” that Naturalism departs from the normal and everyday in its depictions of “the vast and terrible drama” (Literary Criticism 72) of life to comprehensively reveal the “Truths” of the human condition. Though extreme, these conditions are dramatized (mostly) in adherence to the realistic probabilities of a natural universe and plausible psychological motivations. Norris declares in “A Plea for Romantic Fiction” that “Romance” is the fictional mode that allows the writing to move beneath sur-
face realities to confront “the unplumbed depths of the human heart, and the mystery of sex, and the problems of life, and the black, unsearched pene-
tralia of the soul of man” (Responsibilities 220). In Norris’s valuation, Ro-
man is not indistinguishable from Gothicism, but his superbly florid de-
scription suggests a generous overlap. London’s frequent use of the genre is enveloped in his cultivation of multiple techniques and styles. This diver-
sity is another reason critics have been slow to appreciate the Gothic pres-
ence in his work. Injecting the Gothic into his writing enriches and darkens the Romantic strain of his Naturalism, adding thematic and metaphorical dimensions to prose that is often direct and realistic but that can also swing toward lyrical opulence and melodramatic overstatement.

“An Odyssey of the North” shows London’s inclination to blend genres. One of his most haunting tales, this story reveals how he could successfully manage a generic mélange of the Gothic, myth, adventure, mystery, and crime. Originally published in the January 1900 issue of Atlantic Monthly,
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scholars regard “Odyssey” as heralding the arrival of London’s mature style and form. London himself ranked it as the finest story in his first collection, The Son of the Wolf (Letters 1:195). Commercially and artistically, it was a breakthrough, regularly cited and anthologized as one of the author’s definitive Northland works.

The story is rich in Gothic motifs—including a ghostly cabin—and also could be productively analyzed as a prototypical crime story. Commentators have accurately identified Conrad’s influence on its complexly framed structure, but “Odyssey” also evidences uncanny tinges of Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein in its descriptions of Artic pursuit and its thematics of retribution. It is a heavily atmospheric narrative of abduction, rape, obsession, chase, concealed identity, and revenge, which culminates with a grisly double murder; additionally, Jeanne Campbell Reesman’s careful reading reveals that the story’s language and underlying structure draw inventively from Homer’s The Odyssey. To add to the intricacy of the story’s cultural clash and partaking of Gothic hybridity, two of the story’s main characters, Unga and Naass, who live on “the edge of the world” in a small Indian village in Akatan in the Aleutians, are of mixed European and Native American descent. The main action of Naass’s framed narrative begins when Axel Gunderson—a 300-pound, seven-foot Scandinavian “sea lion”—arrives at Akatan on Unga and Naass’s wedding day (Novels and Stories 350). After subduing the young Naass with drink, Axel, laughing like a “big bull seal in the rut,” abducts the unwilling Unga and disappears.

Next begins Naass’s tireless quest to retrieve his violated bride and take vengeance on Axel. Traversing continents and oceans in his search, he becomes a sailor, endures salt mines, escapes prisons, crisscrosses the Northland, and even travels to England; however, Unga soon comes to love Axel and acculturates to Euro-American society. But Naass, doomed by his own righteousness, grandly conceives of himself as “the righter of wrongs” (358). Though he hears that Unga is happy, he somehow still believes that “[he] knew better,—knew that her heart harked back to her own people by the yellow beach of Akatan” (354). Though deluded about Unga’s affections, Naass is as relentless as he is patient, and when years later Unga and Axel return to Dawson, the now unrecognizable Naass “guides” them to an eerie cabin where many men have died “alone at different times.” The cabin sits on a plain where “the earth and the snow fell away, straight down toward the heart of the world.” Axel calls it “the mouth of hell” (359). Before they can return to civilization, Naass, who has methodically plotted Axel’s agonizingly cruel starvation, pitilessly watches him die in the snow. When Naass reveals his true identity and the object of his quest to his beloved Unga, she laughs in his face. When he proposes they return to Akatan together and
resume their tribal lives together, she scoffs at the prospect of “liv[ing] in the dirty huts, and eat[ing] of the fish and oil, and bring[ing] forth spawn.” Unga calls him a “dog” and a “swine” and tries to kill him with her knife (362). Seeing her undying devotion to Axel, Naass abandons Unga to perish on the taiga huddled with the Scandinavian.

Naass narrates his tale to the Malemute Kid and Stanley Prince, after he stumbles into the Kid’s cabin, as “a thing” (343) with a near skinless face that is “sunken and emaciated” and bears “very little likeness to human countenance” (344). This ravaged visage suggests Naass’s monstrosity, dehumanization, and culpability, but also shows how colonial pilfering strafed his identity. In true Gothic form, “Odyssey” reveals the dark consequences of Eros. And while Naass’s audacious tale of obsessive pursuit may seem motivated by his own inexorable emotional mania, the story also catalogs the twisted consequences of imperialism. The traumatic complexity and extenuating contexts of Naass’s ordeal are what, after hearing his story, prompts the Kid to override the verdict of “this is murder!” pronounced by Stanley Prince, a white Royal Canadian Mounted Police officer. Instead, the Kid proclaims—“There be things greater than our wisdom, beyond our justice. The right and wrong of this we cannot say, and it is not for us to judge” (364). In London’s ambiguous configuration, Naass—as murderer—asserts his tribal rights while assuming the resources and methods of the colonizers. As the dispossessed Akatan chief, he remains the brutalized colonized subject. London cannot escape the privilege of his colonial perspective, but “Odyssey” underscores the consequences of imperial and racist ideologies—ongoing sins from the past unique to American Gothic. Eric Savoy contends that “the strange tropes, figures, and rhetorical techniques, so strikingly central in American Gothic narratives . . . express a profound anxiety about historical crimes and perverse human desires that cast their shadow over what many would like to be the sunny American republic” (168). Axel’s and Naass’s wrongs are inextricable from the larger historical crimes perpetuated in the names of colonial empire and manifest destiny. The story’s thematics also gesture toward some issues within the purview of what more recently has been termed the Ecogothic, and London’s later narratives, which frequently focus on the human–nonhuman animal relationships, are particularly amenable to this critical paradigm.

The Ecogothic offers a category of analysis that, David Del Principe explains, seeks to “reconsider the role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear” (1). He maintains that “the Gothic often portrays this estrangement in panicked, dystopian terms, as humans’ reluctance to come to terms with their nonhuman ancestry and the common, biological origin of all life” (2). London’s stories of-
ten represent processes of re-primitivization and atavistic “regression” and exemplify states of primal intensity in ways that are horrible, painful, and grotesque. And while he conveys that we are ultimately entombed in our animality, these innate drives are not as asocial as commonly perceived. London depicts human and nonhuman animality in a variety of ways and frequently seeks to deflate the prevailing human/reason-animal/instinct hierarchy. Still, the trials of being merely another post-Darwinian animal are fraught with their own physical sufferings and ethical confusions, which he ably conveys through Gothic devices.

In “Love of Life” (1907), for instance, London incorporates vampirism to heighten his dramatization of the biological compulsion for survival. After an unnamed prospector sprains his ankle in the wilds of the Canadian Barrens, his partner abandons him. Injured, alone, and delirious, he slogs desperately toward the slim chance of rescue. The harrowing journey is brutally depleting, and by the time the prospector spots a whale ship in a bay, he can barely drag himself toward his would-be saviors. What’s worse, he is being trailed by a sick wolf that licks up the trail of blood the prospector leaves as he inches onward, writhing ever so slowly toward the ship. When the enfeebled wolf attempts to sink his fangs into the miner, London offers his peculiar union of the Naturalistic and the Gothic in a desperate act of Darwinian vampirism: “The [prospector’s] hands had not sufficient strength to choke the wolf and the mouth of the man was full of hair. At the end of half an hour the man was aware of a warm trickle in his throat. It was not pleasant. It was like molten lead being forced into his stomach, and it was forced by his will alone” (436). Physically, this is nothing more than a transfer of energy. Of course, to London’s civilized readers this “terrible” and grippingly depicted vampirism is a decidedly grotesque—but totally necessary—blood slurp. In the story’s Gothically enhanced naturalistic calculus of survival, whichever organism is able to kill the other will do so to live. And superior bodily vigor is the sole controlling value. The story captures the indomitable human will to live—the raw joy of enduring. But what is to “love” about an existence embedded in this amoral ecology? Only perhaps that life—to take in another lungful of air, to persist from one moment to the next—is better than the nothingness of death. And if the only way to continue on is to suck the blood of a sickly wolf, then so be it.

More perplexing are the inscrutable causes that impel the vitalistic energies of humans and all sentient beings to want to live. We merely know that these chemical forces exist and that we live in competition with beings congruently formed. The larger why remains the “Love of Life’s” muted enigma. This mystery and the story’s weird vampirism evoke aspects of Tim Morton’s consideration of humanity’s estrangement from other species, which
he refers to as “strange strangers.” Morton points out that standard ecological thinking presents an abstract bromide of “interconnectedness”—that everything is linked and we exist in what he terms a biological “mesh” of cross-species and organic-inorganic interrelationships (28). But Morton would concur that London’s Darwinian vampirism properly shows that, up close and in person, the “mesh” is not always as palatable for modern westerners as conventional eco-discourse typically proposes. London’s story presents a violent and macabrely uncommodified human-nonhuman animal interrelationship: A man consumes wolf blood (not “animal product”) to continue living. The paradox, in Morton’s view, is that “the more we know about life forms, the more we recognize our connection with them, and the stranger they become” (17). In appropriately dualistic Gothic fashion, the “ecological thought” simultaneously connects and estranges, and those qualities of alienation and separateness, the final opacity of the self and the ruptured intersubjectivity of the human and nonhuman, are conditions the Gothic tropes can usually depict more deftly than scientific discourse.

London also uses the Gothic to explore relationships among nonhuman animals. In a little-discussed episode in chapter 3 of The Call of the Wild (1903), “pandemonium” ensues when a pack of zombie-like huskies attack Perrault and François’s dog-team camp in the night. These “skulking furry forms” are starving dogs from a nearby Indian camp. “Crazed by the smell of blood,” the “famished brutes” raid the food stores and savagely attack the drivers, Buck, and the other dogs. London creates a nightmarish scene where these fiendish canids appear as demon-like dogs: “It seemed as though their bones would burst through their skins. They were mere skeletons, draped loosely in draggled hides, with blazing eyes and slavered fangs. But the hunger-madness made them terrifying, irresistible. There was no opposing them” (25). The team barely weathers the assault. Several dogs are seriously injured and Perrault and François’s rations are perilously reduced. One dog, Dolly, soon goes “suddenly mad” from her injuries and François must kill her by crashing an axe “down upon mad Dolly’s head” (28, 29). Strictly speaking, the attack of the zombie dogs is a consequence of famine, and Dolly’s “madness” is presumably caused by rabies, but London’s Gothic texturizing more fully imparts the emotive terror and desperation of these scenes than an exclusively biological or clinical account would be capable of accomplishing.

Notably, the sled dogs are imperial workers that have become adapted to the primeval Northland while engaged in the rather prosaic task of delivering the mail.10 The zombie dogs are the colonized other, transmuted and distorted domesticated dogs from an Indian village—the displaced doppelgängers of Buck and his sled mates who are losing the struggle for survival,
not due to any intrinsic hereditary deficit, but because they happen to have indigenous “masters.” While the scene registers a marginal colonized population, it also positions Buck and his trail-hardened mates—so distinct in their savagery from “soft” Southland dogs—as the new norm from which London orients his readers to cast the gaze of monstrosity onto these anarchic marauders. Buck’s metamorphosis is extreme and violent, but London depicts his re-wilding as restorative. His existence becomes progressively more intense and full as he accesses “the deeps” of his nature. But the zombie dogs, their deeps drained and drives exhausted, are accessing a reservoir of darker, even diabolical, energy.

Though London professed to write from the position of a materialistic monist, the metaphysical is never fully excised from his writing. Replete with unnerving Gothic reverberations, his famous description of the Northland sublime in “The White Silence” (1900), for example, sounds like it could have emerged from the pages of a Gothic novel published much earlier in the century. This confrontation of the cosmically negligible but subjectively all-important individual with a forbidding universe is an early manifestation of the fundamental existential encounter that recurs in London’s writing. London’s portrait of a trio of journeymen traversing the tundra presents a landscape filled with “fury,” “storm,” “earthquake,” and “the ghostly wastes of a dead word,” “mystery”: “The afternoon wore on, and with the awe, born of the White Silence, the voiceless travelers bent to their work. Nature has many tricks wherewith she convinces man of his finity,—the ceaseless flow of the tides, the fury of the storm, the shock of the earthquake, the long roll of heaven’s artillery,—not but the most tremendous, the most stupefying of all, is the passive phase of the White Silence. All movement ceases, the sky clears, the heavens are as brass; the slightest whisper seems sacrilege, and man becomes timid, affrighted at the sound of his own voice” (300–301). Facing this daunting immensity, the radically diminished human subject becomes a “sole speck of life journeying across the ghostly wastes of a dead world, he trembles at his audacity, realizes that his is a maggot’s life, nothing more.” London douses the bleakly spectacular panorama with the possibility of supernatural presence—albeit one that (if it is not a delusion) resides supremely aloof from trifling endeavors of humanity: “Strange thoughts arise unsummoned, and the mystery of all things strives for utterance. And the fear of death, of God, of the universe, comes over him,—the hope of the Resurrection and the Life, the yearning for immortality, the vain striving of the imprisoned essence,—it is then, if ever, man walks alone with God” (301). If one blunders on this Ecogothic trail, the divinity envisioned is not concerned with the doings of “maggots.” Things happen for a reason in this universe, but the reasons derive impersonally
from the natural laws of cause-and-effect rather than any sort of benign providential design. If we are not utterly alone in the universe—which we most likely are—we are emphatically uncared for.

In his 1913 memoir, *John Barleycorn*, London gives a Gothicized aura and voice to the “White Silence” in what he called the “White Logic,” a ghostly inner entity that defines existence as exclusively material, ontologically desacralized, and morally profaned. The White Logic can also be read as a shadowy personification of Morton’s inner “strange stranger,” which imparts the pessimism of positivist science while remaining suffused in fantastic miasma. Indicative of his Gothic splicing, London uses an immaterial, ghostly presence to snuff metaphysical illusions. He might explain the haunting directives of the White Logic as originating purely from physiological processes, but he opts for more indeterminate, Gothically inspired imagery to convey the extreme horridness of his psycho-philosophical “life-sickness” (*Novels and Social 940*).

The voice of the White Logic, which emerges most strongly in London’s alcohol-induced depression, is a sort of imp—a devilish incarnation of nihilism and death that is “unafraid of all the monsters of the earthly dream.” This nemesis of healthy sanity undermines the well adjusted and subverts stable mental attitudes. The White Logic says that “life is a mad dance in the domain of flux” (1097). Its views are a dastardly philosophical cocktail of the pessimistic implications of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Darwin. It transforms the phenomenological into apparitional, the biological into the ghostly. The “White Logic,” London writes, is “the argent messenger of truth beyond truth, the antithesis of life, cruel and bleak as interstellar space, pulseless and frozen as absolute zero, dazzling with the frost of irrefragable logic and unforgettable fact.” He associates the White Logic with the alcohol-charged visions of “intellectual spectres and phantoms that are cosmic and logical and that take the forms of syllogisms. It is when in this condition that he strips away the husks of life’s healthiest illusions and gravely considers the iron collar of necessity welded about the neck of his soul” (939). The White Logic pulls one deathward and is allied with London’s skull image of mortality, the “Noseless One.” According to the White Logic, life—a “phantasmagoria of living”—is ephemeral, insignificant, and vain (1097). Futilly, we endeavor to paste meaning and values to the relentless cycle of birth and death, but all significance and purpose are obliterated in soulless biological process that renders us imminently replaceable and cosmically irrelevant. The White Logic cunningly “whispers”: “What of it? I am truth. You know it. You cannot combat me. They say I make for death. What of it? It is truth. Life lies in order to live. Life is a perpetual lie-telling process.” Under the blinding glare of the White Logic, the inten-
sity of this philosophical materialism imbues reality with a ghostly haunt-
edness. “Appearances are ghosts,” the White Logic tells London: “Life is
ghost land, where appearances change, transfuse, permeate each the other
and all the others, that are, that are not, that always flicker, fade, and pass,
only to come again as new appearances, as other appearances. . . . You are
an apparition” (1097).

The White Logic negates sedative illusions and refuses epistemological
compromises to apprehend man for what he is: “a cosmic joke, a sport of
chemistry, a garmented beast that arose out of the ruck of screaming beast-
liness by virtue and accident of two opposable great toes . . . brother as well
to the gorilla and the chimpanzee . . . [who] thumps his chest in anger, and
roars and quivers with cataleptic ferocity . . . knows monstrous, atavistic
promptings, and . . . is composed of all manner of shreds of abysmal and
forgotten instincts” (1098). We emerged out of the horrors and confusions
of the evolutionary process only to receive the cognitive capacity to com-
prehend our irrelevance. The White Logic combines the spectral sphere of
the apparitional with the ecology of our evolutionary lineage to produce
a dreadful vision rooted in our biological ancestry, which can only, ironi-
cally, become sensible in the complex and excruciatingly horrifying realm
of the human imagination. London’s most cogent fictional expression of
the White Logic’s existential anxieties comes through his portrayal of Wolf
Larsen in his 1904 novel *The Sea-Wolf*.

Though he more thoroughly biologizes Larsen’s articulation of the White
Logic in *The Sea-Wolf*, the Gothic is palpable from the novel’s first chap-
ter. In the opening pages, London’s protagonist, Humphrey Van Weyden,
a well-heeled dilettante and literary critic, is crossing thickly fog-shrouded
San Francisco Bay aboard the steam ferry *Martinez*. Humphrey is blithely
musing over his recent article in the *Atlantic Monthly* on Edgar Allan Poe
when the *Martinez* collides with another vessel and sinks. He is rescued
and taken captive by Captain Wolf Larsen on his seal-hunting schooner,
the *Ghost*. The *Ghost* is a Darwinian wasteland where raw force and cunning
prevail. Larsen is a wicked tyrant who dominates through brute strength
and superior intelligence. He resembles a new species of post-Nietzschean
Byronic Hero who exhibits shades of Melville’s Ahab and Milton’s Lucifer.
Like most Gothic leads, Larsen has a dark past. Abused as a cabin boy, his
eyearly life was one of “rough fare rougher usage” where “fear and hatred and
pain were [his] only soul-experiences” (*Novels and Stories* 559). Larsen does
not elaborate on the exact details of this maltreatment, but his vehement
hatred for the captains he served under indicates the severity of the mental,
physical, and perhaps sexual abuse that he endured and which plainly ani-
mates his sadism.
London’s distinctive supplement to the novel’s various Gothic elements is a pessimistic variety of Social Darwinism. The miniature world Humphrey encounters on the *Ghost* is not otherworldly in the traditional sense of Gothic. He does not find a haunted space of perambulating corpses or disembodied spirits. It is, seemingly, the opposite—a work-beast ship that embodies what Larsen calls “the world of the real” (603). The voyage affords Humphrey a glimpse into capitalism’s gory inner workings, an initiation process he will share with the poet Maud Brewster, who is somewhat miraculously plucked from the sea in chapter 18. A fellow idealist, she holds her own with Humphrey to oppose Larsen’s might-makes-right dogma.\(^\text{12}\)

In contrast to the cushy upbringings of these aesthetes, in Larsen’s mind at least, the *Ghost* embodies the “True” conditions of life where the stark actualities of the human condition are played out in dog-eat-dog fashion.

In a horrifically pitiless account that foresees the grim implications of Morton’s interconnecting “mesh,” Larsen succinctly sums up the horror of his rigorously materialistic worldview: “[Life] is like yeast, a ferment, a thing that moves and may move for a minute, an hour, a year, or a hundred years, but that in the end will cease to move. The big eat the little that they may continue to move, the strong eat the weak that they may retain their strength. The lucky eat the most and move the longest, that is all” (520). This is a world void of spiritual solace whose principal values are domination and appetite. Larsen anticipates the rationale of the White Logic’s in his view that “life is the cheapest thing in the world. There is only so much water, so much earth, so much air; but the life that is demanding to be born is limitless.” Though theoretically his explanation corresponds with the White Logic, his account accentuates biological rather than the apparitional. He tells Humphrey, “In our loins are the possibilities of millions of lives. Could we but find time and opportunity and utilize the last bit and every bit of the unborn life that is in us, we could become the fathers of nations and populate continents. Life? Bah! It has no value. Of cheap things it is the cheapest. Everywhere it goes begging. Nature spills it out with a lavish hand. Where there is room for one life, [nature] sows a thousand lives, and it’s life eats life till the strongest and most piggish life is left” (534).

Despite this reductive mode of thought, Larsen’s varied speculative and aesthetic interests prompt him to explore larger social issues and philosophical problems, and Humphrey becomes his interlocutor in pursuing assorted lines of philosophical inquiry. Humphrey observes that Larsen “possessed intellect to an unusual degree, but it was directed solely to the exercise of his savage instincts and made him but the more formidable savage” (648). Larsen’s conception of how he meshes with non-human life is
vividly depicted in chapter 21, when a shark bites off the foot of the ship’s cook while he is being towed behind the *Ghost* in accordance with the Captain’s order as a punishment and remedy for his culinary ineptitude and greasy slovenliness. Larsen takes his revenge by catching the offending sixteen-foot shark, prying his jaws apart “to their greatest extension” and inserting in its mouth “a stout stake, sharpened at both ends.” He then releases the shark “helpless, yet with its full strength, doomed to lingering starvation” (642). This scene works more through equivalence than symbolism. For Larsen, the shark does not harbor the vast connotations of a Moby-Dick nor even symbolize anything beyond its biological being. For him, the shark is simply a rival apex predator deserving of the tortuous fate he metes out because of its territorial infringement. The episode illustrates that the unbiased, transpecies cruelty is the keynote of Larsen’s character. Although Larsen has read Shakespeare, Browning, Poe, Tennyson, Shaw, and De Quincy, he becomes ruthless and socially isolated as he succumbs to “primal melancholy” (555). The Captain’s unrelenting brand of White Logic manifests itself in debilitating headaches, symptoms of some mysterious strain of cancer. Grotesquely put, Larsen’s ideology cannibalizes his brain.13

The *Sea-Wolf* is commonly read as a novel of ideas Lon don wrote to fictionalize his competing allegiances to competitive individualism and cooperative altruism, which showcases how Humphrey and Maud’s mutualistic idealism is not only morally superior but also the more adaptive, “fitter” behavior. Larsen’s death proves that he is unfit, while Humphrey and Maud are alive and free at novel’s end to pursue their reproductive interests.14 But what of the horrors and brutalities they have experienced on the *Ghost*? Though they have been initiated into “the world of the real,” London supplies no suggestion that they have any inclination for more high seas adventures in the Pacific, where Wolf Larsen’s even more diabolical brother, Death Larsen, continues to ravage and plunder. The lovers have endured their ordeal and have triumphed; that is, they have escaped the brutishness of the marginalized underclass. The novel ultimately endorses evasion rather than engagement. The overriding motivations are flight and retreat, not sociopolitical reform. Humphrey and Maud exercise their best option: they sail away and escape when the opportunity arises. The novel’s most concrete consolation is that they are able to flee capitalism’s barbarous fringes and return to the tony environs of upper-class privilege and their slim volumes of verse, their garden parties, and their cucumber-sandwich lives of ease. Indicative of the Gothically inspired energies that intensify and complicate so much of London’s oeuvre, the continuation of the exploitative horrors Humphrey and Maud elude darkens *The Sea-Wolf*’s allegedly happy ending.
Notes

1. London does not use the term “Gothic” in “The Terrible and Tragic in Fiction,” but the “terrible” and “horrible” tales and authors he references—which also include Ambrose Bierce and W. W. Jacobs—are widely cited in discussions of Gothic fiction. See, for instance, Allan Lloyd-Smith’s American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction (3–9) for an explanation of the generic attributes of American Gothic fiction.

2. See The Call of the Wild, chapter 3: “The Dominant Primordial Beast” (Novels and Stories 33–34)

3. My commentary on the presence of the Gothic in London’s writing is indebted to Williams’s extensive exploration of the ghostly and imaginative aspects of London’s work. Williams maintains, “London consistently deploys the theme of the suprarational or, more broadly speaking, the general sense of hauntedness and dream states. Thinking himself alone in the world, London was surprised to see a ghostly presence next to him. Ghosts permeate his work—from Buck as ghost-dog to the name of Wolf Larsen’s ship. . . . London was haunted by his own artistic talent” (Author 5–6).

4. Eric Carl Link also notes that “fairly early on the Gothic could be viewed as one of several modes of romance (along with historical romance, adventure romance, and so forth), all of which emerged out of the creative alembic of the hybrid romance novel that blends the ‘actual’ and the ‘imaginary’” (Vast 144).


7. See Auerbach (65–68) for a discussion of the racial categories in “An Odyssey of the North.”

8. Citations of London’s memoir and fiction are from the Library of American editions, Jack London: Novels and Stories and Jack London: Novels and Social Writings

9. Williams calls the cabin “haunted” and representative of the “place that London went back to time after time, this fictitious cabin is the wellspring of his imagination” (Author 168).

10. See Auerbach (84–113) for an analysis of “mail” in The Call of the Wild.

11. Earle Labor maintains that though London “persistently denied [Spiritualism], professing throughout his life that he was ‘a materialistic monist,’ his art betrays him . . . revealing him to be, in fact, a philosophical dualist whose approach to truth was hermeneutical rather than epistemological” (xiv).

12. London’s women characters do not usually suffer the same horrible fates as his Gothic men. For a perceptive account of London’s women characters on the high seas, see Anita Duneer’s “Jack London’s Seafaring Women: Desire, Risk, and Savagery.”

14. For example, see Bender (78–91) and Link’s “Jack London, The Sea-Wolf, and the Natural History of Love” for perceptive readings along these lines. For an essay that is more aligned with my thinking of The Sea-Wolf as an example of Naturalist Gothic, see Crow (“Sea-Wolf”).
One of Edith Wharton’s most consistently Naturalistic works is her novella *Bunner Sisters*, written in 1892–1893 but not published until 1916. The novella chronicles the lives of two sisters, Ann Eliza and Evelina Bunner, who run a small shop out of their New York City apartment. Near the end of the story, after Evelina has married and left for St. Louis, Ann Eliza experiences the lonely apartment as unfamiliar and perhaps even haunted, demonstrating Wharton’s use of the Gothic in the context of her Naturalistic aesthetic. By invoking the Gothic features of the haunted house to represent Ann Eliza’s emotional upheaval and limited future prospects, Wharton suggests Ann Eliza’s inevitable decline into a life of deterministic deprivation. However, in the context of Donald Pizer’s arguments about the humanistic element of American literary Naturalism (“Definition”), Wharton’s Gothic Naturalism emphasizes the tension between the Naturalistic despair of Ann Eliza’s life and her human strivings to better her condition, and this same dialectic recurs in Wharton’s ghost stories.

In his influential essay “Nineteenth-Century American Naturalism: An Essay in Definition,” Pizer notes, “The naturalist often describes his characters as though they are conditioned and controlled by environment, heredity, instinct, or chance. But he also suggests a compensating humanistic value in his characters or their fates that affirms the significance of the individual and of his life.” Pizer locates this tension “between the naturalist’s desire to represent . . . the new, discomfiting truths . . . of his late nineteenth century world and also his desire to find some meaning in experience that reasserts the validity of the human enterprise.” Pizer suggests that the writer’s imagination fleshes out the ethical dimensions of characters: “Although the individual may be a cipher in a world made amoral by man’s lack of re-
responsibility for his fate, the imagination refuses to accept this formula as the total meaning of life and so seeks a new basis for man’s sense of his own dignity and importance,” resulting in “an affirmative ethical conception of life” (87). As Stephen C. Brennan notes, Pizer’s “definition of Naturalism as ethical at its core” provides us with “an unexpectedly complex view of human nature” (12). Wharton explores the complexity of this thematic tension in her short fiction through the Gothic.

Kathy Fedorko argues that Wharton’s Gothic dramatizes and resolves the conflict between the feminine and the masculine. In a similar vein, Gina Rossetti suggests that Wharton used the ghost story form in a piece like “Pomegranate Seed” (1931) “to expose as unnatural the limitations imposed by conventional marriage” (191), and Charles L. Crow notes that Wharton wrote in Gothic form to liberate her imagination and writing from patriarchal constraints (“The Girl” 167). Other critics have noted Wharton’s use of the Gothic to explore sexuality. R. W. B. Lewis observes that Wharton’s ghost stories contain “a sizable portion of the erotic” (“Powers” 644), and he argues that she “adopt[s] the Victorian habit . . . of ‘distancing’ the most intense and private sexual feelings by projecting them in the various forms of fantasy,” for “the ghostly context permits a more direct acknowledgment of sexual experience than we normally find in the dramas of manners and the social life” (Introduction xvii). Barbara White claims that it is not surprising to find “frequent echoes of the incest situation in Wharton’s ghostly tales” (68), and Janet Beer and Avril Horner examine Wharton’s parodic use of the Gothic to critique conventional attitudes toward sexual desire and “raise subversive questions about the sexual politics” (274) of the early twentieth century.

I am also interested in the cultural critique that Wharton enacts through the Gothic, but I focus on the tension between humanism and Naturalism that Pizer identifies to demonstrate how Wharton’s Gothic, to borrow Teresa Goddu’s terms, “is intensely engaged with historical concerns” (2) and “registers its culture’s contradictions, presenting a distorted, [but] not a disengaged, version of reality” (3). Implying the inferior nature of Wharton’s Gothic fiction, and of the Gothic genre itself, Lewis contends that Wharton’s “imagination was moving in the direction of the mythic, but arriving only at the way station of the ghostly and fantastic” (Introduction xvii). Despite Lewis’s view of the Gothic as an inferior “way station,” Wharton’s ghost stories “reveal her extraordinary psychological and moral insight,” as Margaret McDowell observes (134), and, as I explore here, have important cultural implications. Within Wharton’s Naturalist aesthetic, the Gothic allows her to present a range of female agency at work in a variety of women’s experiences lying between human struggle and deterministic despair.
In *Bunner Sisters*, Gothic features are most pronounced, and most clearly underscore negative cultural effects, when Ann Eliza is left alone following Evelina’s move to St. Louis; these negative effects are presaged earlier in the text when Miss Mellins, the dressmaker from upstairs, visits the sisters to help with Evelina’s wedding dress. As Evelina returns from an evening out with her fiancé, Herman Ramy, she enters the room alone, signaling to Ann Eliza that she bears bad news. Miss Mellins does not hear Evelina enter and exclaims, “Mercy, Miss Evelina! I declare I thought you was a ghost, the way you crep’ in,” launching into a tale about a customer whose husband crept up behind her as a joke, sending her into a fit that rendered her “a raving maniac” (379). Miss Mellins often regales the sisters with sensational stories about her own and others’ misfortunes, and many of these stories are similar to gossip in magazines such as the *Police Gazette* and the *Fireside Weekly* (339). Miss Mellins observes that Evelina looks “dead-beat” (379) as a result of Ramy’s excursions, which prompts another tale about an engaged cousin, whereupon Ann Eliza insists that Evelina needs rest. Miss Mellins concludes that Evelina must be “a mite nervous” over the approaching wedding and offers the “arch forecast” that “when my turn comes I’ll be scared to death” (380).

The scene is significant for several reasons. Evelina’s entrance into the house as if she were a ghost foreshadows her eventual disappearance from Ann Eliza’s life and the shop when she is married, the ghostly sounds that take her place, and her eventual death due to the Naturalistic circumstances of her marriage. Miss Mellins’s comments about Ramy tiring out Evelina and the nervousness that might attend getting married reflect the letters that Evelina will write to Ann Eliza about the exhausting obligations of marriage and, when she returns to New York broken and in ill health, the literal sacrifice of Evelina’s body to domestic duty. Miss Mellins’s allusion to women’s marital sexual obligations in her “arch forecast” about the fear with which she will approach her own marriage takes ominous physical form in the figure of Evelina’s sickly child who dies soon after birth and, ultimately, in Evelina’s own death. The news that Evelina has to share as she enters the house after her outing with Ramy also foreshadows her fate. She tells Ann Eliza that the wedding is postponed because Ramy cannot afford it. When Ann Eliza replies that he might have considered his resources beforehand, Evelina jumps to his defense: “I guess he knows what’s right as well as you or me. I’d sooner die than be a burden to him” (381). Of course, Evelina does bear the burden in the relationship, becoming a literal ghost when, in death, she succumbs to the novella’s gendered and Naturalistic calculus.

Once Evelina is married and in St. Louis, the first customer to enter Ann Eliza’s shop frightens her “like a ghost.” She cannot sleep, and Wharton de-
scribes the shop and apartment in terms of the Gothic haunted house: “In the new silence surrounding her the walls and furniture found voice, frightening her at dusk and midnight with strange sighs and stealthy whispers. Ghostly hands shook the window shutters or rattled at the outer latch, and once she grew cold at the sound of a step like Evelina’s stealing through the dark shop to die out on the threshold” (385). Ann Eliza’s familiar surroundings are now “new,” “strange,” and frightening. When she receives a letter from Evelina, it, too, seems unfamiliar. Ann Eliza is disappointed and confused by its coldness and wishes Evelina had chosen “a style more suited to the chronicling of homely incidents” (388). In her letter, Evelina alludes to her unhappiness, noting the difficult work of marriage and domestic life, but the letter offers Ann Eliza very little information beyond the sense that Evelina is resigned to her lot. Ann Eliza is bewildered by the ambiguous “labyrinth of Evelina’s eloquence” (388), and soon Evelina’s letters stop.

The Gothic elements of the tale also correspond to Ann Eliza’s dire economic circumstances after Evelina’s departure and emphasize the cultural forces with which she contends. The sisters are particularly challenged by the expectations of consumer culture and its “determining force” (Totten 135), and their small shop with its meager and unappealing window cannot compete with the splendor of the large shop windows on New York’s main thoroughfares. Further, Evelina had overseen the trimming of hats, the shop’s “most lucrative” business and the “chief attraction” of its window (Bunner Sisters 390), and the clientele dwindles once she leaves.

When Evelina returns alone from St. Louis, broken and degraded and telling a story so remote from Ann Eliza’s “innocent experiences that much of it was hardly intelligible to her,” Ann Eliza “shuddered back” from its implications (416). But she also continues to hold out hope for Evelina’s life and her own, and the novella’s ending finds Ann Eliza seeking employment despite seemingly insurmountable odds. The closing and sale of the shop sends her into the streets of New York seeking work. When she responds to a help-wanted sign in a shop similar to what the Bunner’s once was, the young saleswoman assumes that she is inquiring for someone much younger since the position is intended for “a bright girl: stylish, and pleasant manners. . . . Not over thirty, anyhow; and nice-looking” (436). Ann Eliza’s search for work in the city recalls the similarly difficult ordeal of Carrie Meeber in Theodore Dreiser’s Sister Carrie (1900) and seems to portend a bleak future, as Judith Saunders and Annette Benert have noted. Yet the narrator describes the concluding scene in such a way that we cannot simply read Ann Eliza as defeated: “Ann Eliza went out into the thronged street. The great city, under the fair spring sky, seemed to throb with the stir of innumerable beginnings. She walked on, looking for another shop window
with a sign in it” (436). Both the crowded street and the city’s “innumerable beginnings” suggest the overwhelming task ahead of her and, given her experience in the first shop, the impossibility of finding work as an older unmarried woman. However, the possibility of new beginnings, “the fair spring sky,” and Ann Eliza’s search for “another shop window with a sign in it” also suggest her determination, in Pizer’s words, to reject the harsh Naturalistic aspects of her experience “as the total meaning of life” and seek “a new basis” for understanding her “own dignity and importance” (“Definition” 87).

This dialectic between characters’ Naturalistic circumstances and “a compensating humanistic value . . . that affirms the significance” of their lives (Pizer, “Definition” 87) recurs in relation to Wharton’s Naturalistic aesthetic in some of her ghost stories. That Wharton would situate this critique of women’s opportunities within a Gothic framework suggests the cultural importance of the Gothic in representing the ethical and humanistic dimensions of American Naturalism. The frame tale form of “All Souls’” (1937) emphasizes the Naturalistic constraints experienced by its protagonist, Sara Clayburn, revealing, as Annette Zilversmit argues, the “constricting forces of society” that “plagued [Wharton] and her heroines” (297). Mrs. Clayburn’s male cousin narrates the story of her supernatural experience at Whitegates, imposing his interpretation and structural scheme on her “confused and fragmentary” words. He constructs his narrative from Mrs. Clayburn’s “half-avowals and nervous reticences” (Ghosts 6).2 He admits the “conjunctural” nature of his version of events (34), yet the authority with which he appropriates Mrs. Clayburn’s story emphasizes the gendered ideologies informing both his opinion of the veracity of her tale and his assumption that he should offer possible explanations for it. Further, the fact that Mrs. Clayburn refused to return to Whitegates to solve the mystery confirms the narrator’s gendered view of her diminished capacity to cope with what has happened.

Mrs. Clayburn’s gender oppression is also symbolized by her physical immobility. Early in the story, and just after encountering a “foreign” women on the “lonely” road to Whitegates (7)—who the narrator assumes is a witch (34)—Mrs. Clayburn slips and sprains her ankle (8). Her confinement to her bedroom for the night and her difficulty getting around the house the next day heighten the terror of finding herself alone and without electrical power in the silent house. Indeed, Mrs. Clayburn becomes the stereotypical trapped and helpless woman in the Gothic haunted house.3

While these details suggest that Mrs. Clayburn is subject to forces beyond her control, the story’s Gothic elements also point to her assertion of agency. The way in which Wharton builds suspense is particularly innovative in relation to how she simultaneously builds readers’ awareness of Mrs.
Clayburn’s ability to assert her will and persevere in her search of the house despite the fear of what she might find. When her maid, Agnes, does not answer her bell, she drags herself to the telephone on the landing to call the pantry. When there is no answer, she goes to Agnes’s room, the “undisturbed order” of which unnerves her (15) and reveals that her maid has gone out (16). The housemaid’s room is similarly deserted. Although the narrator notes that by this time “she was past reasoning,” Mrs. Clayburn’s continued search reveals a logical approach. As she descends to the ground floor, the silence of the house descends with her. She is chilled by “the feeling that there was no limit to this silence, no outer margin, nothing beyond it,” and when she comes to the drawing room she expects to find the “bodies of her dead servants, mown down by some homicidal maniac” (18). Here, the narrator provides the first indication of what might propel Mrs. Clayburn’s search: “She must find out—she must face whatever lay in wait.” He notes that she is “not impelled by bravery—the last drop of courage had oozed out of her—but because anything, anything was better than to remain shut up in that snow-bound house without knowing whether she was alone in it or not” (18).

Finding the drawing room empty, she believes that she will find the rest of the house similarly deserted, but she is determined to go through all the rooms because “she must see” for herself. The oppressive silence follows her “as though she were its prisoner and it might throw itself upon her if she attempted to escape.” The mystery of the house reminds her of the unsolved mystery of the ship Mary Celeste: “No one ever knew what happened on board the Mary Celeste. And perhaps no one will ever know what has happened here. Even I shan’t know.” This thought produces a heightened level of fear, as if “an icy liquid [were] running through every vein, and lying in a pool about her heart,” but it does not paralyze her. Instead, “a new impulse pushed her forward” (20) to the scullery and kitchen, where she believes she will find the source of the mystery (21).

When she hears a voice in the kitchen, a new fear grips her, for whereas “her previous terrors had been speculative, conjectural, a ghostly emanation of the surrounding silence,” this new fear is “a plain every-day dread of evil-doers” (21), and she wishes that she had brought her husband’s revolver from her room. She soon discovers that the voice emanates from the portable wireless on the kitchen table. She gropes her way back to the bedroom, fainting several times on the way, and once there she locks herself in, finds the revolver, starts a fire, and spends the day in bed dealing with the pain of her ankle, “out of which there emerged now and then a dim shape of fear . . . that she might lie there alone and untended till she died of cold, and of the terror of her solitude” (23).
The various kinds of fear that Mrs. Clayburn experiences are significant for the actions that she takes in response. Her fear of an intruder causes her to check the rooms and to see if anyone is hiding behind the drawing-room curtains (knowing is better than not, she concludes) or to consider defensive measures (wishing she had her revolver). However, a more philosophical fear emerges in response to the “speculative, conjectural, [and] ghostly emanation of the surrounding silence” (21) that motivates her search of the house and leaves her with the “terror of her [potential] solitude” (23). Her inarticulate and “ghostly” fear of the house’s silence and her lone state points to existential concerns beyond that of physical safety. To “know” whether her life will end in solitude becomes more important than whether a murderer is waiting for her in the house.

Her resistance to ending her life in solitude exists in contrast to and in the context of the various physical and cultural forces that restrict her, including her immobility and the narrator’s limiting perspective of her ordeal. However, while her cousin indulges in a great deal of “conjecture” (33) to flesh out the details of the events, his conjecture also emphasizes Mrs. Clayburn’s agency in keeping back details and presenting information in a way that confuses him. The narrator offers this disclaimer: “I have set down above, I hope without omitting anything essential, the record of my cousin’s strange experience as she told it to me. Of what happened at Whitegates that is all I can personally vouch for. The rest—and of course there is a rest—is pure conjecture, and I give it only as such” (33). His statement emphasizes both Mrs. Clayburn’s control over her story and the effort he expends to understand and interpret it. As he concludes, he indulges in additional conjecture about whether the maid Agnes (from the isle of Skye—the Hebrides being “full of the supernatural”) might have been a conduit to “the other side of the veil” (33) and the strange woman on the road to Whitegates a witch come to “summon” Agnes and the other servants to a “midnight ‘Coven’” (34). He assumes Mrs. Clayburn shares his feelings about Agnes, but, ultimately, many of these conclusions seem to be his alone. He notes that Mrs. Clayburn “always said she could not believe that incidents which might fit into the desolate landscapes of the Hebrides could occur in the cheerful and populous Connecticut valley; but if she did not believe,” he posits that “she at least feared” (34–35). Whenever he raises the subject, she reiterates that she does not intend to return to Whitegates and “risk seeing that woman” (35)—whether he refers to Agnes or the woman on the road is not clear.

The narrator’s description of Mrs. Clayburn’s feelings about the supernatural events as “fear” rather than “belief” invokes the various kinds of fears that she experiences while searching the house. As I noted, her fear of the
oppressive silence and potential solitude of her life prompts her to act but also causes the most psychological anguish. Although the narrator finds it curious that Mrs. Clayburn has no desire to return to Whitegates to solve the mystery—in contrast to her strong desire to know what’s going on as she searches the house—in the end, her will triumphs through her refusal to return. Ultimately, the oppressive force of the events do not overwhelm her since she chooses to avoid Whitegates altogether.

“Afterward” (1910) also involves an unresolved supernatural mystery, the disappearance of Ned Boyne at the hands of a ghost and Mary Boyne’s recognition of it as a predetermined fate predicted by Alida Stair when she first shows them the Lyng house in Dorsetshire. She warns them that they will not recognize the house’s ghost until “long long afterward” (71). Initially, the Boynes disregard this warning, but Mary experiences a supernatural affinity with the house, sensing its “mysterious stir of intenser emotions” (73). Several months into their stay, she concludes that “it was the house itself . . . that possessed the ghost-seeing faculty, that communed visually but secretly with its own past; if one could get into close enough communion with the house, one might surprise its secret, and acquire the ghost-sight on one’s own account” (75). Thus personified, the house reflects the qualities of both the “ghost-seer” and the “ghost-feeler,” the latter of which, as Wharton describes in the preface to *Ghosts* (1937), is “sensible of invisible currents of being in certain places and at certain hours” (vii). Mary assumes that she will not be able to tell if she sees or feels Lyng’s ghost “since, when one did see a ghost at Lyng, one did not know it” (76).

These reflections prompt her memory of an earlier occasion when a man approached the house. Boyne claims that the man disappeared, but his anxious look causes Mary to question his explanation. These questions, and the nagging concern about the house’s ghost, contribute to Mary’s anxiety, which escalates as the story progresses. Soon after the sighting of the unknown man, Mary receives a letter and newspaper clipping informing her of a suit brought against her husband by Bob Elwell in connection with Boyne’s work with the Blue Star Mine in the Midwestern United States, the windfall which has financed their new life and “the leisure to taste it” (72). With this news, Mary is “startled . . . to find how little she knew of the material foundation on which her happiness was built” (85), revealing, as Karen J. Jacobson argues, Wharton’s criticism in the story of the acquisition of wealth “through unscrupulous means” (104).

When a young man visits the house and asks for Boyne, Mary sends him to the library to meet her husband. The parlor maid later tells Mary that the two men have gone out together, and this is the last time Boyne is seen. Mary tries to make sense of the letter Boyne was writing just before he dis-
appeared—addressed to his lawyer, Parvis, and discussing Elwell’s death. Although she eventually absorbs the mystery as a normal part of her life, her strain is obvious: “There were even moments of weariness when, like the victim of some poison which leaves the brain clear, but holds the body motionless, she saw herself domesticated with the Horror, accepting its perpetual presence as one of the fixed conditions of life” (102). Like Mrs. Clayburn, Mary seeks to know what happened but believes that she will never know: “No, she would never know what had become of him—no one would ever know. But the house knew” (103). The house, with its ghost-seeing and ghost-feeling faculties, does not give up its secrets to her.

When Boyne’s lawyer Parvis visits Mary and reveals the extent of Boyne’s involvement in Bob Elwell’s death, Mary feels she would have been better off not knowing. Parvis says he cannot say if the deal was “straight” or not, but “it was business” (104) and “survival of the fittest” that allowed Boyne to profit from Elwell’s tip about the Blue Star Mine, “getting ahead” of Elwell, who was “less alert to seize the chance” (105). Jacobsen reads Boyne’s fate as an indication of the culture’s (and Wharton’s) “growing concern with the power of greed and lack of business ethics” among the nouveaux riches (104), and Mary’s desire to shield herself from the knowledge of Boyne’s business dealings is perhaps meant as a further indictment of the unethical behavior of her class. Mary comes face-to-face with the consequences of her husband’s questionable business ethics when she learns that Elwell shot himself because of the amount of money he had lost in the venture, hanging on to life for two months after his suicide attempt. When Parvis shows Mary Elwell’s photo in the newspaper, she recognizes him as the man who approached the house and then disappeared the previous October (just after attempting suicide) and then returned for Boyne two months later, after finally dying. As this knowledge dawns on her, “She felt the walls of books rush toward her, like inward falling ruins. . . . Through the tumult she heard . . . the voice of Alida Stair”: “You won’t know till long, long afterward” (112). Alida Stair’s words coincide with Mary’s realization that Elwell has enacted his revenge and, even worse, that she assisted by sending him to the library to meet Boyne (112).

The story implies the negative emotional consequences of women using their agency to gain knowledge while also suggesting that such knowledge is important to Mary’s realization of the cost of greed and corruption. Wharton emphasizes the inevitability of this conclusion as Alida Stair’s words set in motion the deterministic series of events that allow Mary to learn of Boyne’s deal. The experiences of Mary and Mrs. Clayburn suggest, paradoxically, that a lack of knowledge can support female protagonists’ efforts to resist the oppressive forces in their lives even as such a lack con-
firms traditional class and gender ideologies. As Jacqueline Wilson-Jordan argues, in relation to the attempts of Lady Jane Lynkes in Wharton’s “Mr. Jones” (1928) to acquire knowledge about her ancestral estate, such ideologies are “a formidable entity” and perhaps “even more threatening” when they assume “a ghostly shape” (79), emphasizing the power of forces constraining women characters in Wharton’s ghost stories.

In “Miss Mary Pask” (1925), the title character is also trapped by gender ideologies but has found a way to challenge them. On the urging of Grace Bridgeworth, the story’s male narrator visits Grace’s sister, Mary Pask. His nighttime journey through the sea fog is replete with Gothic trappings, his “feeble light” in the thick darkness rendering common objects along the way as “portentous and incredible” (227). Once he arrives, and the housekeeper admits him into the dark house, he remembers that Mary Pask is dead, recalling the announcement of her passing. When a figure resembling Mary Pask stands before him, he decides that this is her ghost. She describes the loneliness she has endured, claiming that “Grace thought she was always thinking of me, but she wasn’t. She called me ‘darling,’ but she was thinking of her husband and children. I said to myself then: ‘You couldn’t be lonelier if you were dead.’ But I know better now. . . . There’s been no loneliness like this last year’s . . . none!” (236–37). The narrator assumes she speaks of death’s solitude, but it becomes clear that she refers to a lifetime of being alone. The narrator’s arrival suggests an end to her loneliness: “Sometimes I sit here and think: ‘If a man came along some day and took a fancy to you?’” When the narrator attempts to leave, she springs toward him, exclaiming, “Oh, stay with me, stay with me . . . just tonight. . . . It’s so sweet and quiet here. . . . No one need know . . . no one will ever come and trouble us” (237).

Mary’s expression of desire reveals the “preoccupation with the self as seen or desired by the male other” (272) that Carole Singley attributes to the female Gothic. A gust of wind bursts through the window, “slamming back the loose-hinged lattice” (“Miss” 237), emphasizing the transgressive nature of Mary Pask’s request, which has been facilitated by her liminal state between life and death where, as Beer and Horner phrase it, “the usual distinctions between propriety and impropriety, between suppressed and expressed sexual desire are suspended” (273). The narrator gropes for the door and bolts into the night, unnerved by both her status as undead and the sexual nature of her proposal.

When he reviews these events, he tries to categorize Mary Pask’s desires: “Supposing it was a ghost I had been talking to, and not a mere projection of my fever? Supposing something survived of Mary Pask—enough to cry out to me the unuttered loneliness of a lifetime, to express at last what the living woman had always had to keep dumb and hidden?” The narrator
muses that “no end of women were like that, I supposed, and perhaps, after death, if they got their chance they tried to use it. . . . Old tales and legends floated through my mind; the bride of Corinth, the mediaeval vampire—but what names to attach to the plaintive image of Mary Pask!” (238). The narrator’s recognition of women’s stifled sexual lives and his assumption that such desires are taboo and only speakable as ghostly utterances after their deaths emphasize the cultural forces constraining women’s sexuality.

The narrator’s horrified reaction to Mary’s desire reveals the degree to which she has transgressed convention. When he tells Grace of his experience, she informs him that her sister is not dead at all. “Could it be simply that you never heard?” she asks. “She isn’t dead! . . . It was only a cataleptic trance. . . . An extraordinary case, the doctors say. . . . Surely she must have told you that she wasn’t dead?” (242–43). Although he and Grace discuss the subject into the night, the narrator concludes that he “couldn’t get up any real interest in what she said. I felt I should never again be interested in Mary Pask” (243). As long as he can interpret her sexual appetites as the ravings of a ghost, he feels sympathy for her loneliness, but knowing that she is alive he feels disgust and, even worse, disinterest. However, while Mary Pask is limited by conventions that dictate she can only express these desires in death, her manipulation of the narrator ultimately allows her to resist the cultural forces that silence her and suppress her desire.

Even the minimal degree of agency that Mary Pask wields is largely denied the women in “Bewitched” (1925). Saul Rutledge claims that he is bewitched by the ghost of Ora Brand, to whom he was betrothed years earlier but never married. Mrs. Rutledge calls in the church Deacon, a neighbor Orrin Bosworth, and Sylvester Brand—widower and father to Ora—to reverse the spell. Rutledge claims that Ora “draws” him, and that he is helpless to resist (261). The men plan to rendezvous the next evening at Lamer’s pond where Rutledge and Ora meet, but on the way home, they discover footprints in the snow near the pond. They follow the footsteps to a broken-down hovel, in which Brand seems to shoot the ghost of his dead daughter. Of course, a bullet is not the normal mode of dispatch for the already dead, and the dubious nature of the shooting of Ora Brand’s ghost is exacerbated three days later when Brand’s younger daughter, Venny, dies, supposedly of pneumonia. She is buried in the same grave as her sister, and Mrs. Rutledge observes that perhaps now Ora will “sleep quieter now . . . she don’t lay there alone any longer” (277). The unusual circumstances of Venny’s sudden death imply that Brand shot her in the Larmer pond shack and that perhaps she and Rutledge had been having an illicit affair. That Rutledge would blame the dead Ora for his indiscretion suggests that he needs an excuse to pre-
serve his marriage while his wife would rather insist on supernatural reasons for her husband’s actions than face the truth of his infidelity. The women characters suffer in order to support Rutledge’s indiscretions, and, unlike Mary Pask, the women in “Bewitched”—both dead and alive—do not have much license to speak their desires. However, Mrs. Rutledge seems to get the last word as she pronounces both Saul and Ora now at peace (277), exerting some control, despite the gender oppression she experiences, on the community’s interpretation of the events.

“Pomegranate Seed” (1931) similarly dramatizes women’s efforts to control their narratives, and, in this respect, the story is also reminiscent of Bunner Sisters. Charlotte Ashby lives on a street “long since deserted by business and fashion” (323), not unlike the Bunner’s “side-street already doomed to decline” (Bunner Sisters 309). Ann Eliza Bunner is grateful that her shop and apartment offer her refuge from the tumult of city streets, and the narrator of “Pomegranate Seed” similarly notes Charlotte’s appreciation in the first few months of her marriage to Kenneth Ashby of the street’s solitude, the “contrast between the soulless roar of New York, its devouring blaze of lights, the oppression of its congested traffic, congested houses, lives, minds and this veiled sanctuary she called home.” However, “in the last months, everything was changed, and she always wavered on the doorstep and had to force herself to enter” (323). Charlotte is plagued by the gray envelopes addressed in a female hand that are delivered for Kenneth; indeed “her mind had no room for anything else” (324) but the possibility of such a letter waiting for Kenneth on the hall table. She tries to imagine who the writer might be; she confronts him, but he refuses to divulge the sender or content of the letters.

The story charts Charlotte’s escalating jealousy caused by her uncertainty. Indeed, the mystery becomes “something conscious, malevolent” (343), not unlike the mystery in “Afterward,” a linguistic control that Kenneth wields; Charlotte thinks, “He knows what’s in the letter . . . while I’m still in darkness” (345). Charlotte’s status is already tenuous as Kenneth’s second wife, and while Charlotte appreciates and is not threatened by Kenneth’s devotion to his first wife, Elsie, her memory permeates the house and both Kenneth’s and Charlotte’s thoughts. Only near the end of the story, when Charlotte and Mrs. Ashby, her mother-in-law, have determined that the letters are from Elsie, summoning Kenneth from beyond the grave, and that he has responded to the call, does Charlotte understand the full extent of Elsie’s influence. This climax alludes to the myth of Persephone, goddess of fertility held captive in the underworld, from which the story’s title derives. Persephone must remain in the underworld for part of the year with
her husband, Hades, because she has eaten some pomegranate seeds while there. As the figure of Persephone, Elsie seems to have summoned her husband back to her in the underworld.4

While Charlotte is subject to forces of jealousy and suspicion that threaten to overwhelm her, the story ends with her and Mrs. Ashby taking definitive action, calling the police to report her husband’s disappearance. They have no doubt that Elsie has summoned Kenneth—indeed, Charlotte notes that she has “known for a long time now that everything was possible,” even this (365)—but they still take action in the world of the living. Mrs. Ashby says that Kenneth himself will give the explanation for what has happened: “But meanwhile we must act; we must notify the police. Now, without a moment’s delay. We must do everything—everything.” Charlotte asks, “Exactly as if we thought it could do any good to do anything?” And Mrs. Ashby answers “Yes!” while Charlotte picks up the telephone receiver (367). The story’s ending parallels that of Bunner Sisters, in which, despite overwhelming forces, a female protagonist continues to act and strive as if her actions will result in positive results. Charlotte’s and Mrs. Ashby’s actions at the conclusion of “Pomegranate Seed” dramatize female striving as evidence of humanistic value even in the face of Naturalistic conditions and against impossible odds of success, a situation similar to the other female protagonists of Wharton’s ghost stories.

Such representations challenge the resignation that is often assumed of Naturalist characters in much scholarly criticism. Wharton depicts her female characters engaged in human struggles that allow them to retain their dignity and a level of agency despite difficult and even seemingly insurmountable circumstances. The fact that Wharton stages this dialectic in the context of the Gothic emphasizes not only the literary importance of the Gothic in her work but also the larger cultural interventions that the Gothic allows her to present in her fiction.

Notes

1. See Wentzel for a discussion of Wharton’s use of myth and classical literature.
2. Quotations from Wharton’s ghost stories are from Ghosts (1937).
3. See DeLamotte.
4. Critics have read all three main characters as Persephone (Wentzel 22).


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