Gothic Fiction

“Horror, madness, monstrosity, death, disease, terror, evil, and weird sexuality”: these preoccupations, according to a recent critic, have animated Gothic fiction ever since it emerged in the mid-1700s. We will contemplate these preoccupations as we examine a range of Gothic texts, from eighteenth-century Gothic fragments to stories by Edgar Allan Poe and Isabel Allende. And we will ask these questions about those texts: What makes Gothic fiction “Gothic”? How do we account for its immense popularity? Why have high-minded readers and writers always tended to scorn it? (What are they so worried about?) And what have modern Gothic writers and readers made of the genre they’ve inherited?

We’ll develop a working definition of the Gothic in our first segment, which will take a group of short stories—of various centuries and nations—as its primary texts. Next, we’ll read Jane Austen’s Gothic spoof, Northanger Abbey, in the context of both the popular fiction Austen parodies and the heated eighteenth-century debates about what young women should read. Our third segment will focus on Edgar Allan Poe and his tales of paranoia, insanity, and incest, and it will extend the course’s focus from the Gothic mansion (and the Gothic monster) to the Gothic mind.

Course Policies and Requirements

The Texts

Available at the Coop (please obtain the designated edition):

- The Oxford Book of Gothic Tales (Oxford)
- The Mysteries of Udolpho (Oxford World’s Classics)
- Northanger Abbey (Penguin)
- The Portable Poe (Penguin)
- The Short Guide to College Writing 5/e (Penguin Academics)

Additional readings will be distributed in class or available through the course website.

The Writing Assignments

There will be several short writing assignments, three drafts, and three required essays: an analysis of a single short story; a reading of a text in its literary context; and an interpretation of a group of stories (and/or other works) in the context of a range of secondary sources.

- Essay 1 will be an interpretive analysis of a short Gothic tale. You’ll choose one
of the 4 tales assigned during the first weeks of the course: The anonymously published “Ruins of the Abbey of FitzMartin,” LeFanu’s “Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family,” “The Yellow Wallpaper” by Charlotte Perkins Stetson, or “If You Touched my Heart,” by Isabelle Allende. For the essay, you will develop a critical question worth writing about and explore the question by carefully analyzing relevant passages from the tale.

For Essay 2, you will analyze and interpret Northanger Abbey, Jane Austen’s Gothic parody, in its literary context. In addition to Northanger itself, we’ll read contemporary criticism by Mary Wollstonecraft and other thinkers about the pleasures and dangers of reading fiction; we will also read portions of Ann Radcliffe’s great Gothic novel, The Mysteries of Udolpho. These sources will help you to refine your sense of the intellectual climate within which the 18-year-old Austen wrote her first novel and to articulate your sense of what that novel means.

Essay 3 will serve as the culmination of all the work you have done this semester, both in terms of your writing and course content. Unit Three takes as its subject selected tales of Edgar Allan Poe and critical debates about them. First, we will read Poe’s tales, analyzing their Gothic character and literary structure. Next, we will become familiar with three areas of Poe criticism—the biographical, psychological, and historical—and consider the kinds of sources that are used to make arguments about the relationship between Poe’s life, mind, and work. From there, you will be asked to choose a tale on which to focus and find a topic you would like to write about. You will be required to find new sources, which may include: 1) primary sources, e.g., nineteenth-century texts or later adaptations, including film or illustration; and 2) secondary criticism on your selected tale, historiography on a topic related to Poe’s life and time, or a source from another discipline. Your main goal is to employ different kinds of sources in order to enter into a debate about Poe’s fiction.

Grades

Although I will assign grades only to final revisions of the three major essays, everything you do for the class—your work on the exercises and drafts, your participation in class discussions and workshops, your preparation for our conferences—will count toward your final grade for the course.

Here’s how things break down:

Essay 1 = 20%
Essay 2 = 35%
Essay 3 = 45%

Thoughtful participation in class discussions, thorough preparation for our conferences, and consistently well-developed responses to the response paper assignments are expected. Sketchy responses to the response paper assignments and a failure to participate in class and prepare for conferences will drive a grade down at least a half a letter (from, for example, a B+ to a B.)
Writing Format and Submission

Drafts, exercises, and essays must be presented in MLA manuscript format (see the sample formatted essay below). Please number your paragraphs in all response papers, drafts, and final revisions.

All work is to be submitted to the course website. Although our class meets on Mondays and Wednesdays, assignment due dates sometimes fall on other days of the week. Final revisions are to be submitted on a rolling basis, five to seven days from your draft conference date (see the schedule for the specifics).

Attendance

Attendance is required. (See Harvard College Writing Program Attendance Policy, attached.) Any student who is absent without excuse more than twice risks failing the course. Classes begin promptly 10 minutes after the hour. A student who is regularly late by even a few minutes can expect to see his or her final grade suffer as a result. A student who is more than ten minutes late for class will be counted as absent. A missed conference appointment (see below) also counts as an absence from class. If you must miss a class, please notify me by email in advance, and consult the course website or a classmate for class handouts.

Devices and Desires

Electronic devices (laptops, phones, tablets) must be turned off and put away when class begins. All readings, including drafts for our workshops, must be printed in advance because open laptops aren’t permitted in the classroom. (Also: Note that most instructors possess extraordinarily sharp senses and can in fact see right through the seminar table to the device on your lap, and so on.)

Conferences

We’ll meet in scheduled conference to discuss your drafts three times over the course of the semester. We’ll also meet once briefly at the beginning of the semester to discuss your writing questionnaire. Because time is tight during conference weeks, your prompt arrival for a scheduled conference appointment is crucial. Missed draft conference appointments count as absences from class and generally cannot be made up. I am also available by appointment for additional meetings.

Communications

The best way to contact me outside of class is to e-mail me at pat_bellanca@harvard.edu, but I can also be reached by phone at my office: 617-496-8674.

I’ll be distributing photocopies (in-class exercises, workshop materials, etc.) at the beginning of nearly every class. You’re responsible for getting them, reading them
carefully, and keeping track of them.

**Draft and Essay Due Dates**

Work must always be turned in when it’s due (of course). But you will have at least one opportunity to acquire a one-day extension of time to be used for the assignment of your choice.

In-class workshops rely on your written work for their success. In Expos 20 it is assumed that the instructor may distribute students’ drafts (or portions of them) via email to the class. (If you have concerns about sharing your writing in this way, let me know.)

Please note that I will distribute the schedules for Units 2 and 3 approximately one week before those units begin. I will tell you the dates for the draft and revision of Essay 3 as soon as I learn what they are.