

## Exam Rationale: 20<sup>th</sup> Century American Gothic

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I initially chose to take an exam in American Gothic not because I felt drawn to the area, or to “horror novels,” but because I saw a certain set of books, books by Marilynne Robinson, Flannery O’Connor, Kathryn Davis, among others, that would not leave me alone, long after I’ve put them down. As I’ve extended my reading, both from the primary and secondary lists, I’ve come to understand my attraction to the genre, and to appreciate its breadth of style and purpose.

The Gothic, as manifested in America, could be loosely defined as a literature that voices doubts about America’s progress and exceptionalism. It works to expose what we, as a nation, have chosen to overlook or repress. American Gothic also tends to be much more focused on the internal self than the Gothic as it is manifested in other countries. It plays upon America’s idea of itself as a unified front, and the idea that its citizens are all independent and clear-thinking pioneers—ideas that have tended to “rationalize” all manner of evil. American Gothic reveals the diversity of the country and the heterogeneity of individuals, and admits that we *are* a haunted country. American Gothic elicits a powerful response, such as horror or terror, from the reader, seeking to, through this elevated response, heal the reader, the nation.

American Gothic is a wide-reaching genre that some, like Leslie Fiedler, would claim encompasses the whole of our country’s literature, including *The Great Gatsby*. For the purposes of this rationale, I will focus on four primary areas that I see surfacing in my reading: 1) the Racial Gothic, and how, in claiming we are a “united” nation, we have overlooked our diversity, “Other-ed” a large portion of our country, and condoned a number of wrongs; 2) Suburban Gothic, or Edenic Gothic—Gothic that, through its insistence on similarity, “niceness,” and even hope against all odds (including the Myth of the West and the Myth of Eden) has created locations of dissonance and areas that are ripe for attack—whether internal or external; 3) the ways that boundaries, or the horror at the lack of them, play in the Gothic; 4) American Gothic’s cathartic and healing functions, and the role that terror plays in them.

Racial Gothic originates from, though it is by no means limited to, Black slavery, Native American slaughter, and racial tension in the United States. Morrison, in *Playing in the Dark*, claims that when white settlers came over they anticipated freedom but were faced, instead, with a terrifying blankness, the wilderness, and uncertainty as to whether they would succeed. These internal conflicts grew within them and within the growing country, but could not be admitted publicly, due to faith in the success of “founding principles,” such as individualism and Manifest Destiny, and so they were transferred to what Morrison calls a “blank darkness.” These fears rationalized exploitation and brewed “American Africanism—a fabricated brew of darkness, otherness, alarm, and desire that is uniquely American.” It extends beyond American Africanism to the idea that any culture that claims it is consolidated is also a culture of exclusion—excluding on account of race, religion, physical defect, etc. The Racial Gothic, as described above, is the focus of, or plays a role in, a number of books on my list. It differs from non-Gothic racial literatures in that, beyond showing the pain of subjugation, it is interested in walking the line between waking and dreams/nightmares, evoking the supernatural, and/or

demonstrating the ways in which fears and the abuses of power/knowledge can create monsters of all involved. It suggests that the pains inflicted are not temporary, but will, instead, poison generations, if not echo into an afterlife.

Edenic Gothic is the Gothic of suburbs, quiet rural areas, and, generally speaking, the West. These areas are marked by the inhabitants' (or soon-to-be inhabitants') belief that their spaces are innocent, new, safe, even vital and healthy. It is such a prevalent form of Gothic literature in America because America was founded on, and continues to operate on, the myth of the West and the myth of Eden. These myths suggest a dangerous idealism that utopia is possible, if heavily controlled/constructed; also that, if something goes wrong with *this* "Eden," there will always be new territory to tame over *there*. Thus, these myths are not only delusional, but also physically harmful to the people and lands involved. Edenic Gothic in America emerged from the initial colonization and development of America, then it spread to America's West, and then, once the West was occupied, the myth of Eden was made manifest in the many suburbs that separate their inhabitants from harsh "outside world," hoping for safety and the familiar. I would argue that, while the myth of the West should have, in theory, dissipated as the area developed, the myth persists in the cults of health, beauty, and possibility that rule much of our culture's attitude toward the West Coast. The goal of this type of Gothic fiction is to unsettle, even shock, bourgeois complacency in order to demonstrate that their sense of safety is a myth, and that they have, while trying to create "the familiar," created a suffocating sense of conformity that breeds inner anxiety that must take some external, and likely dangerous form; this happens on the levels of both community and person. Most forms of American Gothic call attention to a Freudian sense of self, a self that is divided and mysterious, despite our attempts to create a unified self, a solid identity; the call for conformity within the suburb heightens the tension between the myth of a solid self and community and the reality of a divided self and a diverse community.

Above, I've addressed some of the ways in which boundaries work within the Gothic: divisions within the self, the boundary that is crossed when internal fear is externalized into violent action, and the boundaries that we create in order to protect ourselves. But Gothic as a whole is built upon boundaries including supernatural/natural, freakish/normal, human/monster, etc. Gothic literature would not exist unless there was some "Other"—be it spirit, human, or past—that threatens what we believe we know. Kristeva defines the abject, the things that cause us horror, as those which are "radically excluded" from self and self-definition, but still draws the self toward it, to "the place where meaning collapses." The abject works almost as a warning to the self, that here is a boundary it must not cross. The abject ties interestingly to Bakhtin's definition of the grotesque body as "transgressing its own limits," and being open to the outside world; Bakhtin's grotesque body is abject in its willingness to toe this line where meaning and definition simultaneously exist and collapse.

What interests me most as a writer are the Gothic's cathartic possibilities. Perhaps as a writer, I'm constantly looking for ways to make literature deeply affect readers, beyond entertainment or an occasional twinge of unease. Gothic literature is constantly asking the reader why he or she is so afraid. In the midst of terror, there is the constant element of needing to both locate and confront the source of the terror; it is the only way to ease the fear—not unlike psychoanalytic healing. Given the focus of much American Gothic—racial fear, fear of repressed memories, incest, and guilt—healing is a much-

needed response. Gothic literature is also known for its excess of meaning—its attention to and population of the written surface that creates deep and multi-layered subtexts. This excess tends to create a larger variety of possible (and healing) reader responses, allowing the reader to bring personal hurts or anxieties to the text, and to have them addressed through the work's inherent ambiguity. The sublime and terror are also tied into this cathartic process. Terror, as opposed to horror (which is claustrophobic and limiting), is a type of fear that allows for possibility—both the possibility of becoming more deeply entrenched and the possibility of escape. The sublime is known to elicit terror and not horror from the viewer/reader, who is experiencing a sense of danger, not horror's revulsion. Thus, the viewer/reader feels the impulse to sustain oneself, to fight, to heal.

As stated above, these are only four facets of American Gothic literature, and do not encompass the whole of my list, nor the whole of my interest in it. They do seem to be, however, essential and definitive elements: racial hurt, the permeability of the American Dream, the divided and mysterious self, the play with boundaries, and the cathartic possibilities.