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Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice



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Teaching American Literature: A Journal of Theory and Practice
Fall 2020 (11:2) Special Issue, Teaching Horror in the
American Literature Classroom

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Introduction

Many years ago, Chris Brawley and I bonded over horror fiction. I hadn’t read any H. P. Lovecraft at the time and Chris couldn’t stop talking about him. I began with *The Shadow over Innsmouth* and spent an entire summer reading just about everything Lovecraft wrote. After that summer, every conversation Chris and I had began with “what have you been reading good lately?” The subtext was, “what have you been reading that is strange, weird, spooky, and other?”

Although we both agree that the stories of M. R. James and Algernon Blackwood are some of our favorites, our tastes in the weird and supernatural mostly go in different directions. I am an unrepentant reader of 19th-century British and American ghost stories and I have been making my way through all nineteen volumes of *The Wimbourne Book of Victorian Ghost Stories*. Stories of the supernatural by American authors such as Edith Wharton and Mary Wilkins Freeman are among my favorites. Chris, on the other hand, has more of a taste for the American writers Thomas Ligotti and Edgar Allan Poe (he greatly appreciated the Poe mug I brought him back from the Poe Museum in Richmond, Virginia). His favorite Jeff VanderMeer collection is *The Weird: A Compendium of Strange and Dark Stories*, whereas mine is *The Big Book of Modern Fantasy*.

But two works we both agree are indisputably important to the genres of horror and the Weird are Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. Chris was able to

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secure Leslie Klinger, the editor of *The New Annotated Frankenstein*, for Sensoria, Central Piedmont Community College's art festival, in 2018. The auditorium was packed and students loved his talk. Both *Frankenstein* and *Dracula* are taught in British Literature classrooms to great critical acclaim, but there is not similar space granted in the American Literature classroom for the teaching of American horror/supernatural and the Weird. Why is that?

I think I have part of the answer. When Chris was working on his PhD at Florida State University, he struggled with getting his readers on board with his topic of the numinous in the fantasy fiction of C. S. Lewis and J. R. R. Tolkien. Why? Fantasy fiction is just not valued as much as "classic" literary works in the literature classroom. I believe the same holds true for the Weird and the supernatural. This is fringe material with only the most "literary" of works, such as Poe or Gilman's "The Yellow Wall-Paper" included in most anthologies. Yet students love reading "creepy" and "weird s@#%." They will never complain about being assigned a Poe short story, for example, even though Poe really is difficult reading.

In this issue, we present articles by scholars who have found ways to integrate supernatural and Weird fiction, and even poetry, film, and graphic novels, into their syllabi. They explain how they do so, and more importantly, why they do so. What is the point? What do students get out of reading the Weird, other than entertainment?

José Antonio Arellano answers that question in "Screwed in 2020: The Psychology of Horror and Class Immobility in Adaptations of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*" by offering an approach to teaching two adaptations of Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* that appeared in 2020, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* and *The Turning*, through the lens of the psychology of horror. We know that by providing students with interpretive lenses through which to read literature, we help them become more critical thinkers in all areas, not just in literature. By examining contemporary adaptations of historical works, we also help students see the value of "literature," which like art, has long term value, rather than fulfilling an immediate disposable entertainment itch.

Alisa Burger sees value in adaptations of classic horror as well. "In Visualizing Poe: Graphic Novels, *Extraordinary Tales*, and *The Simpsons*," she takes us on a journey of teaching graphic novels based on Poe; Raul Garcia's 2013 film, *Extraordinary Tales*; and several episodes of *The Simpsons*. Her examination of these adaptations of Poe's work in the classroom in Burger's words, prompts students to "consider critical questions of

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adaptation, the active and purposeful negotiation of texts, and Poe's influence on contemporary culture."

In Russell Brickey's "Weird Language and Weirder Places: Reading and Teaching the Weird in Poetry," he introduces us to poems by James Tate, Mary Oliver, and Charles Simic to demonstrate the mechanics of the Weird, a category that most scholars would probably not have thought these poets belonged to. As Brickey says in his article, "These poems take the reader into the subconscious to find new ways to displace the ordinary and imply a link to the numinous without actually explicating this relationship." He offers us a way to move students to see what is not readily apparent, to see the ghosts running the poetic machines.

Laura L. Beadling's "Weirding Women's Writing: Karen Russell's 'St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves' as a Defamiliarizing Lens" exploits the othering quality of Weird fiction to help students enter into the narratives of othered American women's writing. She uses Karen Russell's short story "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" as she says, "in conversation with Zikala-Ša's life writing in her 1921 work *American Indian Stories* and Jamaica Kincaid's prose poem 'Girl'."

And finally, some practical advice from Patricia West. From West's article abstract: "Presenting Mystery, Mayhem, and Madness: Getting Students to Read and Respond to Crazy American Literary Texts" discusses methods to select texts, emphasizes the importance of having a sense of student audience, and prioritizing author diversity in terms of race, gender, and other identities in course design. In a 2020 blog posting by Mel Ashford, "8 Weird Genre Fiction Books by Diverse Authors," Ashford says that "One of the best things about speculative fiction and Weird speculative fiction is that it is full of diversity." This has historically not always been the case. The world of speculative fiction, including horror, has been pretty white, and for many decades predominantly male. West reminds us that "when creating any course content, instructors should be guided by our student audience and author diversity in terms of gender, race, and culture." Amen.

Chris and I had a wonderful time reviewing the articles submitted for this issue. I hope it is not the last time that we hear about the vastly diverse world of the Weird and the supernatural and how we can make more space for it in our American Literature classrooms. We also hope that you enjoy the issue.

Patricia K. Bostian and Chris Brawley, Central Piedmont Community College

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José Antonio Arellano, Screwed in 2020: the Psychology of Horror and Class Immobility in Adaptations of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*

Abstract: This essay offers an approach to teaching two adaptations of Henry James's novella *The Turn of the Screw* that appeared in 2020. Instead of prompting students to consider whether James's story is either a supernatural or a psychological tale, I ask students to analyze the "psychology of horror." Developed from Robin Wood's writing on horror films, the psychology of horror offers a historicized account of Freudian repression. Using the psychology of horror as an interpretive lens, students could examine how historically situated social norms become sources of oppression that lead to repression. In horror, ghosts—of either the supernatural or psychological variety—could be understood as representing the return of the socially repressed. An analysis of the 2020 adaptations of James's novella reveals how gendered, heteronormative expectations and class immobility produce the ghosts that haunt us today.

If Stephen King is right to suggest that the "horror genre has often been able to find national phobic pressure points" (3), then what might students say about the adaptations of Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) that appeared in 2020? What "political, economic, and psychological" fears do these adaptations help us identify (King 5)?¹ Through Mike Flanagan's popular Netflix series *The Haunting of Bly Manor* and Floria Sigismondi's film *The Turning*, the horrors of *The Turn of the Screw* continue to feel relevant. Although both were produced before the genuinely horrifying events of 2020, a year full of emergencies that appear to affirm the apocalypticism that characterized the very start of this century, the adaptations nevertheless capture the pervasive feeling of precarity that saturates our world today.

James's "little fiction" (123) continues to be a staple in American literature and literary theory classes because the tale's ambiguity allows students to practice the skill of interpretation and consider its mysteries. How *does* one arrive at an interpretation when the evidence does not appear conclusive? Is the governess a troubled writer who projects a narrative that encapsulates everyone around her, or is she a skilled reader who can understand what lies beyond the surface of mere appearance? It is, however, less productive

¹ I am grateful to my colleague Mark Kaufman, who teaches a popular class on horror film, for pointing me to Stephen King's idea of "phobic pressure points," Robin Wood's work on "surplus repression," and Peter Hutchings's phrase "the psychology of horror."

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to encourage students to consider *The Turn of the Screw* as either a supernatural or a psychological tale and have their interpretive work be settled with their conclusion. Instead, students could recognize the “psychology of horror” wherein a haunted house is itself, as Peter Hutchings argues, “an expression of something that has been repressed psychologically by the characters associated with the house” (56). By developing a historicized Freudian account of repression, following the work of Robin Wood, students could begin to study how social norms can become internalized to such an extent that the norms become “surplus repression” (Wood 25). This surplus repression will be “specific to a particular culture and is the process whereby people are conditioned from earliest infancy to take on predetermined roles within that culture” (Wood 25). Social norms that police sexuality and gender, for example, could become forms of oppression that result in surplus repression. Ghosts represented in horror in this view spiritually embody a society’s return of the repressed.

Ghosts thus understood depict what is existentially dangerous to a social order maintained by prescribed roles. Wood provides a list of examples of such repressions, including the policing of “sexual energy,” “bisexuality,” and “the denial of the infant’s nature as a sexual being to the veto on the expression of sexuality before marriage” (26). This list makes clear that Wood’s theory of horror films could be fruitfully applied to the repressions depicted in James’s *The Turn of the Screw*. As Eric Savoy reminds us, the 1890s witnessed “the era of the Oscar Wilde trials, the consequent policing of aberrant sexualities, and the cultural fetishization of childhood innocence” (135). Ghosts, understood as the return of the repressed, threaten the very normalizing stories that perpetuate the status quo.

Insofar as a study of James’s *The Turn of the Screw* connects students to the ghosts of the 1890s, a study of contemporary adaptations welcomes an interrogation of the present and its relation to history. Instructors can enable students to ask: What was scary then and what remains scary now? By studying the possibilities and limitations of textual narrative and visual forms of art, students can consider how serialized novellas, Netflix serials, and films *work*, how they enable meaning. The aesthetic experience of watching adaptations, in short, welcomes narratological analysis as well as historical analysis and comparison.

Whereas James provided a serialized story that captivated the reading public of the 1890s, Netflix provides a series seemingly tailored for the era of “safer at home” binge-watching. Viewers could pause the episodes to search for the ghostly Easter eggs included

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throughout the series. In the type of coincidental prescience that feels preternatural, the very first episode of *The Haunting* features several sightings of a ghostly 17th-century plague doctor who lurks in the corners, unseen by anyone but the assiduous viewer who has read the online articles listing the Easter eggs.² The doctor wears the customary outfit meant to protect him from contagion: a long overcoat, a wide-brimmed hat, and a long-beaked mask. The ghost's appearance within the *mise en scène* seems to remind us, like Edgar Allan Poe's "The Masque of the Red Plague," that we can indulge and binge all we want, trying to forget the troubles "outside" by escaping into our pleasures. But perhaps already creeping in our midst, the ghost of infection lingers and waits.

As I show in what follows, however, the horrors that the Netflix series and Sigismondi's film highlight are not simply those of compromised health. The adaptations implicitly highlight the economic insecurities that structure the lives of college students who prepare to engage in a world that no longer appears to respond to the sense-making narratives and conventions of previous generations. Class immobility appears as the lurking specter, simultaneously hidden from view but visible everywhere should one choose to look.

The Turning

Considering the psychology of horror is especially revealing for an analysis of Sigismondi's film *The Turning* (2020). Even if students were to settle on a psychological or a supernatural reading, they could continue to analyze the repressions the movie's ghosts make evident. Both psychological and supernatural interpretations could identify the depicted fear of intergenerational influence. The protagonist Kate Mandell worries that she has inherited her mother's mental illness, which could be causing her to hallucinate. As Mrs. Grose says to Kate, "Whatever your mother has, let's hope it's not genetic" (1:16:30-1:16:37). Similarly, Mrs. Grose worries that Quint was a "terrible influence" on Miles (58:30-58:36), an influence that becomes evident when Miles describes Quint's horse riding lessons. "That's how Quint taught me," says Miles, "If you don't exert power over it then you'll never gain control" (0:42:23-42:34). The insidious nature of this advice becomes clear in scenes depicting Quint's escalating sexual harassment that ends in rape and murder. So whether it

² Jason Mittell's use of Robert Allen's notion of *reader-oriented poetics* would be useful here to describe the cross-media interplay of watching the online series and reading online fan sites about the series (6).

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is Kate's mother's genetics or Quint's behavioral influence, previous generations haunt the present.

This haunting assumes a class dynamic as Quint's sexual predation is linked to class antagonism. Mrs. Grose characterizes Quint as "a brute" and "an animal" because he "walked around this place like he owned it. [He] even moved himself into the master suite" (0:58:00-0:58:11). Quint, in other words, began to "exert power" over the property, thereby attempting to "gain control." By connecting sexual predation with class ambition, the film aligns violent, predatory behavior with class transgression. Quint does not respect personal boundaries or the boundaries of property. And although Miles will become the legal owner of the estate, he begins to wear Quint's clothes, notably a ratty sweater with conspicuous holes. Quint personifies the threat of class transgression that refuses to maintain class's boundaries. He steals from the upper class and corrupts its children, made evident by Miles's violent behavior and acquired *déclassé* sensibility.

Kate calls Miles's / Quint's sweater "cool" (0:27:45-0:27:50) because the movie is set in 1994. Early in the film, a television broadcasts the news of Kurt Cobain's memorial service as Kate holds up a pair of ripped jeans. She considers packing the ripped jeans for her new job but her roommate comments, "That's not how fancy nannies dress" (0:2:19-0:2:23). Like the governess in James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Kate's education will also enable her to witness how the upper class lives. She leaves behind a roommate, an apartment, and a teaching job where she was responsible for an overcrowded classroom. As she tells her roommate, Rose, "I'm going from 25 screaming kids to one little girl. How hard can it be?" (0:3:40-0:3:46). So like the cheap thrift store sweaters that Cobain made famous during the 1990s, Quint's ripped sweater has the working-class sensibility that was salient during the grunge era.³

Kate, while not exactly part of Quint's working class, does not belong to Miles and Flora's class either. She appears as an ingénue unfamiliar with the upper class's mores. When they first meet, Mrs. Grose asks Kate, "Have you ever been a live-in governess?" to which Kate jokingly responds, "No, no, not since the 1800s" (0:9:23-0:9:34). Her response

³ See Kreps, Daniel. "Kurt Cobain's 'Unplugged' Sweater Sells for Record \$334,000 at Auction." *Rolling Stone*, 26 October 2019, <https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-news/kurt-cobain-unplugged-sweater-sells-334000-auction-904246/>.

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highlights Mrs. Grose's atavistic characterization of the job, which Kate herself describes using the neoliberal terminology of independent contracting: "I'm a private tutor" (0:2:23-0:2:27). Kate's response invites viewers to consider the relevance of the 1800s to the 1990s.

Mrs. Grose, who in the movie kills Quint, appears as the embodiment of the class ideology that polices boundaries and naturalizes class positions. When Kate asks Miles to take his used dishes to the kitchen—and he responds by asking, "Want me to cut the grass, too?" (0:30:00-0:30:12) and pointing out "That's her [Mrs. Grose's] job, right?" (0:30:20-0:30:22)—Mrs. Grose sides with Miles. Taking up Miles's rhetorical questioning, Mrs. Grose reminds the ingénue, "They were born into privilege, Kate. Can you please remember that? [...] This is my job. You do yours" (0:30:39- 0:31:25). Mrs. Grose describes her life-long job as Bly Manor's maid as "an honor" instead of as a source of income (0:10:13-0:10:17); yet, she calls Miles and Flora "very special" because "they're thoroughbreds" (0:09:42-0:09:47). Mrs. Grose articulates the beliefs that justify how some people are born into privilege, which is a product of their bloodlines, while others are born into a life of servitude. As a relic of earlier centuries' ideology, Mrs. Grose provides the historical connection between the 1890s of James's *Turn of the Screw* and the 1990s of the film's setting.

By recalling the economic context of the 1990s, we could begin to understand the symbolic importance of the film's grunge sensibility. This style is not the result of mere nostalgia for the 1990s, nor is it simply the result of the director Sigismondi's experience as a well-known music video director of that era. The style, instead, is symptomatic of the economic reality structuring the lives of the musicians who rose to prominence during the 1990s. Grunge rock emerged from the ashes of the industrial towns that had been wrecked by the American economy's transition away from manufacturing during the 1970s and the depletion of union protections for workers' jobs during the 1980s. A 1992 issue of *Rolling Stone* describes Cobain's working class background in Aberdeen, Washington, as a "depressed logging town" with "pervasive unemployment" (Azerrad). And the journalist Steven Kurutz, who grew up across the country in central Pennsylvania, could relate to this economic reality all too well: "I thought: replace timber with the railroad and it sounds like home!" Kurutz describes how the emerging grunge rock stars were dressed like his working-class family. The singer Chris Cornell's "lace-up Dr. Martens, worn on stage at Lollapalooza '92 were a version of the work boots my father wore to his job as an engine mechanic." Grunge music was "recessionary music, made by underemployed slackers" (Kurutz). The

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Rolling Stone article reveals an uncanny relation between the 1800s and the 1990s when it comments how during the 1990s, Cobain's hometown of Aberdeen "had seen better days—namely, during the whaling era in the mid-nineteenth century, when the town served as one big brothel for visiting sailors" (Azerrad). The characterization of the 1850s as "better days" begs the question: for *whom* were these days "better"?

The Turning shows different but related challenges that women continue to endure. In a moment of desperation, Kate calls her old roommate Rose. The movie cuts from Kate calling from a payphone to a close-up shot of the refrigerator in her old apartment, which displays a picture of Kate surrounded by all 25 of her previous students. The shot is so tight that all of the children do not fit within the frame, emphasizing the overcrowded nature of the classroom. Rose, shown wearing Kate's torn jeans, answers the phone by saying, "This is Rose's assistant. How may I help you?" (0:51:32-0:51:38). Rose's greeting reveals a reality that contingent workers face, that of existing simultaneously as one's own employer and employee, without benefits or job security. Kate went from being a teacher of 25 to a teacher of two, but the movie does not suggest whether she, as a "private tutor," will have access to healthcare and a living wage.

One of the prominent fears that *The Killing* makes visible, then, is the fear that today's class mobility is hauntingly similar to that of the 1800s. Perhaps one's family, zip code, and body type continue to determine one's position in the world. Mrs. Grose's statement to Kate, "We can't choose our family" (1:16:05-1:16:17), comes across as overdetermined, suggesting not only the genetic nature of mental illness but also the potentially inherited quality of one's position within a class hierarchy. *The Turning* offers the horrifying possibility that we are still living in the aftermath of ghost/industrial towns that have yet to recover. The ghosts of the 19th-century class immobility and the ghosts of the 20th-century economic transformations continue to haunt the present.

The Haunting of Bly Manor

The Netflix series *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, created by Mike Flanagan, offers a remarkably related set of issues involving class and gender. By using multiple frame narratives and embedded historical flashbacks, *The Haunting of Bly Manor's* complex discursive temporality invites historical analysis and comparison. Because all of the episodes were released at once, Netflix creates the conditions for "immersive and attentive viewing

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experiences” driven by the “mad rush for narrative payoff” (Mittell 36). Cliffhanger endings and deferred exposition drive an audience to press forward, while the temporal complexity of the narrative rewards close analysis. Several episodes replay previous scenes in light of new exposition, thereby teaching viewers the importance of rewatching, of thinking about narrative temporarily in light of what we learn, and of the role of history as such.

The Haunting’s initial framing narrative is set in northern California in the year 2007, and the ghost story told within this frame is set in England during the 1980s. In the ghost story, Danielle “Dani” Clayton applies for a job in London in 1987, and we learn that she had been searching for employment for over six months. A scene in a bar presents her circling ads in the help wanted section of a newspaper. Dani is a teacher who has left her life in America because she cannot bear the heteronormative expectations, which end up haunting her in the form of her ex-fiancé who died. His ghost appears to continuously demand that she uphold her side of the story: she is a woman who is to marry her childhood sweetheart and live happily ever after. Dani is thus haunted by the ghost of gendered expectations.

At Bly Manor, however, she encounters a different set of ghosts that are the product of a similar set of gendered expectations. Viewers do not learn about the source of Bly Manor’s haunting until the penultimate episode. Shown in black and white, this decidedly historical episode takes place in the 17th century and depicts the situation of two sisters named Rosaline and Perdita. The death of their father forces them to consider the “dire necessity for marriage” (“The Romance” 2:41-2:47). As women without a man to legitimize their claim to their manor and wealth, they would lose everything they owned. As the narrator puts it, “Women in that time had nothing. No present, no future, without a tie to a man” (“The Romance” 3:01-3:10). The women’s existential temporality depends on the existence of a man who can legitimate their present and future. Without such a man, the women are tied to a past—their father—that is now dead. Like the character Rosalind from James’s story, “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes,” that inspires the episode, Viola’s name alludes to Shakespeare’s comedies. Viola’s “wit” described by the narrator (“The Romance” 3:31-3:34), echoes another of Shakespeare’s comedic heroines, the ever witty and independent Beatrice of *Much Ado About Nothing*. Just as Beatrice swears off marriage but finds herself caught in a plot that ends in her agreeing to marry, Viola, too, will have to marry because she is caught within the social plot of a patriarchal society. But unlike Beatrice, Viola and her sister Perdita themselves plot to trap their cousin to marry and thereby keep their wealth within the family.

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By playing the game on her terms, Viola nominally changes the patrilineal line of inheritance to a matrilineal one. The “innumerable yards of lustrous silk and satin, of muslin, velvet, and lace from all over the world, and all manner of expense. Some as rare and rich as if there were spun of threads of jewels” (“The Romance” 10:50-11:01) will become “a great inheritance of [her] daughter” (“The Romance” 24:49-24:52). After Viola dies, her spirit possesses these material possessions.

The very source of the haunting of Bly Manor, then, is the danger of an independent woman. Viola’s refusal, during the marriage ceremony, to recite the oath “to obey” her husband during the in marriage (“The Romance” 6:44-7:13), and her refusal, during the Extreme Unction, “to go” where she is told in death (“The Romance” 15:30-15:31), can be read as a rejection of the sacramental injunctions connected to the ur-patriarch. This very expression of her “considerable will” (45:13-45:17) creates a competing source of “gravity”: a “gravity of will” (“The Romance” 45:39-45:42). Viola’s spirit is trapped within Bly Manor, becoming the lady under the lake and thereby reversing the lake-as-womb metaphor.⁴ Instead of representing the productive source of life, this lake becomes the source of her inescapable gravity, a black hole of death. Independent women like Viola and Beatrice pose a threat to such a society because of their refusal to perpetuate the patrilineal lines. Were they to heed their own sexual desires, they would become the sources of illegitimacy instead of perpetuating the aristocratic lines.

This source of horror grates against the class antagonism personified by the twentieth-century ghosts of Peter Quint and Rebecca Jessel, those born not into the aristocracy but into the working class. They are concerned not with the maintenance of their property via inheritance; rather, they are concerned with the gaining of property and possessions through cunning. The working class must plot their way to try to achieve class mobility because the narrative of grit and gumption is betrayed by uncontrollable obstacles. Rebecca can work as hard as she can but will be limited by her gendered, racialized body. And although Peter is a white male dressed in (stolen) expensive tailored clothing, the moment he speaks, he evinces his background. “Growing up where I did,” says Peter in what is considered an unpolished accent, “I’m quite simply not part of the fucking club” (“Two Faces, Part One” 22:21-22:25).

⁴ See Wilson, Edmund. “The Ambiguity of Henry James.” *The Turn of the Screw*. 2nd ed. (Norton Critical Editions), W. W. Norton, 1999. 171-173.

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Peter ingratiate himself with a barrister and begins to embezzle money and steal from his country estate. Rebecca wants to be a barrister, not simply a solicitor, a goal that requires mentorship that, for women, comes at the cost of sexual harassment. Rebecca attempts to circumvent male sexual entitlement by becoming the au pair of a successful barrister's dependents. Her attempts will be futile, argues Peter, because "we're always gonna be the help in their eyes" ("The Altar" 34:57-35:19). Peter will not become a partner in the law firm and she will not be given the necessary pupillage to advance her legal career because they will be kept in their place—in their class. Referring to the self-serving ideology that perpetuates the status quo by naturalizing everyone's class status, Peter says, "I mean, everybody wants something in life, and somehow our betters have convinced us that's a bad thing" ("The Two Faces, Part One" 20:15-20:33). Ideology convinces those like Peter and Rebecca to stay where they rightfully belong.

Peter and Rebecca dare to dream above their allotted station, and this desire to transgress the boundaries of the established social order poses a threat to its maintenance. Peter and Rebecca personify the specter of class antagonism and revolution. It stands to reason that, while Peter attempts to steal from Bly Manor, Viola's ghost murders him unexpectedly. The ghost of an independent woman who wants to create a matrilineal line of inheritance thus creates the ghosts of class ambition. The ghosts of repressed class antagonism haunt the children of the privileged, those without glass ceilings, threatening to possess their very bodies.

By the last episode of the series, the multiple narratives are resolved in the most conventional of endings that almost neutralizes the horror of the series. Whereas Viola wishes to be independent, Flora, now an adult, worries that perhaps her husband will die before she does. "How am I supposed to just live a life that he's not in?" she tearfully asks ("The Beast" 43:40-44:00). The historical difference the series exposes, ultimately, is between the thought of marriage understood as imposed by societal pressure and marriage understood as willfully chosen because of love. This is why the adult Flora wants to recharacterize the story from one involving ghosts to one fundamentally about love. "You said it was a ghost story," she says, "It's a love story" ("The Beast" 42:16-42:40).

The final wedding scene eases the existential dread: society will continue and everything will be OK. Yet, this scene is set in 2007 and the threat of economic crisis looms. In 2008, the investment bank Lehman Brothers will collapse, initiating a devastating recession

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the effects of which continue to haunt us today. *The Haunting's* almost comedic ending is thus haunted by what the wedding scene would like to repress. The reality of class instability threatens us all.

Jamesian Horror Today

The popularity of these recent adaptations provide a ready-to-hand answer to the question my students have asked: Why read Henry James today? Watching the adaptations allows students to consider how the horrors *The Turn of the Screw* made available remain relevant. And by using the “psychology of horror” as an interpretive lens, students could recognize how the horror genre could represent “our collective nightmares” that are repressed from our conscious minds (Wood 30).

The adaptations update the themes of gender and class present in James’s original story and invite students to make historical comparisons. In Sigismondi’s film, Flora mistakenly dates an old mirror to the 1980s instead of the 1880s, and she attributes her great-great-uncle’s death to “dentistry” instead of “dysentery” (0:15:33-0:15:52). These mistakes could prompt a series of questions: What *is* the relationship between the 1880s and 1980s? And what is the relationship between a profession and a disease? As we saw above, the film asks viewers to consider how mental health and class status are too often predetermined— class status understood as an inherited disease.

In the Netflix series, the difficulty Dani has trying to find a job in England in 1987 would have been shared by many workers looking for employment in Margaret Thatcher’s changing England. Thatcher led her party to a resounding electoral victory in 1987, which witnessed rates of unemployment that had not been seen since the 1930s.⁵ The series invites viewers to consider the relationship, too, between England and the United States. As Peter Quint tells Rebecca Jessel, “The only thing the English care about is class. But the only thing Americans care about is money. And if I had enough of that in the States... I can be anything at all... with money” (“The Altar” 35:13-35:55). The imaginative possibilities he offers Rebecca, however, are the stuff of unattainable fantasy. He tells her how, in America, they can pretend to be “A

⁵ See Rogers, Simon. “How Britain Changed under Margaret Thatcher. In 15 Charts.” *The Guardian*, 8 Apr. 2013, www.theguardian.com/politics/datablog/2013/apr/08/britain-changed-margaret-thatcher-charts. Had Dani been searching for a job via newspaper ads just a year prior, the newspaper she would have used could have been part of a massive print union strike. The workers involved in that strike, considered obsolete, were dismissed.

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lord and his lady. No, a queen and her stable boy” (“The Altar” 36:39-36:56). In America, of course, there are no such things as lords, and certainly no queens. Americans might only care about money, but money is what determines class status. A nightmare of class immobility, wherein some people do not have access to money, haunts the American dream.

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JOSÉ ANTONIO ARELLANO is an Assistant Professor of English and Fine Arts at the United States Air Force Academy. His publications, some of which are forthcoming in

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Forma Journal, *Race in American Literature and Culture*, and *The Cambridge Companion to Race and American Literature*, explore the fraught relationship between Chicana literature and working-class politics. His current research studies the history of aesthetics and formalism in twentieth century Mexican American literature.

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Laura L. Beadling, Weirding Women's Writing: Karen Russell's "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" as a Defamiliarizing Lens

Abstract:

Weird literature is a defamiliarizing literature. This article examines how Karen Russell's short story "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves," from her 2006 collection of the same name, can be used to help students see other women's writing from new perspective. Specifically, the article examines the perceptual shifts enabled by Weird literature as explored by Mark Fisher and Elvia Wick. Wick uses the terms figure and ground to explore how Weird literature can enable a shift in readers' perception between which characters are meant to be figure—agents and subjects—and which are meant to be ground—simply background for the figures. Weird literature, she argues, can switch the figure and ground. By reading Russell's short story, students are prepared to examine characters in other women's writing in these terms. In particular, this essay puts Russell's work into conversation with Zikala-Ša's life writing in her 1921 work *American Indian Stories* and Jamaica Kincaid's prose poem "Girl."

In my early teaching of women's writing, in both general literature classes and classes focused on women's writing, I can see that one blind spot: not much beyond realism. At the time, I believed I was providing breadth in these various survey classes by including not only long and short fiction but also plays, poetry, graphic works, and screen works that ranged widely in tone and subject matter. It hasn't been until recently that I have incorporated works from science fiction, horror, and the Weird into my teaching of literature generally.

When a colleague retired a few semesters ago, I inherited his beloved Science Fiction and Fantasy Literature course. While I have been a fan of this literature since childhood, it did not play much role in my teaching. I quickly saw the power of these works to ignite student interest. However, beyond that (and that in itself is no small thing) I began to appreciate how Weird literature in particular can defamiliarize other authors' realist writings and enable students to look in new ways at more familiar stories and topics. I began to look for ways to incorporate some of these Weird works into my survey courses not only because of the salutary effect they have on student interest and participation but, more importantly, because of how works of Weird literature complement my goals for teaching literature.

Defamiliarization is not only one of the main tools and methods of Weird literature but also of my teaching. In a roundtable among writers of Weird literature hosted on *SF Signal*, Rjurik Davidson asserts that Weird literature is enjoyable and important because it "disturbs"

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the reader, which he calls an “essential experience.” Rather than prefiguring some “cathartic return to the normal,” which he says is frequently true of horror, often a conservative genre, Weird literature prioritizes “disturbance” which “unhinges our conceptions of the world. It disrupts ‘truths’ and ‘certainties’ and ‘common sense.’ It makes us see things in a new way. It asks us to question our previous beliefs.” This is also a good description of the effect I seek to achieve in my teaching, especially my teaching of general education liberal arts classes.

One way that Weird literature can defamiliarize the world to students is by enabling what Mark Fisher calls a “perceptual shift” in which the reader can “see the inside from the perspective of the outside” (10). Building on this, Elvia Wick points out that H. P. Lovecraft, as the point of origin for Weird literature, highlights the potential problems as well as the possibilities of Weird fiction. Lovecraft’s racism and xenophobia are well known and, as Wilk notes, his protagonists were usually white men whose superiority is threatened by figures from the weird outside. She notes that “certain marginalized bodies have always been designated weird: historically aligned with the ‘outside,’ the freaky, the abnormal, the exotic.” She points to Marlon James who succinctly notes just this dynamic in Lovecraft’s work by writing that “the other always comes from the South. The other always comes from darkness . . . it’s always coming from the outside . . . the dark continent.” In her own argument, Wilk uses the metaphor of figure and background by which means she investigates which characters are meant to be portrayed as agents and focalizers and which serve as passive or unknowable background for those characters. In Lovecraft, the white protagonist is the figure and the Others, whether monsters or monstrous strangers, are background.

In light of Weird’s origin, Wilk conceives of the radical potential of Weird literature in terms of not just rewriting it so that more diverse characters are figures (which in itself is important) but argues that “to weird” fiction today could be “to map the same strangeness certain subjects have historically been afforded onto other subjects in order to reveal the inherent strangeness of all such constructs.” Paraphrasing Fisher, Wilk notes that what she finds particularly valuable in Weird literature is how it enables “perceptual shifts” that can “relocate the weird other from the outside to within.” This is one way that Weird literature can pair productively with a variety of women’s writing.

What follows is not meant to be exhaustive and, indeed, Russell’s story could make an interesting companion piece to any number of works by women writers specifically. These might include Sui Sin Far (Edith Maude Eaton), Flannery O’Connor, Miné Okubo, Diane

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Glancy, Hisaye Yamamoto, Louise Erdrich, Alice Munro, and many others. The point of this particular essay is to demonstrate how pairing Weird literature like Russell's with more commonly anthologized works of women's writing can lead to not only increased student engagement via intriguing comparisons but also productive discussions that may enable students to experience such "perceptual shifts" that might unsettle their views of the everyday.

One of my major goals for my general education literature classes is to have students question what they think they know and to see the familiar with new eyes. One way that I have done this recently is by incorporating Weird literature, particularly Karen Russell's short story "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves," from her 2006 collection of the same name. Specifically, because of its themes of assimilation, colonization, identity, and liminality, this story works well when paired with work by other women writers, and this essay will specifically examine how Russell's work complements Zikala-Ša's life writing and Jamaica Kincaid's prose poem "Girl."

For those who have not read Russell's short story, a brief summary might be useful. The story deals with a group of children sent to boarding school by their parents in order to have different opportunities in life. Specifically, though, these children are the children of lycanthropes who live an "outsider's existence" shunned by both the local humans and wolves in their part of the forest. The condition skips a generation, thus making their offspring unlike their parents who change each month. The parents send their children to be reeducated by nuns so that they will be able to live in human society. The nuns follow *The Jesuit Handbook on Lycanthropic Culture Shock* and strive to teach the girls to be proper young ladies, able to make small talk and dance the Sausalito.

The story follows the remaking of the wild and exuberant wolf girls into young ladies suited for human gender and social roles. This remaking is accomplished via education about etiquette, language, etc. and the story is structured into five parts that mirror the five steps of overcoming culture shock outlined in *The Handbook*. As the "we" of the pack consciousness eventually becomes the "I" of Claudette, who emerges as the focal character, the story stresses the costs to both collective and individual well-being as identity is reforged into an unfamiliar shape. Claudette falls somewhere between the two other main wolf girl characters: Jeanette, who seems to quickly acclimatize to the nuns' expectations, and Mirabella, the youngest and wildest who cannot forget the ways of the pack and who begins to embarrass the other girls who are trying to make "progress."

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The climax takes place at a mixer where the girls are reintroduced to their brothers until, under the stress of being evaluated by the nuns and watched by their kin, Claudette is struggling to not revert to her old behavior patterns. Mirabella sees her distress and tries to rescue her even though she doesn't understand what is distressing Claudette. Mirabella's misguided but heroic intervention takes the pressure off Claudette who regains control of herself and joins in shaming Mirabella for her uncouth manners. While Mirabella is exiled in disgrace afterward, Claudette is granted permission to visit her family but realizes upon her return home that she no longer remembers the way to her cave and she can no longer fit in with her family. The final stage in *The Handbook* claims that "rehabilitated" students will "find it easy to move between the two cultures," but Claudette's realization proves that false now that it is too late to go back (245).

By design, "St. Lucy's Home for Girls Raised by Wolves" bears an unmistakable resemblance to literature of colonial resistance. Because of the depiction of children who, after religious and cultural reeducation, do not feel comfortable in either their home culture nor the majority culture, one obvious work that pairs well in conjunction with "St. Lucy's" is Zikala-Ša's 1921 work *American Indian Stories*, which, in addition to traditional stories, includes stories of her own life. One of her often-anthologized works of life writing is "The School Days of an Indian Girl," which depicts the end of Zikala-Ša's early childhood on the Yankton Sioux reservation when she is taken by missionaries to a boarding school in the East. Like Claudette and the other girls in "St. Lucy's," Zikala-Ša is first separated from the boys and then the nuns work on changing her appearance, language, behavior, and every other aspect of being.

Like Claudette, although Zikala-Ša is at first excited by the new adventure, she quickly learns that the school is a harsh environment. In both stories, the girls suffer emotionally as their culture is erased and physically as the nuns demand new behavior and skills. In each, the girls' hair is cut in unfamiliar styles, new clothes are required, strange languages are spoken and expected, and punishments are meted out. Zikala-Ša notes that the children were not only confused and upset but also that many became sick and were often inadequately treated for their illnesses. Likewise, Russell notes of the wolf girls that "The whole pack was irritated, bewildered, depressed. We were all uncomfortable, and between languages" (229). As both Zikala-Ša and Claudette realize, though, once the process has well and truly begun,

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they are trapped between cultures and can no longer easily return to a home culture made alien by re-education.

Both pieces depict the personal costs of being in-between cultures not only in the boarding school but also on visits home, which looks and feels strange and unfamiliar after months in a different culture. After the first three years of study in the East, Zikala-Ša was permitted to return home for several summers. Once back with her mother, she found out how much she had changed and how little she felt at home there anymore. She notes that those summers felt like she was hanging “in the heart of chaos, beyond the touch or voice of human aid” and describes how her family could no longer understand or help her. She mourns that “even nature seemed to have no place for me.” She attributes her displacement and anguish to her studies in the East. Likewise, Claudette and the other wolf girls long for familiar people and places but do not want to disappoint their parents, who only wanted a better life for them. Claudette both longs to fail and be sent home and worries about what would happen to her if she did, haunted by the “shadow question” of “whatever will become of me” (233). Like Zikala-Ša, Claudette returns to her family only to find that she is strange to her relatives and they to her. The story concludes with Claudette being aware that she is telling her “first human lie” when she tells her family that she’s home (246).

Zikala-Ša’s life writing and Russell’s short story do not simply share similarities in plot; each also asks what it means to assimilate into another culture. Life writing is clearly one genre well suited to exploring what it means to be in-between cultures. Weird literature is another genre that is generically amenable to exploring such questions. Jeff Vandermeer, an important theorist of the Weird, both old and new, argues in a definitional article in *The Atlantic* that the Weird is “A country with no border, found in the *spaces between*.” Likewise, in a round-robin style interview about writing and reading literature of the weird, Mike Underwood notes of the Weird that one of the most important elements for him is “a fascination with the transformative – with liminality and change, with the hybrid, the chimera – since it’s a genre of chimeras itself.” In a special issue of *Genre* on the new Weird, Benjamin Noys and Timothy S. Murphy write in their introduction that Weird fiction is a “profoundly hybrid form” (117). Such a hybrid form is well suited to Russell’s characters who are, she says, “stuck between worlds,” even though the cultures in her stories are Weird.

I ask students to reflect on Russell’s story in writing before we discuss it in class, and my students usually discuss how the wolf girls’ experiences are similar to their own in various

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ways. Adolescence and young adulthood are of course times of in-betweenness experienced by most people, and my students do often comment on this aspect of the story. The wolf girls feel like an unbreakable community that nevertheless gets broken, and this often resonates with students who have had some of their own bonds – whether with siblings, friends, family, or others – broken by forces beyond themselves. Likewise, students often comment about how they were “civilized” into adult behavior, much like the wolf girls, who find the expected clothing and behavior uncomfortable and baffling. Women in particular often recall how they were acclimated in various ways to the gendered expectations of women in American society in ways that seem similar to the wolf girls’ surreal experiences. Reading this story makes my students remember and, in some cases, reevaluate those earlier experiences and see them in new ways. The discussion in class usually involves students questioning the norms and expectations that shaped their earlier lives and continue to affect them as they begin in many cases to leave their parents’ homes and attempt to discover what life on their own will be like.

Reading Weird literature can lead to the perceptual shift Fisher and Wick discuss and this new perspective can, in turn, make the everyday seem Weird. Thus, having students read Weird literature can help them perceive works by other writers from a new viewpoint. In particular, work like Zikala-Ša’s life writing can look different to students after reading and discussing Russell’s story. Rather than seeing Zikala-Ša as an Other who is outside their own experiences and viewpoints, students often comment that Russell’s story has primed them to see themselves as aligned with her. While they recognize that their own experiences are fundamentally different, they nevertheless comment on how Russell’s story makes them experience Zikala-Ša’s writing from a viewpoint of not an insider, which would be impossible, but instead as a fellow but different outsider. Russell’s work helps students switch the figure and the ground, to use Wick’s terms, and because their own experiences have been Weirided, can look at the processes of colonialism as Othering rather than at Zikala-Ša as Other. While it would be easy to overstate this, I can definitely see a difference in how much students process Zikala-Ša’s work when they read Russell’s first.

Rather than seeing the colonialist practices that Zikala-Ša experienced as perhaps regrettable but firmly in the past, our work on Russell’s Weird story prepares them to be more aware of how people and subjectivities designated “Other” are still subjected to similar practices. After reading Russell and Zikala-Ša, I often move to other, more contemporary, writers like Jamaica Kincaid. If there is room and interest in teaching a novel, Kincaid’s 1990

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short novel *Lucy* would pair well with “St. Lucy’s” as it is also a first-person narrative of a young woman who travels to the U.S. from the West Indies to be an au pair and, as such, is displaced from her home culture and suffers a long-standing feeling of in-betweenness. Most often, though, I ask my students to read Jamaica Kincaid’s often-anthologized prose poem “Girl,” which takes the form of a long monologue of motherly advice to the title girl who remains unnamed. The advice is a decidedly mixed bag, blending both mundane chores like how to cook and clean with snide and shaming comments about the “slut” she is sure her daughter is “bent on becoming” (3). For her own part, the title girl offers two small protestations of innocence, both of which are ignored by her mother.

Once again, reading Russell’s work prepares students to be more open to characters who might otherwise have remained Other. Because the girl of Kincaid’s prose poem is at a similar age to many of my students, they too can remember the advice they received about “being a man” or “being a woman” in their own cultural moment and context. Once again, being evaluated on one’s performance of a role that one is still learning connects these two works. As Kincaid’s girl is being taught the expected skills and worldview of her particular cultural context, she is simultaneously being taught to self-evaluate and is developing an ever-vigilant, internalized voice that critiques her performance of the role. In the face of the girl’s two small protestations, her mother’s advice simply rolls on, further reinforcing the expectations. Furthermore, it is not just the skills that are being taught but a shaming look that is devastating when experienced from a loved one but that might well be even more damaging when internalized.

In Russell’s story, a similar dynamic is at work. Claudette struggles to get used to wearing shoes and walk upright. She notes that it was disorienting to “look down and see two square-toed shoes instead of my own four feet” (229). She learns to evaluate her own performance and internalizes the judging voice even as she fails to live up to the expectations. She tells herself repeatedly during their practice sessions “mouth shut, shoes on feet” (229). She admonishes herself to “not chew on your new penny loafers” even as she “stumbled around in a daze, my mouth black with shoe polish” (229). Later in the story, she describes how the wolf girls, when they noticed the nuns watching, tried to please them. Again, Claudette exhorts herself to remember “Mouth shut” and “shoes on feet” (231). As the dance approaches, Claudette locks herself in her closet to privately practice her dance steps, all the while thinking “Mouth shut—shoes on feet! Mouth shut—shoes on feet! Mouthshutmouthshut

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...” (238). Like Kincaid’s girl, Claudette’s own experiences and expectations are re-educated to conform to the expectations of others and, eventually, even her own inner voice has been colonized.

Again, the perceptual shift between figure and ground discussed in terms of Russell’s short story can shed light on Kincaid’s work. Even though Kincaid’s prose poem is titled “Girl,” the girl herself is barely present in the work. It is no accident that she remains unnamed and only addressed by her position. The mother’s voice is emphatically foregrounded throughout, not just her instructions but her shaming perspective of the girl. The girl’s own voice is minimized textually when it does appear by setting her words off in parenthesis. My students often think that the prose poem must be about the girl because of the title. However, reading and discussing “St. Lucy’s” first, they can see that the poem is less about the girl herself and more about the processes and forces being exerted on her that are re-educating her into the role she is expected to play. Her own inner voice is being made over into a critical, shaming outside perspective that she is supposed to turn on herself to keep herself in line even after her mother has stopped inculcating her. It is hard for students to perceive the girl herself in the prose poem, which is part of the point. By reading Russell’s story first, they are primed to be more aware of the tension between who is meant to be ground and who is meant to be figure, which gives them new insight into Kincaid’s work.

The new perspective offered by reading Russell’s Weird literature can help students reevaluate those cultural lessons from a perspective, if not outside, then at least from a little distance. This distance can help them view those inculcated precepts in a more critical light. It also helps them ask questions about whose perspective is valued and whose is suppressed in a variety of contexts. One of my primary goals for my general education literature classes is to have students look at their everyday world in new ways. The defamiliarization that is inherent in much Weird literature can promote this new perspective in ways that illuminate all the others works we read together.

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LAURA L. BEADLING earned her PhD in American Studies from Purdue University in 2007. She currently teaches films studies and writing at Youngstown State University in Youngstown, Ohio. She has recently published on gender in the film and anthology television show *Fargo* (1996 and FX 2014 - present), the Native American gothic, and Indigenous women filmmakers.

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Russell Brickey, *Weird Language and Weirder Places: Reading and Teaching the Weird in Poetry*

Abstract: Poetry of the Weird is a small subgenre that is frequently overlooked as a source for pedagogy, particularly for teaching about poetic language and imagery. The “Weird” differentiates itself from the supernatural by refusing to coalesce into definition and meaning; instead, the Weird embraces the unknowable and oneiric. Instructors can use this aspect of Weird poetry to illuminate issues of tropology and form in poetry as well as to engage students with questions about the poet’s motivation. This article explicates poems by James Tate, Mary Oliver, and Charles Simic to demonstrate the mechanics of the Weird, suggests several ways to approach teaching, and concludes with brief recommendations for future reading.

Each era and genre of poetry has produced visions of the supernatural and numinous. However, canonical (read: academic / *Norton Anthology* standard) poetry is generally not ‘weird’ in the figurative sense of the word. “Natural Supernaturalism”—the seminal term codified by M.H. Abrams in which the poet (eg, Wordsworth) meditates upon the landscape and receives some sort of animate response to the psyche, describes this moment in poetry. The awe and wild immensity of “The Sublime” is the extreme of the experience and is well represented in the English canon. Such poetry revolves around the world of common day we all inhabit, thus tropological language is generally predicated upon recognizable vehicles, everyday things manipulated by metaphoric free-association to expand the meaning of the tenor. In the Western canon, these often serve as a Christian allegory on some level (Wordsworth in “Tintern Abbey” or “I wander lonely as cloud”), although sometimes (as in the case of Robert Frost’s “The Witch of Coös”) poetry of the supernatural is associated with folk motifs, or (in the case of E.A. Poe’s “Ulalum” or “The Conqueror Worm”) ideas of delusive mental states and impending mortality. The supernatural is not unknown, of course. Blake, Poe, Coleridge, and Shelley most notably evoked supernature, but most English poetry since Shakespeare has been essentially lyric, based on a single speaker (or singer) relating a personal experience in rarified language. Most often this experience is forged from memory since the “lyric I” narrator, a product of 19th century Romanticism, is the default of most contemporary poets.

I am using the term “Weird” to differentiate Weird literature from the purely supernatural narratives found in the novels of Stephen King or Clive Barker, for instance, or in the many horror movies familiar to most people. Such poetry is uncommon in modern

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literature, yet for this paper I will limit the commentary to the contemporary canon, a period in which critics often underappreciate the uncanny or Weird in verse. Along the way I will differentiate between what merely appears weird, as in unconventional image and language, and the Weird, as in the dislocation of experience, the expansion of the psyche, which is the immersion in the uncanny. The Weird in poetry is not necessarily supernatural—although one could pick apart the images in the poems below and read exactly the demonic or ghostly—rather, Weird poetry portrays a moment of psychic breakthrough. The images and states of the Weird have to do with images that defy easy hermeneutic identification because they describe subconscious impulses and surprise free-association. For these reasons Weird poetry can be used to teach a number of concepts, including Surrealism, the uncanny, and thematic development.

At the same time, a great many lyric poems, which take place in our ordinary world, express real things through extraordinary language, and comparing Weird poetry to lyric poetry is one way to explain to students that the poet in the traditionally lyric poem (“sung” by a single speaker about personal experience) strives to make readers see familiar or known things in new ways. Weird poetry, on the other hand, takes ordinary things and makes them surreal. These poems take the reader into the subconscious to find new ways to displace the ordinary and imply a link to the numinous without actually explicating this relationship. This movement bares a resemblance to the surreal.

Surrealism (“above the real”) is the notion that writers and artists can access the subconscious, that which cannot be rationally explained, through spontaneous, bizarre, and dream-like imagery. Surrealist writers sought literature free of conscious control and thus above aesthetic or moral concerns, art from the source-spring, so to speak, expressing things that cannot readily be expressed and yet are still aspects of the human psyche. A great deal of contemporary poetry since Modernism utilizes essentially surreal imagery to describe a speaker’s immediate impressions and to make readers see things in new ways. Andre Breton’s foundational manifestos can be excerpted but may be a bit thick for introductory classes; Breton’s *The Magnetic Fields*, on the other hand, is a dynamic example of automatic writing and illustrate the techniques of Surrealist writing. More accessible examples might be the paintings of Salvador Dali or the experimental films of Maya Deren, both available online. Poetry of the Weird is often marked by its progression to the surreal. Both examples in this essay begin in the ordinary world and then, through the speakers’ mental processes, open

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the world of the mysterious and unsettling through tropes which cannot be easily categorized. The language is ordinary, but the meaning is oneiric.

The poems I will look at point to the presence of something metaphysical, or at least not entirely understood, but their stories do not evolve into the supernatural. Instead, the Weird poem creates the notion that there is a connection to the unseen world but that this is something deep inside us that cannot readily be explained. In fact, the purpose of Weird poetry actually seems to be a mysterious expression without explanation, while the supernatural is generally an explanation of the extraordinary. Consider the contemporary vernacular horror story: John Carpenter's *The Thing* is a metamorphizing space-monster from a crashed flying saucer; the Overlook Hotel is haunted by an demon living in the attic in the book version and ghosts of some kind in the movie version who recognize Jack Torrance as a former denizen of the hotel; the cargo-ship *Nostramo* lands on an ostensibly deserted planet only to find a marooned space ship, then to be attacked by a face-hugger, a biomechanical alien, and a homicidal robot working for the galactic company. In each of these scenarios the supernatural is an explanation, at least in part, that develops across the story. The literary supernatural, is essentially the same: consider the cataclysm of Usher estate vanishing into ground because of familial sin. The Ancient Mariner's tale is overtly supernatural, and yet it can easily be read as a story of ecology and the wages of cruelty. Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Kubla Khan," while likewise overtly supernatural, can also easily be read as a dream which represents the polarities of Romantic art and philosophy. Or consider A. S. Byatt's extraordinary short story "The Thing in the Forest" which revolves around two young girls evacuated to a country estate during the Blitz; in the forest they see a "thing" which resembles a giant slug with a face that appears and then disappears, leaving them stunned for life—a personification of trauma. In all these scenarios the supernatural is actually explained, no matter how extraordinary the situation. The Weird in poetry, on the other hand, never coalesces into explanation. Poetry of the Weird leaves us wondering.

Often, since the Symbolist and Surrealist movements were so influential on the foundational Modernist aesthetic of the 20th and 21st centuries, language in Western poetry can be "weird" in the denotative sense—that is to say, surprising, unlikely, unusual, and startling—meant to inspire a new way of seeing everyday things. For instance, when James Tate in "Stray Animals" says

It is late morning,

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and my forehead is alive with shadows,
some bats rock back and forth
to the rhythm of my humming

he is evoking with some humor the dark thoughts that shade an otherwise pleasant morning in which “the mimosa flutter with bees.” He is humming with unspoken ideas which are unborn “shadows” of themselves. The upshot is that things will be born in “a house of unwritten poems” where the poet is also given new form when he is “unborn” by creativity. It is a moment which seems rather bizarre but is actually the poet seeing the world in a new way.

Mary Oliver’s beautiful “Dogfish” is an example of how a poet “sees” and then speaks in the language of the ‘weird’ without actually being Weird. “Dogfish” is a neoromantic poem. It looks at nature in its essential, beautiful mystery but without the sentimentality or belief in a human-centric universe. The poem is spoken by a modern woman looking at nature through, for lack of a better word, a Darwinian sensibility. The scenario is simple enough: the seer is walking along a beach and observes a *Squalus acanthias*, a small species of shark (adult length two to three feet), hunting in the shallows. Waves distort the light and this affects how the seer transmogrifies her perceptions. She describes the shark as “flickering in with the tide,” blending the motion of the light, the water, and the animal as if the three have become some new entity, something unprecedented, preternatural. The imagery implies a motion that is impossible for a corporeal body and can only be generated in the imagination. In evoking the “flickering” (not “flicking” as in the motion of a tail, which would be the natural motion of the animal) we are meant to perceive the speed and violence of the hunter—as if a candle flame in a breath of air. A few lines later the dogfish is metaphorized as

one gesture, one black sleeve
that could fit easily around
the bodies of three small fish.

Again, the tropes are distinctly unnatural and inexact (in the denotative sense) and come from the seer’s own visceral existence which has nothing to do with the existence of the dogfish. The seer is startled by the presence of the animal into free-association where she achieves a kind of transcendence in which language transforms the literal into the symbolic. What exactly are we to make of these distortions of reality? The “gesture” indicates a kind of ease, and the “black sleeve” indicates a kind of horror. There is something of the grotesque in the carnivorous sleeve. And it is precisely here that the language itself sums up the alien and

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even bizarre aspects of biology. Of course, Oliver is describing predatory nature. There is nothing truly supernatural or “natural supernatural” here; in fact, the seer’s meditation turns upon her own emotional state and not the grand wisdom of a responsive universe. Even when the seer says “I want to listen / to the enormous waterfalls of the sun” she is talking about looking at an idealized world, not a visionary moment.

Charles Simic’s “Butcher Shop,” on the other hand, is straightforward in its diction and syntax and yet, though it is a poem which involves common accoutrements, plunges into the Weird. As with Oliver’s “Dogfish,” Simic’s scenario is outwardly simple. The first stanza describes the situation of the poem.

Sometimes walking late at night
I stop before a closed butcher shop.
There is a single light in the store

The speaker barely contextualizes the vision, but he does give us numerous images that allude to his state of mind. He witnesses the bloody butcher’s apron hanging on the wall as if embodying the spirit of the place, a gruesome apparition created by recent violence. The speaker metaphorizes “a map / Of the great continents of blood” and “knives that glitter like altars / In a dark church.” So much blood it forms “rivers and oceans.” At this point the speaker is realizing the brutal nature of the meat industry, the horror of slaughter, and the carnivorous history of the human race. The animals which were carved into sustenance make up eons of sacrifices that flow across the world (utilizing the perennial trope of time, the river) and forms geography itself. We worship this practice; the tools of the trade are icons and religious instruments. Considering the effects of the Anthropocene, metaphors of geography are entirely appropriate; our quest for prime beef and cheap fowl has transformed the landscape, although it is not clear the speaker knows this; he is simply responding on the symbolic level, instinctively, the way most of us do when first perceiving the forces that shape the world.

The juxtaposition of adoration and slaughter is not lost on the speaker, however, and the irony of his free-association—that the “cripple and the imbecile” are brought to this place “To be healed”—illustrates the simple helplessness of the animals: their weakness and stupidity is brought into the fore at the same time that humanity’s willingness to harm the helpless is made blackly comedic. Almost as if counterpoint, the speaker’s next turn in the poem notes the brute reality of the butcher’s shop in realistic terms. He sees “a wooden block

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where bones are broken, / Scraped clean” at the head of the river of blood. Despite this acknowledgement of the world of common day, the poem is becoming increasingly oneiric. We have retreated from the scenario at the head of the poem into a world of nightmare symbols. These symbols are not particularly hard to parse, but neither are they particularly leading toward a clear moral conclusion or ontology. The climax falls in the final line of the poem, where it is most effective: “Where deep in the night I hear a voice.”

We are left with a number of questions after this, primarily about the nature of “the voice” which rises unexplained from the subconscious. It appears to be a reaction to the ages of pain and death, but what is the message the voice delivers? Does it speak or cry? Are we hearing the deep rage of the species demanding predation and bloodlust? Or perhaps the speaker hears the voice of the slaughtered? Is this a moment of empathy, or is the speaker feeling a moment of pure existential horror? All these are possibilities left largely up to the reader. What does seem apparent is that we are left in a nightmarish scenario, the pitch of the dream, the unsettling logic of the subconscious that defies explanation. We have entered the Weird, yet the oneiric moment is composed of everyday language.

The point here is to explain one approach to talking about poetic language and hermeneutics. Examining the complexities of poetic diction—language which is weird in the vernacular sense of the word—can then turn into an appreciation of actual Weird or uncanny in poetry. By pointing out the difference between surreal language and the true paranormal, instructors can make clear the ways in which contemporary poetry plays with image and language. And by comparing this to the Weird, instructors can illustrate how one can also teach poetic form, as poems of the Weird frequently follow a pattern that progresses in much the same way as a typical Gothic or horror story. Beginning in the world of common day, the horror story is generally triggered by an event that defies easy explanation or is denied, and progresses across the scenario as a mystery unfolding to a climax. Again, the horror or Gothic story usually explains the paranormal experience, no matter how unlikely, while the Weird does not explain the experience. Weird poetry follows this basic paradigm.

Nobel Prize winner Louise Glück’s “All Hallows” is a perfect example. Like Simic’s “Butchershop,” “All Hallows” begins in the ordinary world and, through the process of engaging with the landscape, teeters over into the numinous. “All Hallows” is, of course, Halloween. We begin the poem at the end of the day when the children are presumably

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readying for trick-or-treat. Glück's language is very direct and carefully chosen, even simplistic. She describes the falling light, the dumb beast of burden, the production of harvest.

The hills darken. The oxen
sleep in their blue yoke,
the fields having been
picked clean, the sheaves
bound evenly and piled at the roadside

It is hard to pinpoint why exactly, but the imagery here is, for lack of a better description, spooky. Nothing moves. The colors bespeak gloom. The vegetation is bound for sacrifice. This could be an illustration from a children's Halloween book, and this is probably the aesthetic Glück is aiming for. Whatever the purpose, the individual items in the word-picture are nothing extraordinary, their juxtaposition is. The simplicity and stillness of the imagery works in this context almost like a whisper, perfectly fitting for the subject. Into this gloomy mise-en-scene the human element enters: the wife waits in the portal between the domestic sphere and the coming night to hand out the traditional Halloween candy. This is another aspect of the poet's language: through the art of careful substitution we see ordinary things in a new way; temptation becomes "seeds" of desire "calling" the children through the dusk to the mysterious wife in her window.

As with "Butchershop," Glück's poem rises with a sudden crescendo in the final line to the moment of psychic disequilibrium. When "the soul creeps out of the tree" we have once again entered the uncanny. Students often parse poetry by trying to identify literal action. It is possible to see the "soul" leaving the trees as the timid child leaving the neighborhood cove of trees in her costume, seeking the house. And it is possible that scenario is just that simple. Yet the final line is strange enough that it defies this easy reduction. Something has happened that redefines the All Hallows evening. Glück has summed up the sublimated fear, horror even, of the holiday; behind the children's masquerade lurks the inevitability of death and the wilds of death's unknown. The trees, like the forest of "Young Goodman Brown," are a link to the potentiality of evil spirits; the "soul" bespeaks of the afterlife and it "creeps" like any frightened thing. These interpretive possibilities display both the power of language to unsettle, deconstruct, or even reverse meaning.

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At better term for this sort of poetry might be “numinous,” which in the denotative sense means the presence of a divinity or spirit. Instructors can play with this notion in the class by explaining the two terms and asking students to come to their own conclusions.

In addition to the brief examples above, instructors interested in poetry and the supernatural and Weird can see *The Complaint: or, Night-Thoughts on Life, Death, & Immortality* by Edward Young (1745) which was famous and considered sensational in its time, inspired some of William Blake’s most well-known engravings, but is largely overlooked today; *Lalla Rookh* by Thomas Moore (1817), while Orientalizing by today’s standards was a major influence of E. A. Poe, whose Weird poems are well known; and of course William Blake’s visionary poetry, which falls into the category of Christian allegory and commentary. Charles Baudelaire’s oeuvre is grotesque and Decadent (with a capital “D”) as a way to comment upon aesthetics. And the poems of James Tate and Norman Dubie are often surreal in a manner that does not easy coalesce into strict meaning. Engaging with poetry of the Weird is under-explored and underappreciated in contemporary literature, and creative writing instructors might task their students with creating more of this interesting subgenre.

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RUSSELL BRICKEY is a full time lecturer in English at Youngstown State University. He has poetry collections out from Spuyten Duyvil Press, Wild Leaf Press, and Kelsay Books, and a reader's guide to the poetry of Sharon Olds available from the University of South Carolina Press. He holds an MFA and PhD from Purdue University and a BA from the University of Oregon.

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Alissa Burger, Visualizing Poe: Graphic Novels, *Extraordinary Tales*, and *The Simpsons*

Abstract: Edgar Allan Poe is a literary staple, from high school English to the university Gothic classroom. While Poe's work is timeless, with his themes of melancholy and madness continuing to move contemporary readers, the 21st century offers a variety of new, visually dynamic approaches in engaging students with Poe's tales and poems, which are explored here. The first of these is the multiple graphic novel adaptations of Poe's work, including Benjamin Harper and Dennis Calero's take on *The Tell-Tale Heart*, Duncan Long's version of *The Raven*, and a collection of *Stories and Poems* adapted by Garth Hinds. Another excellent opportunity for incorporating striking visual and audio representation in discussion of Poe is Raul Garcia's animated anthology film *Extraordinary Tales* (2013). Finally, there are also multiple references to Poe in *The Simpsons*, from the 'Treehouse of Horror' re-telling of "The Raven" (Season 2, Episode 3) to more nuanced engagement such as repeated echoes of "The Tell-Tale Heart" in "The Telltale Head" (Season 1, Episode 8) and "Lisa's Rival" (Season 6, Episode 2). Each of these options offer a variety of opportunities for engaging with Poe's work: while the graphic novel versions add a visual component and engage students as more active readers and interpreters of the text, *Extraordinary Tales* combines striking visual designs unique to each tale with voiceovers by such horror icons as Bela Lugosi and Christopher Lee, and *The Simpsons* provides an opportunity to address shifts of genre and the impact of Poe on contemporary popular culture.

More than a century and a half after his death, Edgar Allan Poe and his work remain literary touchstones and frequent favorites in the classroom, from introductory survey courses to Gothic literature seminars and beyond. In addition to reading and discussing Poe's work, there are also a wide range of pedagogical possibilities for bringing popular culture adaptations of Poe into the classroom. There is a wide range of benefits in taking a popular culture-based pedagogical approach, including building on texts with which students are already familiar to strengthen understanding of a particular topic, developing critical thinking skills than expand well beyond the walls of the classroom, making complex theories and concepts more relatable and accessible, and foregrounding the ways in which texts are ever-changing and dynamically-negotiated over time and across a range of contexts. Ghada Sfeir further argues that additional benefits to critical popular culture pedagogy include "expanding thinking about others, finding alternative narratives in students' own lives, enhancing cultural synchronization, building culturally responsive awareness, building consumer awareness, and scaffolding social intelligence" (15). Just as Poe has remained popular among readers, his work has been a perennial favorite for popular culture adaptation and, as Dennis R. Perry and Carl H. Sederholm argue in the introduction of their collection on Poe and adaptation, the author's "connection to contemporary popular culture should no longer raise questions of

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‘where’ or ‘why,’ but rather ‘what’ and ‘how’” (1). While Poe’s work is timeless, with his themes of melancholy and madness continuing to move contemporary readers, the 21st century offers a variety of new approaches in engaging students with Poe’s tales and poems, many of which foreground visual representation, from the richly colored panels of graphic novel adaptations to the combination of the sound and moving image in film and television re-imaginings.

In addition to the opportunities for representation and reinterpretation posed by each unique medium, the dynamic process of adaptation also needs to be central to these considerations, with the most productive approach in considering adaptations of Poe arguably one which is built “on the premise that adaptation studies is itself a subspecies of intertextuality” (Perry and Sederholm 6), in which texts respond to texts which came before them and serve as a source for those texts which may come after. As Julie Sanders notes, this is a critically engaged process in which “texts rework texts that often themselves reworked texts. The process of adaptation is constant and ongoing” (24). Through this lens, Poe in popular culture can be productively engaged through literal adaptation, specific allusion, or the invocation of a particular tone. Through incorporating adaptations of Poe’s work in our readings and classroom discussions, we can highlight the myriad ways in which Poe’s legacy continues to impact literature, art, and popular culture, as well as provide students with further avenues for engaging with, understanding, and responding to Poe’s work.

Three particular examples of how this might be done are through the inclusion of graphic novel adaptations of Poe’s work (either in excerpt or assigned in their entirety), screening and discussion of adaptations (in this case, I have used the 2013 anthology film *Extraordinary Tales*, which again, could be incorporated in excerpt or in its entirety), and considering Poe’s appearances in *The Simpsons*, which presents opportunities for discussing intertextuality, satire, and the impact of genre on tone and perception.

Graphic Novel Adaptations

Graphic novels have been making their way into a wide variety of classrooms and across all age levels and disciplines. In *Graphic Novels and Comics in the Classroom: Essays on the Educational Power of Sequential Art*, Robert G. Weiner and Carrye Kay Syma note that “In the past 10 to 15 years, the use of sequential art in education has exploded. Teachers in secondary and elementary schools, professors in universities, and instructors of all kinds are using comics and graphic novels to illustrate points about gender, history, sociology,

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philosophy, mathematics, and even medicine” (1). Echoing Perry and Sederholm’s argument about popular culture and Poe, Weiner and Syma make the claim that “It’s no longer a question about whether sequential art should be used in educational settings, but rather how to use it and for what purpose” (ibid).

There have been dozens of graphic novel adaptations of Poe’s work.⁶ Authors and artists have taken a wide range of different approaches to this visual adaptation of Poe, which Derek Parker Royal groups into “four general forms: multiple stories adapted by various creators in an anthology, an individual tale adapted as a single text, multiple stories adapted by a single artist or creative team into one cohesive volume, and an original fictional narrative where the historical/cultural figure of Edgar Allan Poe serves as the central character” (62). All of these provide productive and thought-provoking opportunities for engaging with Poe’s work, but the two specific examples and approaches that I will focus on here are Matthew K. Manning and Jim Jimenz’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* (“an individual tale adapted as a single text”) and Gareth Hinds’s anthology *Poe: Stories and Poems* (“multiple stories adapted by a single artist ... into one cohesive volume”).

Manning and Jimenz’s *The Fall of the House of Usher* is published by Capstone, “a producer of educational books for libraries and classrooms ... [and] with its simple art and straightforward storytelling, it reads like a study guide” (Royal 72), complete with a glossary and questions for discussion and reflection in the book’s final pages, making it readily accessible for a wide range of reading levels. As a result of this educational role, Manning and Jimenz’s adaptation is one of relatively literal translation, closely following the narrative structure and elements of the story, if deviating significantly from Poe’s language. As Royal notes, this fidelity results in Manning and Jimenz’s work “including references to both ‘The Haunted Palace’ and the *Mad Trist* of Launcelot Canning” (71). Royal explains that “Many, if not most, adaptations of ‘Usher’ fail to reference one or both of these intertexts, but Manning devotes several pages to both, particularly the latter” (71), which creates productive opportunities for discussing the connections between these texts, as well as Poe’s choice to include these intertexts as parallels to the sounds Usher and the narrator are hearing echo through the house and the shared themes which resonate between these texts.

⁶ For an extensive list of these, see M. Thomas Inge’s “Comic Book and Graphic Novel Adaptations of the Works of Edgar Allan Poe: A Chronology.”

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In addition to this textual analysis responding to these literary elements and the “study guide” questions at the book’s conclusion, the graphic novel medium provides an opportunity for visual analysis as well, including issues of how image sets the tone of the narrative and how these images may differ from or clarify students’ own perceptions or visualizations as they read. As Royal explains, in *The Fall of the House of Usher* Jimenz “uses color, specifically a sickly lime green, as a visual braiding device, linking together the horrific elements: the tarn, the fog, the Usher mansion windows, Roderick’s music and writing, the *Mad Trist* section, the eerie sound effects, and the fissure that runs all the way down the House of Usher” (71-72). This gives us the opportunity to discuss the more amorphous “feeling” or tone of the work, the ways in which Poe uses language to set the mood of the piece, how that mood is picked up in the visual representation created by Jimenz, and how both text and image work effectively together to convey the unique signature tone of Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher.”

While Manning and Jimenz’s graphic novel adapts a single story, as Royal has noted, anthologies are another key approach in adapting Poe, and Gareth Hinds’s *Poe: Stories and Poems* is an excellent example of this method, in this case by a single author (rather than an edited collection with a range of authors and artists). Hinds includes Poe’s stories “The Mask of the Red Death,” “The Cask of Amontillado,” “The Pit and the Pendulum,” and “The Tell-Tale Heart,” and perhaps even more notably, graphic narrative versions of a few of Poe’s best-known poems: “Annabel Lee,” “The Bells,” and “The Raven.” Hinds’s book is published by Candlewick Press, a publisher specializing in children’s and young adult books for “readers of all ages” (“Candlewick Press—Welcome”), and much like *The Fall of the House of Usher*, Hinds’s collection is educator-friendly, with a biography of Poe at the end, as well as a brief critical perspective on each of the works, including historical context, notes on poetic form, and definitions of potentially unfamiliar words.

One of the benefits of a collection such as this—whether single author or in compilation—is the opportunity it provides to expose students to multiple works by Poe. Hinds also foregrounds the identification of key themes and connections between individual works with a “Poe Checklist” of themes that appears opposite the table of contents page, featuring visual icons and textual definitions like “creepy animals,” “darkness,” “guilty conscience (or lack thereof),” “insanity,” “murder,” and “scary sounds, hypersensitivity,” codes which he then uses on the title page of individual works to identify central themes in each. Another benefit

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of a graphic narrative collection of Poe, rather than single story, is the opportunity for different visual styles in each section, particularly as used to reflect the narrative and emotional tone of individual works.

While this would seem especially apparent in collections by multiple authors and/or artists, Hinds does an excellent job of creating visual distinction between Poe's different works: "The Masque of the Red Death" features frenetic and richly saturated colors, with entire panels washed in vibrant hues of blue, green, orange, and purple (5). The visual imagery of "The Pit and Pendulum" offers various gradations of darkness, from the pitch black of the early pages with the questing narrator rendered in layered white lines to the gray and brown tones as he begins to mentally map his surroundings, and a vibrant orange-red as he realizes how close he is to the pit he perceives in the middle of his chamber (44-62). The visual style of "Annabel Lee" is defined by soft pastels and fantastical, romantic imagery, as setting, memory, and the narrator's rich mourning are drawn into a cohesive visual whole (38-39).

Readers also remain fascinated with Poe's life and the man himself, an interest Hinds explores in his final entry in *Poe: Stories and Poems*, where he positions Poe as the autobiographical narrator in the black-and-white sketches of "The Raven," with Poe's own face reflecting the horror and despair the lines evoke and ending with a sketch of Poe's tombstone, adorned with flowers and perched upon by a solitary raven. Even the contrast within individual works—such as the images of divine comfort, hellish flames, and moaning despair represented in successive stanzas of "The Bells"—highlight the ways in which image can be used to illuminate and imagine Poe's work and providing a range and breadth of representations ideally suited to providing students with a larger, contextual understanding of Poe and his work.

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Extraordinary Tales

There are countless film adaptations of Poe's work, from classic Roger Corman and Vincent Price films like *House of Usher* (1960) and *Tales of Terror* (1962)⁷ to fictionalized biographies of Poe, as in *The Raven* (2012), but one recent adaptation that lends itself especially well to in-class reading and critical discussion is Raul Garcia's anthology film *Extraordinary Tales* (2013). Similar to Hinds's graphic novel collection, *Extraordinary Tales* features several works, including "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Tell-Tale Heart," "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," "The Pit and the Pendulum," and "The Masque of the Red Death." Each section features a different narrator, including several horror genre icons like Christopher Lee ("The Fall of the House of Usher"), Bela Lugosi ("The Tell-Tale Heart"), and Roger Corman (as Prince Prospero in "The Masque of the Red Death"). Each segment also has its own unique visual style. The sterile black-and-white of "The Tell-Tale Heart," for example, contrasts dramatically with the bold colors of "The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar," which is driven by "saturated colors and wide-eyed images of terror [which] recall pre-Comics Code, vintage horror comic books" (Keogh). "The Pit and the Pendulum" draws on more contemporary modes of popular culture and features "videogamelike [*sic*] virtual environments" (*ibid.*). "The Masque of the Red Death" very effectively foregrounds the power of the visual narrative, as the images of decadence and debauchery do the bulk of the storytelling, with just a single spoken line of dialogue. As with Hinds's collection—and other, similar works—Garcia's *Extraordinary Tales* could be incorporated as a whole, to give students a sense of the range and diversity of Poe's work, or zero in on a single segment for a more focused close reading, as best fits the class and its learning objectives.

While each of these segments presents several promising lines of critical inquiry, in drawing students' attention to the combination of image, sound, and movement, "The Tell-Tale Heart" and "The Masque of the Red Death" are particularly well-suited. The voiceover for the visually minimalist rendering of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is a worn and scratchy recording of Bela Lugosi reading Poe's story, which sets a distinct and eerie auditory tone for the piece, made all the more effective by the stark and modern visuals with which it is paired, in what Brian Tallerico describes as "a fascinating bit of cinema in that it captures influences from

⁷ Corman and Price filmed seven Poe adaptations together: *The House of Usher* (1960), *The Pit and the Pendulum* (1961), *Tales of Terror* (1962), *The Raven* (1963), *The Haunted Palace* (1963), *The Masque of the Red Death* (1964), and *The Tomb of Ligeia* (1964).

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around the world, bringing Lugosi, Poe, and [Alberto] Breccia under one twisted tent,” an intersection that also provides an opportunity for exploring interconnections between Poe, the classic horror genre, the larger comics medium, and the influence of all of these on contemporary popular culture. The segment on “The Masque of the Red Death” is also interesting from a sound and image perspective, as this story has only a single line of dialogue (spoken by Roger Corman as Prince Prospero). The segment begins with an omniscient and disembodied perspective that takes in the hedonistic revelry before assuming the perspective of Death itself, looking on the same revelers as they now stare back in fear and horror, with the upbeat music that underscored the celebration taking on a darker, lower, and more ominous tone as Death walks among them. Tallerico argues that “The Masque of the Red Death” is the least effective of the pieces, writing that it “may be the strongest visually but ... I’m not sure taking away the film’s greatest asset—Poe’s way with words—was the smartest way to end the piece” or the most effective representational choice. Both the scratchy, atmospheric voiceover of Lugosi in “The Tell-Tale Heart” and the near-dialogue-free re-imagining of “The Masque of the Red Death” raise interesting and productive questions about the combination of text, image, and sound in adaptation and serve as an excellent starting point for engaged critical discussion and response, as well as debate, for while Tallerico argues “The Masque of the Red Death” fell short, other reviewers singled it out as the strongest piece in the anthology, with Chris Solomon praising the way “Garcia presents ‘Masque’ visually, without narration—and none is needed.”

The frame narrative of *Extraordinary Tales* also hits on a common theme of the role of Poe as author, who remains a figure of fascination and often features predominantly in critical considerations and adaptations of his work. In addition to bookending the anthology as a whole, this narrative is also interspersed between individual segments, in an ongoing conversation between Death and a raven who represents Poe. As Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock explains of the role of Poe as “undead” author within adaptations “There is clearly a kind of poetic justice at work in this repeated summoning of Poe from the grave. After all, his writing is persistently poised precisely at the intersection of life and death. Again and again, his characters are suspended between worlds or are invoked to speak from outside of time or from beyond death,” which creates a “strange economy of authorship ... in which the author becomes part of the narrative he himself tells—a construction that then becomes available for adaptation and appropriation” (15). Poe’s presence in *Extraordinary Tales*—which also

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serves as a touchstone in Hinds's graphic novel adaptation of "The Raven"—provides the chance to explore the connection between Poe's work and the author himself, who remains a source of literary interest and reader fascination for scholars and students alike.

The Simpsons

While the graphic novel adaptations and Garcia's *Extraordinary Tales* offer re-imaginings of Poe's stories and poems, *The Simpsons* presents an opportunity for more playful intertextual engagement, including parody and pastiche, as "*The Simpsons* superimposes its characters and landscape into other beloved books, iconic films, significant historical events, and other cultural forms of art ... incorporating the likeness of characters, sets, and plots from other cult texts" (Zevallos). This engagement with a wide variety of cultural references from classic literature and Hollywood musicals to reality television and viral videos are responsible for *The Simpsons*' arguable position as "the most literate of all situation comedies" (Koenigsberger 46). These references have the potential for a multitude of critical engagements, as we can look at the impact of Poe on contemporary popular culture, the impact of medium and genre on a work for potential reinterpretation, and the ways in which key themes may continue to resonate despite these shifts. The three most notable appearances of Poe in *The Simpsons* are "The Raven" segment of the first "Treehouse of Horror" Halloween special (in Season 2), which is a fairly direct adaptation of Poe's poem, and two episodes that use "The Tell-Tale Heart" as a jumping off point and episode-long touchstone: "The Telltale Head" (Season 1, Episode 8) and "Lisa's Rival" (Season 6, Episode 2).

While *Extraordinary Tales* takes a fairly straightforward or literal approach to adapting Poe's work, maintaining his narrative and even word-for-word passages of dialogue, *The Simpsons* is significantly more dynamic in its adaptation of Poe. In *Film Adaptation and Its Discontents*, Thomas Leitch charts a wide range of approaches to film adaptation, each of which moves well beyond the assessment of fidelity or comparison to the source text to instead foreground the filmmakers' negotiation of and engagement with that text. Leitch outlines several diverse methods of adaptation, including celebration, adjustment, revision, colonization, deconstruction, analogue, parody and pastiche, and allusion (96-123). While *The Simpsons*' episodes considered here certainly take a celebratory approach to Poe's work and are full of a wide range of allusions to both literature and popular culture, the most

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productive of Leitch's frameworks in critically considering *The Simpsons'* adaptations of Poe are adjustment, revision, and parody and pastiche. Leitch outlines many ways in which a text can be "adjusted" through adaptation, including compression, expansion, correction, updating, or superimposition (99-100) and both *Simpsons'* versions of Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" make use of updating, which involves the filmmaker "transpos[ing] the setting of a canonical classic to the present in order to show its universality while guaranteeing relevance to the more immediate concerns of the target audience" (Leitch 100). A step beyond adjustment is revision, in which a "reassessment" (Leitch 106) of the text itself is undertaken in the adaptation process, offering a reconsideration or literal rewriting of the source text in ways that may dramatically change the narrative. Finally, parody offers the adaptor the opportunity to satirize its source text, while pastiche is a distinctly postmodern approach in which the adaptation engages with elements of earlier works to celebrate and critically engage with the source narrative, self-reflexively foregrounding this interaction in its own adaptation (Leitch 116-119)

As the most direct adaptation of these three works, *The Simpsons'* "The Raven" includes a James Earl Jones voiceover reading of Poe's poem nearly verbatim (though several verses have been excised), and with lyrical and atmospheric delivery. However, this recitation is also a dramatic revision. The most obvious and playful deviation from Poe's original text is in the members of the Simpson family stepping in to fill roles within the poem, including Homer as the narrator, Marge as the "lost Lenore," Lisa and Maggie and censer-wielding seraphim, and Bart as the tormenting raven, which creates the opportunity for a scene which features "Bart-the-raven jovially bringing the narrator/Homer to anger, which is a recurring source of comedy on the show" (Zevallos). While Poe's words remain faithfully recited, it is here in the tone of the work as a whole that *The Simpsons* makes its most abrupt departure, offering an opportunity to engage students in thinking critically about the nuances of adaptation, including distinctions between being faithful to the letter of the text versus the spirit of the text, and delving well beyond "it was different in the story" or "the book was better."

The transposition of comedic characters into a Gothic poem of melancholy and mourning creates a new meaning and possible interpretation of the poem through the engagement with self-reflexive parody and pastiche, though these shifts require constant negotiation and are a rich ground for critical analysis. For example, the stanzas which have been excised (specifically 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 15, and 16) are some of those in which Poe is

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most effectively creating the mood of desolation and despair, a choice that deflates some of the suspense from the reading, and as Peter Connolly-Smith argues, “This comic intrusion of the Simpsons—in character as themselves, as soon becomes apparent—prevents the adaptation from ever achieving full faithfulness” (137). However, in the midst of the slapstick action of Homer chasing Raven Bart around the library and the in-joke nods at Poe’s titles as the books fall from their shelves, the scene “remains in keeping with the mounting hysteria of Poe’s poem” (136) and the episode revels in “the sheer aesthetic pleasure of [“The Raven’s”] complex rhyme schemes and its all-suffusing sense of loss and nostalgia—aspects of the original that Jones’s reading captures well” (136).

This makes *The Simpsons’* take on “The Raven” particularly productive for in-class discussion because it requires students to engage with both texts—Poe’s poem and *The Simpsons’* version—on multiple levels, from the textual to the reimagined, in the shifting of genres and the metatextual pastiche the segment provides. With this wide range of interconnected critical engagement, students are able to view Poe’s poem as a dynamic and negotiated text, analyzing not just the text itself but the myriad uses to which it has been put, its lasting impact and presence in literature and popular culture, and the many re-imaginings that are possible, allowing them to see a familiar text through fresh eyes and consider the impact of different elements of adaptation on the work’s meaning and effect.

In contrast to the central position of Poe’s text in “The Raven,” “The Telltale Head” and “Lisa’s Rival” are referential without being literal. Drawing on Leitch’s definitions, these two variations on Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” offer adjustments to the original text through updating and revision, while also engaging with parody and pastiche. While Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” immerses the reader in the psyche of the troubled narrator, averring his sanity in the aftermath of a grisly murder, in *The Simpsons’* versions, the conflict is much less violent, though the crises of conscious and psychological suspense are central to each reinvention. These two episodes use Poe’s “The Tell-Tale Heart” as a touchstone for storylines in which Bart saws the head off the statue of Springfield’s founding father Jedediah Springfield and in which Lisa’s intellectual superiority is challenged by a new girl, respectively, both of which land the Simpson siblings facing a crisis of conscience and an overwhelming compulsion to confess. In “The Telltale Head,” the severed statue head assumes the voice of Jedediah Springfield and taunts Bart from his backpack, while Lisa steals her rival’s diorama—of “The Tell-Tale Heart” no less, in a moment of layered intertextuality and allusion—and secretes it

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below the floor, where the amplified “beats” of the diorama’s metronome drive her to panicked confession. While these intersections with Poe’s story take significantly more creative license than “The Raven,” arguably re-imagining rather than representing, their tone remains faithful to Poe’s own, as they “nevertheless capture not only Poe’s original narrator’s guilt, but also elements of the grotesque and the macabre (a severed head, in Bart’s adventure; a severed heart, in Lisa’s) that in their own way—and not in spite of, but *because* of their infidelity to the source material—invoke Poe’s sensibility” (Conolly-Smith 135, emphasis original).

These two episodes also offer a distinctive revision of Poe’s short story, in which the narrator continues to claim that he is sane, while the narrative closure is dark and fatalistic. However, in “The Telltale Head” and “Lisa’s Rival,” Bart and Lisa are not consigned to despair and these two episodes also offer an interesting opportunity to critically consider the role of genre in these appropriations, with the “redeeming closure” (Conolly-Smith 141) of each episode’s closing scenes of confession and redemption. Additionally, this particular revision highlights the conventions of the standard situation comedy—and a trope that *The Simpsons* has self-reflexively drawn on throughout their series run—that at the end of the episode, the status quo of the fictional world is reasserted and all is as has been, with order restored. While “The Raven” offers students the opportunity to consider Poe’s text itself, “The Telltale Head” and “Lisa’s Rival” instead require them to think more broadly about the source text and its adaptation, considering key themes, the familiar narrative of guilt and confession, and the psychological turmoil of the individual, while also drawing their critical attention to adaptation approaches and the intent which drives these choices, genre conventions across mediums, and the various permutations of the text’s influence on contemporary literature and popular culture.

Conclusion

Poe’s work is a staple of American literature and Gothic-focused courses and Poe remains a perennial favorite among students. Their familiarity with and fondness for Poe provide a firm foundation upon which we can build students’ central skills of critical thinking and analysis, which can be further engaged through the incorporation of popular culture adaptations of Poe’s poems and short stories. The graphic novel adaptations—like those Manning, Jimenz, and Hinds—add a visual element to Poe’s language, encouraging students to reflect on their own imaginative process while reading, to consider the impact of the added

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visual component on their experience and understanding of the narrative, and to reflect on how different visual styles influence their perception as readers. *Extraordinary Tales* builds on this combination of text and image, foregrounding the wide range of styles in which Poe's work can be reimagined and presented through the artistically-distinct segments that make up the anthology film as a whole, as well as emphasizing the role of Poe as author and the endless fascination with Poe as an individual and a historical figure in the deployment of a Poe character in the frame narrative of the film. Finally, the *Simpsons* episodes that offer their own interpretation of some of Poe's most well-known works raise the bar for rhetorical analysis and critical thinking, as students are required to reflect on the complex process of adaptation and consider Poe's work as a dynamic and negotiated text rather than a concrete classic with a single meaning to be mastered. These graphic novels, *Extraordinary Tales*, and *The Simpsons* provide an opportunity for students to see Poe from a new perspective, not only by combining Poe's text with images, but also in prompting them to consider critical questions of adaptation, the active and purposeful negotiation of texts, and Poe's influence on contemporary culture, which can result in students' more dynamically engaged and critically complex understanding of and response to Poe's work, as his words continue to resonate across the years, beyond death, and well into the twenty-first century.

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ALISSA BURGER is an Associate Professor of English and Director of Student Success at Culver-Stockton College. She teaches courses in research, writing, and literature, specializing in gender, horror, and the Gothic. She is the author of *The Quest for the Dark Tower: Genre and Interconnection in the Stephen King Series* (McFarland, forthcoming 2021), *Teaching Stephen King: Horror, The Supernatural, and New Approaches to Literature* (Palgrave, 2016) and *The Wizard of Oz as American Myth: A Critical Study of Six Versions of the Story, 1900-2007* (McFarland, 2012).

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Patricia A. West, Presenting Mystery, Mayhem, and Madness: Getting Students to Read and Respond to Crazy American Literary Texts

Abstract: “Presenting Mystery, Mayhem, and Madness: Getting Students to Read and Respond to Crazy American Literary Texts,” discusses methods to select texts, emphasizes the importance of having a sense of student audience, and prioritizing author diversity in terms of race, gender, and other identities in course design. For this special themed edition, essential and critical questions are addressed: What is American? What is horror? What is weird? The article further asserts the benefits of Louise Rosenblatt’s transactional theory of literature as still relevant to 21st century teaching to stimulate critical and creative responses to literature. It offers the suggestion that interpretation of horror can range from the humorous and ridiculous to the more serious representations of horror and terror in texts narrating slavery and racial violence. Finally, the article cites specific examples of texts and authors from classroom experience and ends with a brief sample of students writing about the dead.

Introduction

The competition is serious! In higher education, the majority of students who fill our American literature survey classes are likely age 25 and under. We have students who are drawn to imagery and themes of ‘old town roads, beer, honky-tonks, lost, found, and everlasting love, family, wretchedness, the feminist savage, anger, protest, resistance, and mourning for black, brown, and LGBTQ lives that mattered.

Our American literature students are consumed with hip-hop and rap, sexy videos, country western music, Smart phones, and social media. And we want them to read and post what before the next class meeting? So what is horror in today’s America? What is weird? Sadly, the answers have played out right before their screens and on their streets. How do we mine the canonical field for texts that replay imagery from a dysfunctional, historical, and insane past? It requires searching the field for the most unbelievable! Teaching the mystery, mayhem, and madness within American literature opens the door to entice reluctant student readers through the use of high interest texts, inclusion of diverse authors, and response strategies guided by effective motivational and literary theories.

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Rationale

Reflection of my experience teaching literature at a community college and a four-year university in Southeast Georgia provides several memories of the pedagogical approaches I planned and applied based on the course requirements set by the state. English educators at other state universities and community colleges are likewise faced with ways to motivate students who are preoccupied with work, non-traditional college status, and low socio-economic status. Nevertheless, we must find literature that will compete with bestsellers and qualify as ‘cool’ among students who are facing daily life challenges. The course description for such courses is probably similar. For the Technical College System of Georgia, the ENGL 2130 course is described as:

Emphasizes American literature as a reflection of culture and ideas. A survey of important works in American literature. Includes a variety of literary genres: short stories, poetry, drama, nonfiction, and novels. Topics include literature and culture, essential themes and ideas, literature and history, and research skills. (Course Syllabus, 2130)

Within the University System of Georgia, American Literature courses are simply a “survey of important works,” or it could be taught in two segments from the pre-colonial age to mid-nineteenth century and then from mid-nineteenth century to the present” (Course Syllabus 2140). The one thing in common is that all of these course requirements are broadly expressed and allow for various designs, themes, and approaches. The history of the country produced stacks of texts marked with horror and weirdness, sometimes due to the terror of colonialism, slavery, and sometimes due to ghostly and ghastly settings.

Selecting the Most Horrific Pages of “American” Texts

For several semesters, I taught American literature under the theme, “Mystery, Mayhem, and Madness” and included titles that would spark learning excitement. Selection of American literary texts that invite debate, discussion, and critical thinking are ideal. One point I would like to raise here is that “American” should be replaced by “Literature of the United States.” For this comment, I draw upon the thinking of Caroline F. Levander of Rice University. Writing in 2013, Professor Levander raises important questions about course materials when she argues that, “The corpus of material that currently exists under the umbrella of American literature has dramatically expanded in size and generic scope in the

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last 30 years with the inclusion of non-canonical works...” (3). To be fair and concise, “hemispheric studies of the Americas” is a more inclusive heuristic which would broaden our view to all points South, Central, and North, yet this opening of the literary borders has not yet spread to those who pull the curriculum strings among state boards of regents or chancellors. Therefore, to admit an oversight, inclusivity of American literary texts in past semesters did not include authors from South America, Central America, or the Caribbean; however, re-visioned acceptance of what constitutes American literature could lead to different choices. An example of extending this thought lies in the genre of magical realism, usually associated with Latin American literature. Since scholars now identify some writings by Toni Morrison as magical realism, novels such as *Beloved* would belong on the reading list for a horror-themed course. When we think of genre, extracting the most interesting and complex texts from a number of sub-genres could give us the student outcomes we desire.

Course design with strategic and careful text selection is essential and should allow students to meet course competencies while also observing inclusion and diversity. Course design includes “selling” what you have to offer, no matter the mode of instruction: face-to-face, hybrid, or totally online as we have adapted over the past year. I started by creating a promotional flier consisting of the theme, author photos, and titles of sample texts. For diversity in the early part of the semester, we included Native American myths, as well as the women’s captivity narratives. For each historical period, I considered texts that are full of imagery, figures of speech, irony, bizarre and uncanny characters, and dangerous settings. One text that disturbed students with its description of torture and death was Letter IX of Michel-Guillaume-Jean de Crèvecoeur *Letters from an American Farmer*. One point I make is that slavery manifested its worst in forms of terrorism. A particular passage by Crèvecoeur left students almost speechless and clearly shocked when reading of an account of a walk to a friend’s home for dinner when he

perceived a Negro, suspended in the cage and left there to expire! I shudder when I recollect that the birds had already picked out his eyes, his cheek bones were bare, his arms had been attacked in several places, and his body seemed covered with a multitude of wounds. (273)

Texts such as this are appropriate for a written response to follow the silence when an oral discussion is just too much.

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No matter where I sign a contract, my teaching of literature is guided by theories of intrinsic motivation. Ideally, we want our students to run to our classes to hear that next great lecture about American writers and texts. Don't think that it cannot happen. I saw this years ago while teaching 7th and 8th grade English language arts. Students would literally run from the main building out to my modular classroom to hear the next read aloud, think aloud installment of a text. One day, at Savannah State University, where I teach the African-American realm of American literature, a student rushed through the door, slammed her books down on the first desk of the second row and declared, "Alright, let's go. I am ready to get on with this." The text was Zora Neale Hurston's short story, "Sweat." I discovered that my university students were motivated to engage with the texts because they bought into the characters and conflicts to which they could make connections, and I would conclude that they found reading an alternative form of entertainment. One of the most popular and referred to textual examples describing an episode of psychological abuse suffered by the protagonist, Delia is this when Hurston writes, "Just then something long, round, limp and black fell upon her shoulders and slithered to the floor beside her. A great terror took hold of her" (1032). You may think you know what the object is, but it is not until we get to the next line that we learn what slithers!

Another example can be drawn from Hurston's short story, "John Redding Goes to Sea," which she sets in what we now define as the Gullah Geechee heritage corridor from Jacksonville, Florida, up to Cape Fear, North Carolina, and within 30 miles of the Atlantic Coast, which was the primary location for disembarkation of Africans brought to the United States for enslavement. In this short story, she blends language, witchcraft, and the otherness of a young black male growing up in the South and grasps our attention early in the text when she provides a back story that "The very night John wuz bawn, Granny seed ole Witch Judy Davis creepin outer dis yahd" (3). Such texts invite a pre-reading discussion to hear prior knowledge experiences from students. I love when a student might begin, "My grandmamma told me..." A connection is then made. To explain her transactional theory of literature, the late Louise Rosenblatt explains that, "The text is merely an object of paper and ink until some reader responds to the marks on the page as verbal symbols" (23). When that connection is made, students want to read and respond on their own, and not because of the promise of grades. Moreover, the means to monitor comprehension could also expand to more

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observable forms of participation such as small group discussions and small group poster reports.

Diversity and Inclusion of Student Audience and Authors

When creating any course content, instructors should be guided by our student audience and author diversity in terms of gender, race, and culture. As instructors, we all have our go-to favorites, but it is important to consider who will fill those desks, online asynchronous spaces, or those square spaces for synchronous arrangements. A quick survey of student surnames and information will indicate my choices for a reading list. Although they should not be signaled out, are there dual-enrollment readers who may be subjected to sensitive and mature subject matter? In Georgia, a dual-enrollment student taking early college classes may be as young as 15-years-old! Experience has taught me that the younger learners are more likely to make literal rather than figurative interpretations. Another concern for a unit on the weird might require direct instruction on basic literary devices, especially tone, and the elements of horror fiction. We cannot assume that adequate prior knowledge exists. The same factors would apply to that non-traditional student whose last English class was 10 years before.

When designing a course theme based on the horror and the weird, a variety of instructional strategies may be applied. The course flier that I posted teased these topics and activities:

Get ready to examine essential questions through writing and discussion in everything from short fiction, nonfiction, and poetry to Kate Chopin's mysterious novel, *The Awakening*. When the opportunity for extra credit presents itself we will also mine the local community for lectures, art exhibits, and performances related to the competency areas.

The next version of such a flier might include terms such as fantasy, horror, crime thriller, or detective fiction, in other words, I would borrow from what is selling in books, television series, and movies. Of course, the tried and true American Gothic is always reliable. From the Age of Romanticism, I selected Poe's "The Fall of the House of Usher," "The Purloined Letter" and Melville's "Bartleby the Scrivener," and Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." Admittedly, we teach what we like and these page turners are among my favorites. The twists, turns and irony within Kate Chopin's "Story of an Hour" provides the satisfaction of a surprise ending.

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They are in on her secret moment of mourning in the upstairs bedroom. When adding Southern Gothic, William Faulkner's "A Rose for Emily" will hook students of any age and background.

The process to diversify the course content applied to all literary periods and included a focus on gender, race, and place. Rowlandson, Chopin, and Hurston as feminist voices, others who wrote during the period of the Harlem Renaissance and American Realism weave short stories filled with fear, foreshadowing, mystery, and superstition, Using all these characteristics, African-American writer Ann Petry keeps readers on edge as she illuminates the effects of racism on Black families during the great migration in "Like a Winding Sheet" which was voted the best short story of 1946. Critic Evie Shockley calls it "Petry's language of fear in the literary conventions of the gothic genre" (2). This can be taken as that effective balance of tension that Petry threads throughout her fiction. For example, after the Black male character Johnson is verbally assaulted by his white female supervisor with the N-word, the reader gets a preview of a reaction yet to come when Petry describes the effort to restrain himself, "He tried to make his hands relax by offering them a description of what it would have been like to strike her because he had the queer feeling that his hands were not exactly a part of him anymore" (203-204.)

To continue to think outside of the box linking African-American female writers to horror fiction, there are a few to point out from my course syllabi. Georgia Douglas Johnson and her one-act anti-lynching play, *A Sunday Morning in the South*, published in 1925, reflects a time when racial profiling ended with acts of terror: torture, misery, and murder. Unfortunately, this has proven an enduring issue even in the 21st century and not the type of text-to-world connection we want our students to witness. We are all familiar with English author Samuel Taylor Coleridge's call for the "willing suspension of disbelief" in *Biographia Literaria* (49); however, real life experiences over recent years will now lead to future American fiction which reflects the unexpected and forced exposure of the unbelievable due to modern technology. The unbelievable killings of unarmed black men and women caught on camera and the haunting psychological effects will sadly serve as plot situations and characterizations in forthcoming works of literature. Creating fiction and poetry to capture the ghosts of terror and racism is the legacy left by Georgia Douglas Johnson and Ann Petry, among many others. A well-blended reading list allows student to articulate themes of alienation, otherness, loss of identity, queerness, and psychoanalytic theory.

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Motivational Strategies and Literary Theories

After deciding on texts and authors to teach horror fiction genres, it follows to launch a plan that will produce meaningful student outcomes. After years of writers training in workshop methods at the secondary education level, I adapt the best for the higher education classroom. One activity that brought that eager Savannah State student through the door was an activity called Hot Seat in which a class member takes on the role of a character to defend and explain actions and answers as that character. Peers are instructed to create hot questions-higher order thinking. The activity works well with a character who has committed a crime or is suspected of one. For example, in “Sweat” Delia’s abusive and psycho husband Sykes meets an unexpected fate. Is Delia guilty of letting Sykes die, or does he deserve the end that Hurston deals him? Instructors could also set up the class with a witness stand. It works the same as the hot seat strategy. Students participate because they are intrinsically motivated, thanks to the selection of just the right texts and classroom activities that flip the flow of instruction and go beyond lecture.

My instructional repertoire consists of multi-media presentations, focused-free writing discussion posts, creative writing, and even games such as *Jeopardy* Review and the previously mentioned hot seat. In my American literature classes, there are no right answers. In *Making Meaning with Texts*, Professor Rosenblatt was conscientious about the intersectionality of social justice and education and observed before her death in 2005 that, “In our tumultuous changing world beset by poverty, pollution, and war, unthinking ready-made responses are dangerous” (xi). One way to avoid static responses and fixed assessments is to make use of unique university locations to dig for signs of the supernatural.

Place studies is a method that invites a way to flip the classroom with a focus on the weird and the horror-ful. Living and teaching in the hometown of Flannery O’Connor presents a special opportunity. What better author to include! O’Connor’s biography could not be excluded, especially with a cultural studies approach. After oral class discussions and debates, we concluded study of O’Connor with a field trip to her childhood home in Savannah, within driving and walking distance of some students. They received a guided tour and engaged in informed conversation with the tour guide about O’Connor’s life and writing. They experienced being in the home where O’Connor raised pet chickens. Students were not penalized if they did not attend, but intrinsic motivation drew most of them to the event.

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Another writer key to Savannah's literary landscape is Pulitzer Prize-winning author, James Alan McPherson, whose fiction includes dabbling in weird and uncanny characters. Throughout the years, his writings have intrigued hundreds of students. In "The Story of a Dead Man," McPherson centers in on class lines that were being created within the black community as a result of upward mobility. Billy Renfro, the antagonist, is presented as a grotesque symbol of the black man who did not make it. He drops out of school and serves time in prison for stabbing a man to death during a dice game. To present Billy as a grotesque character, he writes that "He was dressed in the black gabardine suit of an undertaker. Dried purple-black blood streaked his coat sleeves, his black string tie, and the collars of the dirty white shirt he wore" (McPherson 35). He continues this imagery of Billy in another scene where "His left eye socket was hollow, no more than a shriveled piece of flesh pressed grimly against skull" (43).

The portrayal of Billy Renfro illustrates how the text can be analyzed using Queer Theory, applicable to teaching texts of horror and the weird undertaker. The undertaker persona is not by accident. In one of the last conversations with a still healthy James Alan McPherson, he shared with me that he lived next door to the Sidney A. Jones Funeral Home, then located off of Savannah's West Broad Street. A key memory for McPherson, in what he says might be "the most important thing," was a funeral home right next door to their home. He says he would watch funerals every day and this shaped his consciousness of death as a natural part of life. McPherson's roots inform his literary imagination and produces this example of the American weird.

Another place key to the mysteries of life is that of the cemetery which provides an ideal setting for fiction and creative writing. In the Spring of 2018, I took a class to the cemetery—figuratively speaking. That term I taught an African-American Poetry class that combined two objectives: documenting stories of an abandoned cemetery with creative responses. After learning the elements and tropes of African American poetry, I assigned students to write tributes to the dead, based on research from online city archives and databases. Selected students presented their writings at a symposium, "Restored Lives & Legacies: Sketches from Savannah's LePageville Community" in April, 2018. The project stems from a community service partnership between the LePageville Memorial Cemetery, Inc. and Savannah State University,

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These students were able to capture the pain of a community suffering from a lack of proper health care for young and old alike. In this example by former William Gardner, he writes of “Stillborn Jenkins”:

With the dreams of his parents Henry and Nattie/ Excited, purely he goes home
Without the toils of hatred and prejudice; he will never know/His birthday and death
day meet together swiftly and silently/ Swathed in a blanket, nameless... (Lines 3-7)

In another poem about infant mortality, former student now teacher Brittani Truell writes of the “unknown quiet body of Miss Jackson”:

Who felt the visions of darkness, silence, coldness, and an intense need to be held by
her mother
Who feared not being able to see the outside world, not being able to be adorned by
her father’s love, and not having the passion of love from her mother’s first embrace
Her accomplishments could and would have been long, however never not once got
to thrive to show them off. (Lines 5-10)

Both student writers use words that set a tone for fear, pain, suffering, and death while demonstrating that a cemetery can serve as subject matter in an American literature class which builds a theme around horror and fear. These original poems function as what Rosenblatt might consider non “ready set” responses because they are sharable, performable, and will never be classified as simple rote memory.

Conclusion

Teaching horror and the weird in the American literature classroom opens the door to a complex and myriad slate of textual and pedagogical possibilities. No matter the approach, students are hooked on the suspense, plots, ironies, imagery, and conflicts woven by some of America’s best imaginative writers. Teachers may design courses with the usual canonical texts, or they may think about other genres and threads which might be considered horror. As pointed out here, the literature of slavery and oppression, past and present, must be considered within this category because of the terroristic nature of slavery. In other words, this theme cannot be just about ghosts or crazy characters. Crevecoeur, Hurston, Johnson, Petry, O’Connor, and McPherson show us why.

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Professors and high school teachers have two choices: We can take the fun, humorous route just for entertainment and mystery-solving. The other choice is to include readings of America's shame with violence and forms of racial injustice which serve as topics for horror and terror. As shown here, a blend of the two is ideal. We want the evocation of tears, laughter, screams, oohs, and ahs. We must challenge ourselves to represent a diverse list of course readings to include masterful writers from all identities. I argue that we must seek ways to expand the content and change lenses to include a wealth of slave narratives and under taught authors. I have shared just a few from my unit on "Mystery, Mayhem, and Madness" and from African American literature courses in which I apply Louise Rosenblatt's transactional theory of literature and remain mindful of students' willingness to accept the foolishness of selected texts, even if just temporary. We could courses end with creative responses, field trips, and other imaginative activities to engage students. The challenge is finding time within a semester to teach all the great texts that exist to meet those student course outcomes set by our institutions. The challenge is almost scary!

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PATRICIA ANN WEST is Assistant Professor of English at the historic HBCU Savannah State University (SSU) where she specializes in African-American literature and workshop-based composition strategies. She completed Ph.D. candidacy in Literature and Criticism at Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP), and now pursues interests as an independent scholar. She has been a Fellow of the National Writing Project (NWP) since 1993. Her teaching, research, and writing interests focus on literature, genealogy, Gullah Geechee culture, and African-American cemetery preservation. Prof. West's presentations include the National Writing Project, Teaching Abroad in Belize, Southern Humanities Council, Southern Association of Canadian Studies, The Slave Dwelling Project, and the University of Virginia Universities Studying Slavery Symposium. Her publications include book chapters, reviews, news articles, and most recently her collection *Still Water Words: Poems and Stories from Ancestral Places* (2020).