

Introduction: Toward a history of Gothic and modernism: Dark modernity from Bram Stoker to Samuel Beckett.

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MFS Modern Fiction Studies

Johns Hopkins University Press

Volume 46, Number 3, Fall 2000

pp. 585-605

[10.1353/mfs.2000.0055](https://doi.org/10.1353/mfs.2000.0055)

ARTICLE

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Modern Fiction Studies 46.3 (2000) 585-605

[\[Access article in PDF\]](#)

Toward a History of Gothic and Modernism: Dark Modernity from Bram Stoker to Samuel Beckett

John Paul Riquelme *

The Gothic Imaginary and Literary Modernism

The Gothic imaginary in its diverse literary embodiments has come to be understood as a discourse that brings to the fore the dark side of modernity (Botting 2). As narrative, it is the black sheep of the Anglo-American novel, which has generally been taken to concern marriage and the contexts that make marriage possible.¹ Although Gothic narratives regularly focus on marriage or on social and sexual relations between the sexes, often those relations are threatened or abrogated, as in Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1765) and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818; revised 1831). Gothic sexuality may also take a bizarre form, as in Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), a form that raises anthropological issues in arresting ways. Some of those issues were already present less insistently in the earliest Gothic narratives, because the threat to marriage, family, and home amounts to **[End Page 585]** a threat to the stability and the future of culture. That dark threat comes from inside.

The historical origins of Gothic writing in the eighteenth century are simultaneously political and aesthetic. Rising along with the English novel during the same decades that are the prelude to Romanticism, the Gothic in its narrative form engages issues of beauty, the character of the sublime and the grotesque, the political dynamics of British culture (especially with regard to the kind of social change that comes to be represented by the French Revolution), the quality of being English (including the holding of anti-Catholic religious attitudes), the structure of the economy (especially concerning property in a market economy and gift-exchange), and the place of women in hierarchies of power. Stylistically, the Gothic has always been excessive in its responses to conventions that foster the order and clarity of realistic representations, conventions that embody a cultural insistence on containment. The essentially anti-realistic character of Gothic writing from the beginning creates in advance a compatibility with modernist writing. That compatibility begins to take a visible, merged form in the 1890s in Britain. In the development of the Gothic after the French Revolution, the characteristics and issues apparent in Gothic writing of the eighteenth century carry forward into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, but they are significantly transformed, intensified, and disseminated by interactions with national literatures and political events outside England. Eventually they are affected by the historical development of modernity in wider than national arenas, including colonial and postcolonial situations.

The influence of Edgar Allan Poe, for example, on British and Irish writers, including Oscar Wilde, is often mediated by his reception among the French, who read him in Charles Baudelaire's translation. The anthropological perspectives that Poe's American stories sometimes evoke, which emerge from a social situation involving slavery, resonate for Irish writers and for others facing racial, ethnic, class, and gender prejudice in colonial and postcolonial contexts. Poe also affects Samuel Beckett through Baudelaire in Beckett's concern in his late prose, especially *Ill Seen Ill Said* (1981), with *mal*, or evil, which derives in part from Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal* (1857). Because Beckett's postmodern sense of *ill* includes an excessively minimal, apparently inept way of writing, his response to historical evil in post-Enlightenment, European culture after World War II and **[End Page 586]** the Holocaust combines with an aesthetics that challenges expectations concerning beauty, narrative structure, and realism. For Beckett, seeing, that is, recognizing, the ill around and within us requires and enables a mode of saying, or writing, that reflects the

illness rather than pretending to be sane, undisturbed, and undisturbing. As does Wilde in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Beckett invites us to recognize our own faces in his portrayal of ill. This is the kind of recognition that Gothic writing has frequently offered. Early in its history...

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