

# GOTHIC NATURE



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## GOTHIC NATURE 1

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**Gothic Nature Revisited:  
Reflections on the Gothic of Ecocriticism**

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**ABSTRACT**

The 2017 ‘Gothic Nature I’ conference in Dublin, Ireland, and the launch of the new journal *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic* present an occasion to reflect on how the entangled fields of ecocriticism and Gothic literary studies have developed and evolved over the past decade. While ecocritics have historically been slow and at times reluctant to embrace Gothic texts and approaches, in recent years that has begun to change. This essay argues that the development of ecocriticism itself can be read as a type of Gothic story. If imagined figuratively as if it were a horror film, the field of ecocriticism is at a point where it is confronting the monster that has been hidden in the basement. This can be seen in the current scholarly interest in topics such as slow violence, ecosickness, environmental injustice, environmental grief, the Anthropocene, and the vibrancy of all matter. The neologism ‘ecoGothic’, despite its sometimes uncertain and unstable usage, and despite the sometimes contested methods and meanings of ‘ecocriticism’ and ‘Gothic’ themselves, shows potential to help scholars productively explore the multiplicity of topics at the nexus of ecocriticism and the Gothic. In this regard, this essay argues that Kristeva’s ‘abjection’ a concept long employed in Gothic studies, can aid ecocritics in examining that which is ambiguous, disorderly, unsettling both in the texts they study, and in their understanding of the trajectory of ecocriticism itself.

In late November 2017, a group of nearly fifty scholars gathered on the campus of Trinity College in Dublin, Ireland. Coming from countries across Europe and from North America, they convened for two days in the Trinity Long Room Hub (and later at nearby pubs and restaurants) to present research, discuss books and film, and otherwise share scholarship. Titled ‘Gothic Nature I’: New Directions in Ecohorror and the Ecogothic’, the event marked an unprecedented moment in the history of both ecocriticism and Gothic literary studies. This

conference was the first of its kind, and the brisk North Atlantic autumn weather, the antiquated Trinity College architecture, and the rich, deeply-layered history of the campus and surrounding city provided a perfect setting for the exploration of Gothic literature. The panels featured topics such as ‘Into the Ecogothic Woods: Trees and Forests of Horror’, ‘Monstrous Vegetality and Themes of the Anthropocene’, ‘Ecohorror and Ecogothic: American Contexts’, and ‘When Nature Bites Back: Animal Horror’, among many others. Two keynote addresses covered related territory: Jenny Bavidge shared an insightful survey of current ecocriticism as she examined the ‘Ethics of the Ecogothic’, and William Hughes drew from his well of knowledge about the Gothic in his reflections on ‘Zombies, Ecoterrorism, and Environmental Apocalypse’. The energy and excitement among attendees and participants was palpable.

I was fortunate enough to have been invited to this auspicious event as an honoured guest of sorts, in part because of an essay I published a decade ago called “‘Deep Into That Darkness Peering’: An Essay on Gothic Nature” (Hillard, 2009). In it, I argued that ecocritics would do well to bring their critical acumen to Gothic texts, and to consider the Gothic qualities of texts that were already part of the environmental literature canon. When I wrote that piece (and during my doctoral work in the preceding years), I was venturing into what seemed almost entirely unexplored territory—particularly in the realm of ecocriticism in which I was trained. Back then, virtually no one was publishing about ecocriticism and the Gothic.<sup>1</sup> That’s now changed. Ten years later, a steady string of publications and the Gothic Nature I conference have made clear that the terrain is now quite different: ecocriticism is having a Gothic moment. Moreover, the existence of this scholarly journal demonstrates that a Gothic ecocriticism likely is here to stay. In some respects, this should be no surprise: after all, I’d argue, ecocriticism itself has always been a Gothic story.

Consider an example.<sup>2</sup> Greg Garrard opens his field-defining 2004 book *Ecocriticism* with a discussion of the first chapter of Rachel Carson’s iconic *Silent Spring* (1962), a book he identifies as a point where ‘modern environmentalism begins’ (p. 1). Carson’s famous chapter, titled ‘A Fable for Tomorrow’, initially sets a pastoral scene of ‘a town in the heart of America

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<sup>1</sup> Although no one was really publishing then, it turns out that many scholars were indeed actively interested in a Gothic ecocriticism and diligently but quietly beginning work in this subfield, as I discovered not long after ‘Deep Into That Darkness’ was published. But like so many subfields that cross boundaries, the scholars of the Gothic weren’t necessarily communicating with the ecocritical community, and vice versa.

<sup>2</sup> Keetley and Sivils (2018) make note of this same example in their recent volume *EcoGothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (p. 2).

where all life seemed to live in harmony with its surroundings' (Carson, 1962: p. 1). It is a place where 'wildflowers delighted', one 'famous for the abundance and variety of its bird life' and where many 'came to fish the streams' (p. 1, p. 2). Garrard notes these bucolic descriptions, and then points to the famous shift in Carson's narrative, where she writes: 'Then a strange blight crept over the area and everything began to change. Some evil spell had settled on the community: mysterious maladies swept the flocks of chickens; the cattle and sheep sickened and died. Everywhere was a shadow of death' (p. 2). Garrard rightfully points to how Carson here moves away from the pastoral scene into one of 'catastrophic destruction' and he explains that the 'silent spring' of which she writes becomes 'a synecdoche for a more general environmental apocalypse' (p. 1, p. 2). Thus, he claims, 'the founding text of modern environmentalism' invokes the 'literary genres of pastoral and apocalypse' (p. 2).

As it turns out, of course, the 'strange blight', the 'evil spell', and the 'maladies' that afflict this town and usher in a 'strange stillness' marked by 'illness', 'sickness', and 'deaths' are brought about by 'no witchcraft'—instead, the 'people had done it themselves' (p. 2, p. 3). Carson's pattern of language here evokes the supernatural, and in doing so she briefly sustains an atmosphere of unease, uncertainty, and fear. This suspense created by this atmosphere is released (to a large extent) when we learn that it is not a supernatural agent, but rather the widespread commonplace use of pesticides (and DDT in particular) that is the cause of the harm. Garrard's assessment of these rhetorical moves—from pastoral to apocalypse—is useful, particularly in the context of framing his introduction to the field of ecocriticism. But Carson's deploying of hints of the supernatural and of malevolent forces, and then later explaining them away with something more mundane or prosaic (but no less deadly and only differently horrific) is also a narrative move reminiscent of another type of storytelling, one exemplified in such iconic Gothic novels as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) or *The Italian* (1797). The narrative trope is that of the 'explained supernatural' and of a secret (hidden or ignored) past that comes back to haunt, a repressed or unacknowledged story that refuses to remain hidden. The truth will out, as the saying goes. Thus, the opening chapter of *Silent Spring*, as well as Garrard's analysis of it, can *also* be read as peculiarly and deeply Gothic.

As I said, the story of ecocriticism has been a Gothic one all along. In some respects, it might go without saying that, from its inception, ecocriticism has been a mode of critical inquiry rooted in an awareness of crisis and danger. 'As global climate change, pollution, and habitat destruction have tilted a comfortable Earth', Sara L. Crosby has recently observed,

‘horror is becoming the environmental norm’ (2014, p. 514). Given this reality, the launch of *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic* presents an opportunity to reflect on Gothic studies and ecocriticism, both past and present, and to consider where we are now—since we all first began peering deep into that darkness. In the brief pages that follow I want to consider some of the implications of imagining ecocriticism as a Gothic tale. Doing so can help contextualise some of the entanglements of the fields of ecocriticism and Gothic studies, some of their uncertainties, and it can also underscore the timely, important, and valuable work of a journal such as *Gothic Nature*.

To this end, I offer a thought experiment: *Imagine if ecocriticism were a horror film.* Here’s where we’d be: For some time now, the main characters have been traipsing about the grounds outside the remote house recently encountered, blithely exploring in daylight hours, and they have only just ventured inside—unaware of, or perhaps unwilling to recognise, the dangers that lurk off-screen. The soundtrack has been slowly building suspense, and the camera angles and editing cuts make it clear that someone, or *something*, is going to be the matter. We’ve reached that point in the film—and I suspect all the readers of this journal know that point—where a curious protagonist opens the basement or cellar door, and with a flashlight (or some other uncertain light source) steps cautiously down the stairs. We’re unsure what’s going to happen next, and the tension mounts. Who or what will be there? Then, upon turning that corner, suddenly thrown into dim but unmistakable relief, is a mouldering corpse. This, I’d suggest, is where ecocriticism is right now: Staring at the body buried in the basement.

It’s taken quite a while to get here. But perhaps that shouldn’t be surprising, given the origins of ecocriticism and its commitments. In its earliest iterations, ecocriticism tended to favour particular types of texts and approaches to them. Among these early projects was the ‘recovery’ of a large but previously ignored canon of ‘nature writing’, a literary genre firmly embedded in the legacy of the European Romantic tradition and employing a stance toward ‘nature’ that helped promulgate our modern day environmental movement (think Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, John Muir, and so on). Cheryl Glotfelty (1996) described this as the second stage of ecocriticism, and such recovery work was important.<sup>3</sup> Yet this focus, necessary as it was, didn’t come without costs. For example, in his 2004 anthology *Reading*

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<sup>3</sup> Glotfelty modelled her vision of ecocriticism’s trajectory after the historical development of feminist criticism (pp. xxii-xxiv). To date, her assessments and predictions have proven largely accurate.

*the Roots: American Nature Writing before Walden*, Michael P. Branch considers why ecocritics tended to pay so little attention to early American texts. '[T]he current blossoming of environmental literature and ecocriticism', he observes, 'has been inspired by a particularly modern, ecological sensibility' (p. xvii). A result of this, he speculates, is that 'we are uncomfortable engaging writers whose approach to the natural world threatens or offends our own literary, environmental, or ethical sensibilities' (p. xviii). Just as important, Branch suggests that '[i]t may also embarrass some scholars to take seriously representations of nature that are badly flawed in matters of scientific accuracy' (p. xx). While he refers to the lack of attention given to early, pre-modern nature writing texts, his observations could just as easily be made about the literary Gothic. If ecocritical scholars were reluctant to embrace such older representations of 'bad science', it's hardly a surprise that the supernatural, fantastic, taboo, and highly affective realms of the Gothic have also been shunned. The Gothic's frequent lack of strict adherence to the probable or possible likely dissuades scholars who are drawn to more realistic and accurate depictions of nature and environment. Moreover, Gothic literature itself has long been an outlier among 'serious' scholars of literature, often perceived as too 'low brow' to be given much scholarly attention, and I suspect that some of this legacy follows it in the realm of ecocriticism.<sup>4</sup>

Thankfully, that is changing. Many ecocritics are beginning to pay attention to the history and tradition of the literary Gothic mode. This is important because, as I've said, right now we stand face to face with a corpse, a body, a monstrosity we don't yet fully know what to do with. Potentially helpful in this endeavour is the new term *ecoGothic*. I won't reiterate this word's short history here, since several recent publications have done that work quite well, such as Elizabeth Parker's essay in the volume *Plant Horror* (2016), and Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils' introduction to *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-century American Literature* (2018). It is my hope that the excellent work of this journal will further clarify and establish its scope and boundaries, because thus far 'ecoGothic' as a term has been used quite loosely.<sup>5</sup> I admit I'm often sceptical of the impulse to add the 'eco-' prefix to denote something

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<sup>4</sup> Many of the recent companions, introductions, and handbooks to ecocriticism still give little (or no) attention to the Gothic. For instance, the introduction to Garrard's impressive, wide-ranging, nearly 600-page *Oxford Handbook of Ecocriticism* (2014) makes passing mention of the 'importance' of the Gothic, yet at the same time categorizes it as 'genre fiction' along with 'romance' and discusses it no further (p. 20). Likewise, Hubert Zapf's equally impressive, 700-plus-page *Handbook of Ecocriticism and Cultural Ecology* (2016) makes no significant mention of the Gothic.

<sup>5</sup> This loose usage includes the word's capitalisation, which has variously been rendered in different publications as 'EcoGothic', 'ecoGothic', and 'ecogothic'.

‘environmentally aware’ or somehow ‘green’ in its methods—which I suspect too often arises more from a desire to coin a new term (or, in the realm of advertising, to sell a product) than to create a genuinely useful or meaningful one. My reservation with ‘ecoGothic’ is that it might be something of a house of cards, since its basic building blocks—*ecocriticism* and *Gothic*, or just *eco-* and *Gothic*—are themselves hardly stable signifiers.

Take ‘Gothic’, for example: It’s a notoriously slippery word. Most people have some understanding of what it means, perhaps conjuring images of frightening characters or entities, supernatural events, dark archaic settings, and so on. Or, as a cultural term, it might make one think of styles of dress or types of music. But readers of this journal know the word ‘Gothic’ can be more widely construed as a literary term, a historical term, an artistic term, or an architectural term (and even a sociological one). So which do we mean?

The word ‘Gothic’ originally referred to ‘the Goths’—those Germanic tribes in what is now northern Germany who played a role in the fall of the Roman Empire. When it was used in this sense in the 1600 and 1700s in England, it was generally based on limited historical understanding and outright misconceptions, and it typically carried a pejorative connotation of ‘barbaric’. But the meaning of ‘Gothic’ expanded (again, in part by something of a misunderstanding of the historical timeline) over the course of the eighteenth century to refer more broadly to things from the so-called ‘Dark Ages’. In that Enlightenment-era context, ‘Gothic’ was understood to be contrasted with ‘classical’, and in that sense derogatory. As David Punter (1996) describes, ‘Where the classical was well-ordered, the Gothic was chaotic; where simple and pure, Gothic was ornate and convoluted; where the classics offered a set of cultural models to be followed, Gothic represented excess and exaggeration, the product of the wild and uncivilized’ (p. 5).<sup>6</sup> Even so, during the eighteenth century those connotations began to change, and a widespread shift in values came to associate these things (the medieval, the primitive, the wild) with *positive* qualities. Consequently, there developed a new sense of looking backward to earlier eras, and in literature this meant an embracing of a ‘truly ancient British heritage’ (Punter, 1996: p. 6), including a revival of interest in older literary figures such as Chaucer, Spenser, and even Shakespeare.

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<sup>6</sup> Punter’s *The Literature of Terror* (1996) offers an in-depth explanation and history of the evolving meanings and connotations of the term ‘Gothic’, which I draw from in this paragraph. For another helpful overview of this history, see also Jerrold E. Hogle’s ‘Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture’ (2002).

This era, one of an ambivalent looking to the past, is the one in which Gothic literature as we know it begins, with the 1764 publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*. As the British Gothic novel began to flourish in the late eighteenth-century, most of its earliest authors chose displaced settings—often in the distant lands of continental Europe, and during the Middle Ages. This displacing is what prompted the use of the term 'Gothic' to describe them. It was (and still is) alluring because such distancing allowed authors a freedom in storytelling, and it enabled a means of grappling with present-day concerns by casting them, in disguised forms, as part of a former era. To put it another way, and much more bluntly, 'the modern "Gothic" as we know it has been grounded in fakery' (Hogle, 2012: p. 496). Yet, of course, the Gothic remains attractive in part *because* of its fakery. That is, 'Gothic' has long been a handy, empty signifier rooted in an often misperceived sense of the past, into which present concerns, desires, anxieties, and fears are projected. As Allan Lloyd-Smith (2004) has said, the Gothic 'is about the return of the past, of the repressed and denied, the buried secret that subverts and corrodes the present, whatever the culture does not want to know or admit, will not or dare not tell itself' (p. 1).

But what makes a Gothic text Gothic? Is it the use of familiar set-pieces, characters, and plot devices that harken back to those original eighteenth-century British Gothic tales? Thus, aspects of content, genre, or form? Or is it instead a literary mode, one that functions in particular ways because of the displaced narrative—and therefore the disguised confrontations with secrets, transgressions, and taboos? One thing we know with certainty: there is little critical consensus, so much so that Punter (1996) has noted that there is only one 'element' found in all Gothic texts, and 'that is fear' (p. 18).

This brings us back to the slipperiness of the term 'ecoGothic'. If the terrain of 'Gothic' is hardly stable, then no more surefooted are those working on the 'eco-' side of things. Much in the same way as the 'Gothic' has had a sometimes contested meaning, those who study or practice ecocriticism don't typically agree on common goals, methods, or theories—or even if the term '*ecocriticism*' is the one that ought to be used. Yet like the Gothic, patterns emerge. In her foundational *Ecocriticism Reader* (1996), Glotfelty declares ecocriticism to be simply 'the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment' (p. xviii). Moreover, she contends that 'all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it' (p. xix). In that early iteration, Glotfelty describes ecocriticism in this manner: 'As a critical stance, it has



one foot in literature and the other on land; as a theoretical discourse, it negotiates between the human and the nonhuman' (p. xix).

Since those early years, ecocriticism has been repeatedly revised, redefined, and re-examined, and introductory ecocritical volumes and handbooks have proliferated. Amid the retelling of the story of ecocriticism, we find some common claims. Garrard (2004) has identified ecocriticism as 'an avowedly political mode of analysis', in which critics 'generally tie their cultural analyses to a "green" moral and political agenda' (p. 3). For Garrard, the 'widest definition of the subject of ecocriticism is the study of the relationship of the human and the non-human, throughout human cultural history and entailing critical analysis of the term "human" itself' (p. 5). Such a roomy definition leads to his accurate observation that 'no single or simple perspective unites all ecocritics' (p. 15). Timothy Clark (2011) has also noted that 'the moral impetus behind ecocriticism [...] commits it to take some kind of stand, however implicit, on the huge issue of what relationship humans should have to the natural world', yet he emphasises that '[n]o distinctive method defines environmental criticism' (p. 5). Similarly, Ursula Heise (2006) observes: 'ecocriticism coheres more by virtue of a common political project than on the basis of shared theoretical or methodological assumptions' (p. 506). These descriptions of the multiplicity of ecocritical methods are but a few; a wider survey of the ecocritical field than this could produce many similar claims.

To be sure, I don't intend to make a case that there *should* be a clear, stable, or neatly defined single method or theory of ecocriticism. Indeed, its openness has been one of its assets, and I hope that remains the case. But where does this leave us with terminology? If 'Gothic' remains a historically unstable term prone to critical disagreement, and ecocriticism is only a loosely coherent 'project' without unified methods or theoretical leanings, what then to make of this recent coinage *ecoGothic*? Despite such semantic slipperiness, *ecoGothic* is particularly valuable as a praxis, or, as Parker (2016) has put it, a 'framework of ideas' (p. 217). As we know, the Gothic mode allows us, by way of narrative and text, to confront fearful 'secrets', things 'buried'—'whatever the culture does not want to know or admit', in Lloyd-Smith's phrase. If we consider this in the context of the story of ecocriticism, the Gothic mode (or the 'ecoGothic') urges us to ask: What has ecocriticism been burying? What has it been keeping out?

This brings us back to that body in the basement. Julia Kristeva's concept of 'abjection'—a type of psychological displacement that is a core function of Gothic literature—is helpful here.<sup>7</sup> In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva explains:

'The corpse [...] is cesspool, and death [...] refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border. Such wastes drop so that I might live, until, from loss to loss, nothing remains in me and my entire body falls beyond the limit [...] It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.' (pp. 3-4)

In other words, we psychologically abject (or 'throw off') those things that unsettle a stable, coherent identity (whether individual, or more widely cultural), yet those denials or 'throwings off' remain a fundamental aspect of that identity, inextricably a part of it. When seen in this light, ecocriticism has become infected, disturbed: there is that corpse, the body—the revenant (literally, the thing that returns, but which never really left in the first place!). The body was there all along in the basement, haunting the cheery hopefulness of ecocritical work in its earliest days when 'nature' was 'out there'. In the context of Kristeva's abjection and her description of the corpse, let's consider the recent movement known as the 'new materialism'. At the front of this 'material turn' in ecocriticism—a theoretical shift that focuses attention on matter, materiality, the body—Stacy Alaimo (2010) asserts: 'Imagining human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world, underlies the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from "the environment"' (p. 2). Moreover, Alaimo argues: 'Those particular sites of interconnection demand attention to the materiality of the human and to the immediacy and potency of all that the ostensibly bounded, human subject would like to disavow' (p. 4). Described that way, there is something decidedly Gothic about this 'material turn' in ecocriticism.

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<sup>7</sup> For excellent explanations of the ways that Kristeva's abjection has been a central function of the Gothic, see Hogle (2002: p. 7-8) and Goddu (1997: p. 10).

Ecocriticism has been heading towards this figurative basement for a while, facing what it would ‘like to disavow’. In recent years—and with or without the term ‘ecoGothic’ attached to it—a Gothic-inflected (or Gothic-infected) ecocriticism has been among us. There is clearly a rich field of inquiry at the nexus of Gothic studies and ecocriticism. Over the past decade or more, as these fields have expanded and their scope of analysis has enlarged, we’ve seen an increased awareness that all is not necessarily well in the world, and that things might not be quite as we’d imagined them. We’ve seen a direct scholarly engagement with such diverse topics as slow violence, ecosickness, environmental injustice, environmental grief, a dawning understanding of the Anthropocene, and a creeping concern about the vibrancy and the ‘mesh’ of all matter, living or not. A perusal of recent Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE) conference programs and a scan of published ecocritical books and articles shows how pervasive such interest is. We’re hip-deep in a cultural moment that is hyper-focused on discourses of catastrophe, toxicity, pollution, destruction, waste, refuse, death. We face the looming threat of irreversible climate change, and fear apocalyptic disaster from without and within. And I’m reminded again, the Gothic is at heart a literature of fear, of excess.<sup>8</sup> As we study it more and more closely, the diversifying canon of texts about humans and nature (overtly Gothic or otherwise) reveals that such things were always there, *haunting us all along*—anxieties about the dangers of the natural world and our place in it, ethical perils of unchecked scientific experimentation and extractive industries, the unstable boundary between human and nonhuman, and a growing dread over human-caused environmental change.

The impressive array of scholarship at the 2017 Gothic Nature I conference in Dublin and, now, in the pages of *Gothic Nature* points to the exciting and cutting edge work that lies ahead. Ecocriticism is at last confronting many of the things that it has abjected for so long. Here we are, with the body in the basement. If ‘ecoGothic’ enables us to attach a word to such confrontings, and naming them leads to better understanding, then all the better. After all, the root ‘eco-’ derives from the Greek *oikos*, meaning ‘house’ or ‘home’. In that sense, what we have is *house-Gothic*. And if earth is home, then perhaps it’s true, as Emily Dickinson suggested nearly a century and a half ago, that all of ‘Nature is a Haunted House’.

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<sup>8</sup> Fred Botting opens his 1996 book *Gothic* with the declaration, ‘Gothic signifies a writing of excess’ (p. 1).

Yet the question remains: If ecocriticism is a horror film, how will the film play out? Asked another way: What kind of haunted house story is this? Now that we've seen the body, now that we have some notion of what the monster is, will it be the kind of horror film where everyone dies by the end? Or is it the kind where the strong survivor, sadder and wiser, escapes to live another day?

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**Tom J. Hillard** is Associate Professor of English at Boise State University, where he teaches courses on early American literature, environmental literary studies, and Gothic literature. His scholarly research focuses primarily on the literary Gothic in early American literature and culture. Recent publications include work on Nathaniel Hawthorne and Charles Brockden Brown, as well as essays in the volumes *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-century American Literature* (Routledge, 2018) and *EcoGothic* (Manchester University Press, 2013). He co-edited (with Amy T. Hamilton) the book *Before the West Was West: Critical Essays on Pre-1800 Literature of the American Frontiers* (University of Nebraska Press, 2014). From 2011-2018, he served as Book Review Editor for the Oxford University Press journal *ISLE: Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*. He is currently working on several projects related to early nineteenth-century American Gothic literature.