

## Domestic Monsters: The Subversive Identity of the Countryside in American Gothic Narrative

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### Abstract:

*American Gothic literature departs from its European roots by offering a distinctive and often sinister image of the countryside. European Gothic usually centers on ancient castles that are falling apart. Meanwhile, American Gothic shifts the idyllic image of the countryside from a heavenly place into a place harboring frustration, moral decadence, and unearthly terrors. This paper investigates how American Gothic literature changes rural settings into hubs infested with horror and supernatural activities, thus disclosing the deeply rooted social anxieties often linked with trauma, isolation, and the total failure of the moral system. This paper applies a close-reading methodology of selected texts, ultimately revealing how the seemingly heavenly countryside can be a source of disturbing natures.*

**Keywords:** *Gothic, Countryside, Uncanny, Horror, American.*

### 1. Introduction

American Gothic fiction often lays the foundation for a nation's deep-seated anxieties, usually pertinent to things like identity, morality, and history. Unlike European Gothic fiction, which, on most occasions, deals with supernatural and fantastical settings, American Gothic places horror in both a domestic and a natural setting. American Gothic fiction then converts the idealized scenery of countryside sanctuary to a setting of unfamiliar, uncanny mystery.

In this context, the American countryside becomes a strong metaphor for growing national discrepancies. As deceptively pure and innocent as it may appear on the

surface, horrific mysteries are lurking inside, mirroring the furtive vulnerability of the American collective identity. The American Gothic narrative thus closely investigates the subversiveness of rural domesticity, remoteness, and subjugated histories that leave the countryside with relics of evil that are hard to discard.

Washington Irving was the first American author to venture with Americanness in his writings. With his *The Legend of Sleepy Hollow* (1820), Irving brilliantly combined two different literary genres in a single narrative: horror and comedy. Taking place in a town called Sleepy Hollow, in the remote countryside of New York, Irving

explores the uneasy coexistence of the familiar and the horrific.

Again, unlike the grand castles and labyrinthine streets of European Gothic fiction, American Gothic narratives depend upon landscapes much closer to home: small towns, decaying farmhouses, and rural expanses filled with both promise and dread. Perhaps nowhere is this tension better dramatized than in the use of the countryside traditionally salubrious or at any rate unspoiled setting.

Under the veneer of its superficial, ideal picture lies an entirely more subversive picture that sees the countryside as isolation and a disintegrated environment: a place of the grotesque. These stories make the rural world into a "domestic monster," upending idealized versions of country life and laying bare anxieties lying at the core of the American experience.

In the American cultural imagination, the countryside is idealized as the site of simplicity, self-sufficiency, and moral clarity. It stands for the return to nature and away from corruption and chaos brought by city life. Yet, for American Gothic, this countryside is a breeding ground for paranoia and madness. It is wide open, with widely spread fields that hold isolated farmhouses, trapping one inside them instead of liberating; all its long past conceals some secrets that do not want to stay buried. The land seems to be in league with those terrors, where nature goes feral, and sinister, as if reflecting some darkness within a human psyche or unresolved traumas of the nation.

Central to this transformation is the idea of the "domestic monster," an elision of the familiar and terrifying within the domestic

sphere of rural life. The American Gothic countryside is overtly not a monstrous space filled with supernatural beings or demonic forces. Instead, its horrors are invested in subtler, more insidious corruption of the ordinary. The farmhouse can be cozy and inviting from the outside, yet, upon closer consideration, it becomes a prison with which such brutal generational violence and guilt linger. The natural world moves from that which supports beauty and life to becoming strange and unyielding, even consuming its inhabitants within endless cycles of decay.

This article will explore some of the ways American Gothic literature transforms the countryside into a site of subversion and dread. It questions how rural settings expose the myth of pastoral innocence while participating in deeper cultural anxieties about isolation, ghosts from history, and the fragility of the American Dream. Such stories reimagine the countryside as a type of domestic monster that shows just how even the most familiar spaces can become uneasily *unheimlich*, where the line separating home from horror dissolves entirely.

## 2. Literature Review:

The American Gothic tradition has increasingly rendered the countryside as a subversive setting, where themes of horror, decay, and monstrosity disrupt the idyllic nature. Scholars such as Leslie Fiedler (*Love and Death in the American Novel*, 1960) and Jerrold E. Hogle (*The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, 2002) have argued that the rural landscape is not a refuge from modernity but a space where repressed national traumas—such as

slavery, genocide, and environmental exploitation—resurface in Gothic form.

Fiedler's foundational work emphasizes the American Gothic's preoccupation with the nation's unresolved historical tensions. At the same time, Hoggle's more recent contributions highlight the countryside's role as a liminal space where boundaries between self and other, human and non-human, and past and present dissolve.

In his book *Love and Death in the American Novel*, Fiedler (1960) emphasizes the idea of the haunted countryside and how ghosts and unearthly apparitions often choose to reveal themselves in the remote "haunted countryside, and especially the haunted castle or abbey which rises in its midst and in whose dark passages and cavernous apartments the chase reaches its climax" (p. 112).

Moreover, Hoggle (2018) stresses the idea of the troubled countryside and how working-class people are often the ones with troubled minds and spirits. In his book, *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, Hoggle argues:

*Gothic* has long been a term used to project modern concerns into a deliberately vague, even fictionalized past. It has thus served over the years to refer, with equal fictionality, to Moors and other orientals (hence as a term of racial othering) and to uneducated members of the rural working classes. (p. 16)

The American Gothic tradition further emphasizes that despite its idyllic nature, the countryside will always have supernatural occurrences. In their book *Haunted Landscapes Super-Nature and the Environment*, Heholt and Downing (2016) explain that the countryside is a natural

environment until something unnatural interferes and makes the familiar unfamiliar. They argue:

A perfectly 'natural' and 'familiar' situation is denatured, becomes 'uncanny', loaded with horror and threatening possibilities, as soon as we add to it a small supplementary feature, a detail that 'does not belong', that sticks out, is 'out of place', does not make any sense within the frame of the idyllic scene. (p. 44)

It seems that the American Gothic tradition always seeks to embody the countryside as a place where evil is incarnated. It is remarkable how the view of the countryside shifts from a place of peace and vastness to a place of void and emptiness. The Gothic view of emptiness is most often perceived from a negative standpoint. According to Lucie Armitt and Scott Brewster (*Gothic Travel through Haunted Landscapes: Climates of Fear*, 2023), the emptiness of the countryside brings with it an annoying sense of restlessness, which links to a "perceived sense of actual threat that something fearful resides in the countryside" (p. 13).

Furthermore, Gothic literature greatly attached itself to the countryside and rural life to the point of giving birth to a subgenre called Rural Gothic. The latter typically deals with the notion of the horrific nature of the countryside instead of being idyllic. In her dissertation "Flesh and Blood: The Inbred Grotesque and Queer Kinships in Rural Gothic Literature and Film," Celeste McAlpin-Levitt (2024) argues that "the Rural Gothic is located in 'wilderness': the undeveloped land at the fringe of civilization" (p. 2). Rural Gothic, then leaves no doubt that the countryside is the mother

of all horrors. Within this context, rural life stands in parallel to urban life, thus indicating that the countryside is naturally a home of poverty, supernatural activities, and witchcraft.

Rural Gothic typically enhances the distance between the countryside and its idyllic image. What was once perceived as the symbol of serenity and peace, now stands for evil and deeply-rooted horrific histories. In his article entitled "This Sense of Otherness": The Horrors of the Countryside in Andrew Michael Hurley's *Starve Acre*, Erin Mercer (2024) explains that "darkness lingers in the rural:" rolling hills dotted with sheep were once places of execution; expansive fields were once bloody battlegrounds; and dappled woods were once rife with terrifying tales of the supernatural" (p. 2).

Mercer's standpoint regarding the countryside is that it is inherently evil, and its evil lies in its long, dark history. Within this context, the idyllic image of the countryside serves as nothing but a façade—a fake beauty that covers a darker nature. The countryside's subversive identity thus contributes to its already-existent alienation and loneliness, further distancing it from urban life.

In addition, recent studies examine how women's Rural Gothic literature attempts to break out of the patriarchal confines. Scholars such as Melissa Edmundson Makala (Women's Ghost Literature in Nineteenth-Century Britain, 2013) seek to demonstrate that ghosts and hauntings reflect women's fears and anxieties often challenging them in their societies. In her book, Makala explains that women do not escape their homes, rather they seek to

reenter them. By regaining their property, these women regain the identity they were once denied by socioeconomic mismanagement. This is usually symbolized through the hauntings, that seek to expel them from their homes (pp. 130-131).

Through scholars like Makala, American Gothic can address gender issues founded on racial inequalities and discrimination. Thus, American rural Gothic female literature boldly examines the nation's deepest anxieties. Still evolving, this literature promises to explore themes related to the nation's anxieties, identity, and history. In doing so, women's rural Gothic fiction does not stray far away from home, instead, the domestic home is located at the center of the plot.

### 3. The Subversive Nature of the Countryside

In the American Gothic tradition, nature is often embodied as remote and alienating. Away from its idealized rural landscapes, the countryside serves as the home of sinister often demonic activities. Within this context, the Gothic sinister view of the countryside reflects the inner chaotic nature of its characters. The forest is considered an essential element within the countryside, often reflecting the dark, ambiguous, and unknown supernatural events.

Nathaniel Hawthorne is regarded as one of the early pioneers in American Gothic literature. His short story *Young Goodman Brown* (1835) tells the story of a young man who suddenly decides to leave his newly-wed wife (Faith), to pursue an unknown and mysterious quest into the forest. The protagonist's journey into the forest reflects his moral decadence, falling into paranoia and despair. Instead of providing refuge, the

forest is a home of various temptations and spiritual corruption, leaving him cynical and wary of everyone he encounters. The isolation of the countryside strengthens the protagonist's feelings of dislocation and alienation, thus reflecting the Gothic obsession with the collapse of the moral system and spiritual decadence.

In his *Young Goodman Brown*, Hawthorne ends his story with his protagonist dying in a gloomy and melancholic manner. As his old wife, Faith, and a large crowd of his neighbors and friends were taking him to his grave, there seemed not a moment of hope and peace given even to the carcass: And when he [Goodman Brown] had lived long, and was borne to his grave a hoary corpse, followed by Faith, an aged woman, and children and grandchildren, a goodly procession, besides neighbors not a few, they carved no hopeful verse upon his tombstone, for his dying hour was gloom. (p. 20)

The ending in Hawthorne's story indicates that there is no hope or moment of peace even at death. This melancholic ending reinforces the Gothic preoccupation with the subversiveness of the countryside. While it is physically an idyllic space, the countryside possesses an intrinsic inclination toward being sinister and uncanny, this is typically embodied through the symbolism of the forest in the story.

In addition, another essential element associated with the subversiveness of the countryside is "hillbillies." Whether or not hillbillies have ever existed, they are essentially present in American Gothic literature. Representing the distorted reality of American rural life, hillbillies often inhabit the remote mountains away from

ordinary people. In her dissertation, Levitt (2024) explains that "the hillbilly is defined by their essential ironies: both white and poor, settler and imagined "Native," vigorous and lazy, patriotic and subversive, evangelist and heathen, family-centered and sexually deviant" (Levitt 2024, p. 20).

These unusual contradictions represented by hillbillies reflect the unreliability of the countryside. While it is idyllic and salubrious on the outside, it is mystical and far more wicked on the inside. American Gothic literature, thus insinuates that the more they get away from urban life, the more people experience unpleasant and unnatural incidents. American Gothic literature, ultimately "presents the rural landscape as a place that turns once generous people into hardened survivors" (Makala 2018, p. 14). People in the countryside do not flourish mentally or spiritually, instead, they deteriorate and collapse.

In his short story *The Color Out of Space*, H. P. Lovecraft (1927) emphasizes the eeriness and evil of the countryside. Lovecraft's fictional town of Arkham is so loaded with paranormal activity that plants refuse to grow and animals and insects are urged to flee their homes. This is another vivid image of how dark and gloomy the countryside can be in the Gothic literary tradition. In describing the darkness and eeriness of Arkham, Lovecraft says:

And all the while the vegetation was turning grey and brittle. Even the flowers whose hues had been so strange were greying now, and the fruit was coming out grey and dwarfed and tasteless. The asters and golden-rod bloomed grey and distorted, and the roses, zinneas, and hollyhocks in the

front yard were such blasphemous-looking things that Nahum's oldest boy Zenas cut them down. The strangely puffed insects died about that time, even the bees that had left their hives and taken to the woods. (p. 13)

Lovecraft's vivid description of the countryside is a firm statement that rural settings possess a hidden, more horrendous nature that tends to hide itself from the plain eye. Once this other nature is revealed, there is no going back, where things tend to fall apart. Within this context, the countryside becomes a sinister space, surfacing national fears and anxieties.

#### 4. The Monster within the Domestic Space

In literature, the home is traditionally the symbol of shelter—a sanctuary where individuals find peace and security. In American Gothic fiction, the home often becomes a place of horror. Remote farmhouses and old mansions reflect the fragility of households indicating inevitable personal and collective traumas. Far from providing refuge, these domestic spaces become traps for their dwellers transforming them into monster figures.

In her final novel, *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, Shirley Jackson (1962) demonstrates the transformation of domestic monsters in the countryside. Living in a large mansion in a remote American town, the Blackwoods experience a deep sense of isolation after being ostracized by the townspeople. What seemed to be an accident leading to the death of Merricat's father, and mother John and Ellen, her aunt Dorothy, and her brother Thomas, turns later to be a well-planned

crime of Merricat poisoning her family with arsenic for no particular logical reason.

Enraged, the townspeople force the remaining three members of the Blackwood family to live in isolation from the town: Merricat, her older sister Constance, and their sickly uncle Julian. The three survivors endure isolation, poverty, and loneliness. However, living in their castle in isolation for too long drives the Blackwoods insane, forcing them to bring out the monsters within. Toward the end of the novel, while conversing with her sister Constance, Merricat strangely wonders if she could eat a child if she had the chance (Jackson 1962, p. 61).

The Blackwoods' claustrophobic home reflects their mental imprisonment. After the villagers alienate them, the Blackwoods—typically Merricat and her sister Constance—become domestic monsters from the townspeople's perspective. Within this context, the countryside shifts from being a heavenly space, to becoming a site rife with insanity and mayhem.

Rural settings have often been associated with unnatural thinking in Gothic literature. It is the perfect place for committing the most abominable of crimes. In his novel *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1893) admits through his protagonist Sherlock Holmes that he is not impressed by the idyllic beauty of the countryside, instead its isolation is strongly associated with committing a crime. He states:

You look at these scattered houses, and you are impressed by their beauty. I look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation and of the

impunity with which crime may be committed there. (p. 151)

Equipped with the gifted mind of a detective, Holmes reveals to his friend Watson that what seems to a normal person as a heavenly countryside, is in fact of a horrific nature. Throughout his detective career, Holmes attests to countless crimes taking place in isolated settings and remote areas of the countryside. Holmes's testimony is a reminder of the wrong turn the rural space can take. While the countryside promotes its idyllic and heavenly nature, Gothic literature has succeeded in shifting this one-sided view, revealing its second hidden horrific nature where the supernatural prevails.

### 5. Repressed Collective Traumas and their Haunted Legacies

American Gothic literature often employs collective national traumas to form a haunting aura within the rural space. The national collective repressed traumas are usually tightly linked to the violent colonial history, traumatic family tensions, and a history of slavery. These haunting legacies often revisit abruptly and startlingly, uncovering the dark horrors haunting American memory. Regardless of its lasting value, the countryside transforms into a home for these repressed histories, haunting the illusion of rural peace.

In his short story *A Rose for Emily*, William Faulkner (1930) demonstrates the ramifications of unsettled histories. The story takes place in the fictional town of Yoknapatawpha which symbolizes the fall of the decaying Old South. Simultaneously, Emily Grierson's house turns into a tomb for an obsolete era. The house of the Griersons

which stood once as a symbol of aristocratic glory, now attests to isolation and decadence. Refusing to accept her father's death, and discovering her lover's dead body are two crucial symptomatic elements of a repressed trauma both Emily and the villagers suffer from. Such traumas showcase the Gothic tradition of emphasizing death, trauma, and the haunting of repressed histories.

After her family's death, Emily is left alone to live in further isolation among people who do not seem to accept her. Faulkner highlights this dynamic relationship between Emily and the villagers, showing that the decaying American South did not possess the prospects of a civilized setting: "Miss Emily had been a tradition, a duty, and a care; a sort of hereditary obligation upon the town" (Faulkner 1930, p. 2). This statement reveals how living under the legacy of her family and within the expectations of her townspeople, affects Emily leaving her trapped in the past. Not able to change, Emily is haunted by her past, making the rural setting a site far away from civilization and change.

Repressed histories of the past are hard to discard, and they will always resurface haunting the present. In his novel *Requiem for a Nun*, Faulkner (1951) explains how the past is linked to the present and how any instance of unsettling it would jeopardize the present peace. In the novel, the author declares that "the past is never dead. It's not even past" (Faulkner 1951, p. 49). Faulkner's statement reminds the reader of the jeopardizing risks of the haunting legacies of repressed histories.

Furthermore, unsettled histories will often return to the present in search of settling

back. This process is usually exhausting and effortless, for the past is the wilderness of horrors. The seemingly idyllic appearance of the countryside does not prevent it from revealing its diabolic nature occasionally. It is the nature of the countryside that makes it suitable for such unnatural occurrences, thus "the wilderness seems a much more ripe place to spawn haunting tales and ghostly speculations about the forces that dwell there" (Romero 2021, p. 45). While the countryside is an idyllic and heavenly site it still possesses an unfathomable uncanny hidden nature.

American Gothic literature has often employed ghost stories of the supernatural while linking them to unsettled fears and anxieties still lingering from the past. These ghost stories serve as a metaphor demonstrating that these lingering fears and anxieties will reemerge if not examined and settled. In American Gothic literature characters often experience unusual ghost-like occurrences where "the inevitable ghost which haunts them indicates a peculiarly intense fear of the return of the powers of the past" (Breton, 1934, as cited in Baldick and Mighall 2012: 227).

According to the American Gothic tradition, the countryside is a site that has a second hidden demonic nature serving as a vessel carrying unsettled past traumatic memories. Often doomed to fail, characters in Gothic literature struggle to navigate to safety, often by trying to overcome the unsettled past traumas that insist on reemerging in the present.

## **6. The Subversive Identity of the Uncanny**

The symbolism of the uncanny is a central theme in American Gothic literature,

resulting in a mystical uncertainty that defines the genre. Within this context, characters appearing to be mild and normal often display paranormal and dark hidden identities, refuting traditional perceptions about the virtuous innocence of the countryside.

Shirley Jackson is a key American Gothic figure highlighting the countryside's subversive identity. In her short story *The Lottery*, Jackson (1949) demonstrates the subversiveness of the countryside through its rural setting, essentially revealing ritualistic violence. Taking place in an unknown American village, every June marks a horrific bizarre annual rite known as the Lottery where a marked member of the residents is picked to be eventually stoned to death.

The lottery exposes the dark hideous concealed nature of the remote countryside. Throughout the story, Jackson contrasts the common standard with the abnormal hideous, intensifying the Gothic tradition. Within this context, the countryside becomes a deceptive site where the seemingly normal appearances hide evil natures. The villagers in the story were clinging to a ritual that was lost long ago, and "although [they] had forgotten the ritual and lost the original black box, they still remembered to use stones" (Jackson 1949, p. 7).

This statement reveals how people living in remote rural areas are more inclined to commit abnormal and often horrific actions. This is due to the physical isolation of the countryside, away from urbanized spaces, leading them to forget what it means to be ordinary. While the countryside appears vast and majestic, its vastness often leads its

dwellers to experience emptiness. This is why people inhabiting isolated rural areas usually speak incomprehensively and act in what seems unnatural to most people.

Furthermore, rural spaces are often constructed to fit criminals committing horrendous crimes. It seems that the physical isolation of the rural space serves these criminals best away from any external disturbance. On rurality and crime, Somerville, Smith, and McElwee (2015) explain in their article "The Dark Side of the Rural Idyll: Stories of Illegal/Illicit Economic Activity in the UK Countryside" that "rurality is a space in which criminals who shelter under the rural idyll can operate freely" (p. 6).

American Gothic literature is obsessed with revealing the concealed evil nature of the countryside. Ever since, the archetypal image of the countryside as a repository of values has received many second thoughts. American Gothic literature thus portrays the countryside as violent, overshadowing rural simplicity. Within this context, the countryside is no longer a haven, rather becomes a prison keeping its dwellers trapped in a haunted past.

In her novel *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, Jesmyn Ward (2017) revives the historical atrocities committed in the American South, often in the form of ghosts inhabiting the Mississippi whispering those atrocities out to Jojo in the wilderness. Jojo's encounter with ghosts serves as a reminder that past traumas are hard to disappear, often resurfacing in the present haunting the places in which they occurred. In the sense of the haunted rural space, Ward (2017) says:

And the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top... They speak with their eyes: *He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard.* (p. 181)

The subversive and uncanny identity of the countryside does not lie only in horror ghost stories meant to scare the reader. Rather, these ghost stories serve as a reminder of the atrocities committed in the past, usually refusing to disappear. The past becomes a reservoir of unresolved traumas, often found within family conflicts and personal and collective identity issues, haunting the present and jeopardizing prospects of a bright future.

## 7. Conclusion:

American Gothic literature succeeded in shifting the view of the countryside from an idyllic heavenly space to an uncanny and malicious site. This major shift in view led to numerous second thoughts about whether the countryside is a place of virtue or a home of unresolved and unsettled past traumas. Within the isolation of the rural setting, these traumas help shape the subversive identity of the countryside, where the uncanny dark hidden nature prospers.

Through the American Gothic tradition, the rural setting is successfully combined with the historical national collective memory, where unaddressed histories are confronted through a combination of ghost stories and horror tales of ancient hidden lore. In this regard, the rural space becomes a site where there is no absolute truth, where reality is confused with mystery.

Life in the countryside no longer enjoys peace and prosperity. Thanks to American Gothic literature, the countryside is now a site where the grotesque prevails. Such new settings serve as a canvas for horror dark tales to be told. Through this new canvas, American Gothic literature is now able to address suppressed histories related to the common national memory, border violence, slavery, and native displacement issues.

The physical isolation of the countryside amplifies the psychology of the American Gothic genre. Characters within the genre are often overwhelmed with guilt, violence, madness, and paranoia. The isolation of the countryside further leads these characters to dive deeper into moral corruption often losing track of themselves. Within this context, the isolation of the countryside mirrors the inner turmoil of these characters, reflecting their agonizing pain in the process of trying to find their lost identities.

While the countryside was commonly associated with peace and tranquility, American Gothic literature has managed to transform it into a site of entrapment and familial discord, revealing the fragility of the American home within the rural space. American Gothic subversiveness of rurality is a central theme in this article, exposing the dysfunction and darkness within the domestic space.

By associating horror and darkness with the countryside, American Gothic literature addresses unresolved issues related to identity, race, and other societal fears lurking beneath the surface. While the countryside becomes a site full of terror, it reflects the fragility and disempowerment of the American societal structure. This new

uncomfortable reality challenges the reader to identify the fears and anxieties intermixing with the established system of the familiar.

In conclusion, American Gothic literature has successfully managed to reintroduce the rural space as a site of horror and instability, while it was perceived as idyllic and heavenly. This reevaluation of the countryside reveals the disconcerting realities lurking beneath the surface of the common and familiar realities, such as; family conflicts, race and identity issues, and suppressed histories of the past. This new vision of the countryside enriches the American Gothic tradition, while it compels the reader to question the truth of the places we inhabit.

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