

# An introductory overview on representation of dissident sexualities, abjection, and subversion in queer Gothic fiction

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## Abstract

Queer Gothic may be considered one of the most recent subgenres of Gothic literature, being understood as a type of fiction in which body, gender and sexuality assume a central role. I approach the representation of queer sexualities in queer Gothic works, basing my analysis on the theory of abjection, as well as on other authors who work with Gothic fiction and Queer Studies, such as Judith Butler (1990), William Hughes and Andrew L. Smith (2009) and Paulina Palmer (2016). My analysis consists of drawing a critical panorama, then commenting on Gothic works such as *The Monk* (1796), by Matthew Gregory Lewis, and *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), by Edgar Allan Poe, culminating in contemporary works such as the novel *The Lazarus Heart* (1998), by the trans author Poppy Z. Brite. It is possible to consider that in the aforementioned works Queer desires are articulated with supernatural or psychological phantasmagorias, assuming a liminal aspect which denounces the fragmentation of the Queer subject in face of hegemonic society. On the other hand, the representation of Queer sexualities has subversive potentials, while the hegemonic discourse imposes on them the stigma of abjection.

**Keywords:** queer gothic, queer studies, gothic studies, criticism

## 1. Introduction

Queer Gothic may be considered a recent subgenre of Gothic fiction in which issues related to queer identities and sexualities play a central role in the narrative. This type of fiction emerged in the 1990s amid feminist studies, whose provocations and criticisms of theoretical and political interest prompted a review of Gothic texts, examining, for example, the homo-affective elements in founding works of Gothic such as *The Monk* (1796), by Matthew Gregory Lewis, or from later expressions such as Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Sexuality, as well as its multiple representations and its relationship with what is made abject by the hegemonic discourse, would become, as Michael Warner (1993) comments, one of the main objects, if not the main one, of Queer Studies. As sexuality is almost unconditionally related to issues of body and gender, Queer Gothic – or a Queer approach to Gothic – would take these three issues into account.

In this essay, I intend to draw up a theoretical and critical overview towards queer Gothic. At first, having gender theory and queer studies as theoretical support, I discuss the elements which characterize the type of fiction understood as queer

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Gothic. As a theoretical basis, I approach the theory of abjection founded by Julia Kristeva (1985). This notion allows us to discuss how specific dissident bodies, desires and identities occupy a dual position within the limits of the hegemonic discourse, being at the same time desired and feared. In a second moment, I draw a critical panorama of Gothic works, starting with early Gothic stories and culminating in contemporary works, commenting on the queer elements of these works and on the representation of dissident sexualities.

This essay provides a literature review on Gothic studies, focusing on queer Gothic, revisiting and rereading exponential works in order to discuss issues such as authorship, representation of dissident identities and sexualities, also focusing on their subversive potentialities as well as in the frequent state of abjection imposed on such identities. As a theoretical basis to such research problem, I approach theoretical conceptions and works that guide gender theory and queer studies, such as Julia Kristeva (1982), Eve Sedgwick (1985) and Judith Butler (1990); on Gothic fiction, such as Fred Botting (1996) and Glennis Byron and David Punter (2004); and about queer Gothic, such as George Haggerty (2006), William Hughes and Andrew L. Smith (2009) and Paulina Palmer (2016).

## 2. The emergence of a queer gothic

As a recent offshoot of Gothic fiction, queer Gothic emerged in the late 1980s and gained consistency during the 1990s, boosted in part due to the development of feminist studies (Hughes 2013). Expressive studies related to body, gender, sexuality and identity, such as the works of Eve Sedgwick (1985) and Judith Butler (1990), offered a theoretical and critical basis for the ascendancy of this type of fiction. Their provocation and criticism of a political and theoretical nature, generated an interest in the political aspect of sexuality, which prompted a critical review of various Gothic texts, both early expressions of tradition, as in the case of Matthew Gregory Lewis' works, as well as modern works. George Haggerty (2006) argues that, in some instances, Gothic fiction anticipates certain discussions about sexuality in the 19th century questioning whether the nascent Gothic would not in fact prove itself a type of proto-queer narrative. In *Queer Gothic*, Haggerty comments that

[...] the cult of gothic fiction reached its apex at the very moment when gender and sexuality were beginning to be codified for modern culture. In fact, gothic fiction offered a testing ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities [...]. In this sense it offers a historical model of queer theory and politics: transgressive, sexually coded, and resistant to dominant ideology (Haggerty 2006: 2).

Eve Sedgwick, who has been dedicated to the study of homosocial relations and dynamics, argues that the apprehension of any aspect of Western society demands a critical understanding of relations and concepts related to gender identity, body and sexuality. The author's works, especially regarding the recognition of the relevance of gender as a vehicle for the representation of queer identities, as well as her readings of Henry James and Charles Dickens, offered a particular theoretical

contribution on the matter of approaching Gothic and queer studies. In *Between men* (1985), the author dedicates a chapter to gothic and emphasizes that

[...] the Gothic was the first novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality, at a time when styles of homosexuality, and even its visibility and distinctness, were markers of division and tension between classes as much as between genders (Sedgwick 2015: 91).

Gothic fiction has a certain obsession with liminal themes often made abject by the hegemonic discourse, especially regarding themes related to dissident sexualities. And the notion of a queer Gothic is developed from this point on. Queer Gothic, then, would be a strand of Gothic fiction characterized by the centrality that representations of dissident sexualities occupy in the narrative. This issue is aligned with the questioning outlined by Michael Warner in the introduction of *Fear of a Queer Planet* (1993), as the author wonders if sexuality could be considered the main object of queer studies, just as gender had become the main object of feminism.

Paulina Palmer (2016) comments that Gothic always had a sort of queer aspect to it, departing from a scope similar to Sedgwick's. In *Queering the Gothic* (2009), Hughes and Smith outline a brief conception of the type of fiction understood as queer Gothic. For the authors, queer refers to a quality present in Gothic narrative:

[...] queerness [...] is a quality which may be said to inflect a sense of difference not confined simply to sexual behavior but which may equally inform a systematic stylistic deviance from perceived norms in personal style or artistic preference (Hughes; Smith 2009: 5).

To Hughes and Smith, queer refers to a representation of an individual outside or excluded from the hegemonic discourses of power and identity. In addition, the term would also imply a stylistic deviation, which could be set in parallel to the theory of gender as performance proposed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (2019), published in 1990. However, sometimes the authors seem to understand queer as a notion too encompassing in order to guarantee broad and distinct approaches to Gothic studies. Of course, from this perspective, there is a risk of removing the notion of queer from its fundamental scope relating not only to dissident sexualities, but also to issues regarding body, gender and gender identity. Even so, the authors' study reveals a consistent effort to bring Gothic and queer studies closer together, guaranteeing both areas a certain scope and autonomy. It would be interesting to note that, like Fincher (2007), Hughes mentions that Gothic could be understood as a narrative genre characterized by an element formally queer, as "it is balanced uneasily between a frequently superficial adherence to the literary orthodoxies of plot and characterization, and the almost invariably unpalatable nature of its subject matter" (Hughes 2013: 207). For the author, this formal element, this deviation from narrative conventions, would be based on the Gothic's predilection for unpalatable themes and liminal themes, such

as the incest taboo or the obsession with perverting religious and/or sacred icons or spaces.

I do not intend to adopt such a broad perspective, being careful to keep queer in its fundamental scope, relating to bodies, sexualities, genders and complications of desire, especially when considering certain historical contexts. Paulina Palmer (2016) comments that Gothic fiction has never been exclusively related to homosexual issues and, therefore, its queer aspect would have more to do with the way in which the Gothic represents, hides or symbolizes sexual identities and orientations through the heteronormative structure of our culture. The author also emphasizes that queer Gothic, as a thematic, structural and analytical approach, would refer to those texts in which sexuality and gender identity occupy a central role in the narrative. This is the perspective I consider most adequate to approach throughout this essay. The concept of abjection, conceived by Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror* (1982), also contributes to this approach of queer Gothic. Kristeva's work appears as a reference in fundamental texts to Gothic studies, such as *Gothic* (1996), by Fred Botting, and in the first volume of *The Literature of Terror* (1996), by David Punter.

Kristeva's theory contradicts the notions of conventional psychoanalysis (contemporary to the work's publication), which understands the construction of the subject's identity as a process based on an oppositional and constitutive relationship between subject and object, as well as on a series of assumptions concerning early symbolic patterns, sometimes taken as pre-discursive – examples of this are the debated opposition between oedipal and pre-oedipal, the oppositional relationship between sanctioned and taboo, and the assumption that desire is distinct from the object of desire. However, for Kristeva, subject and object have inherent identity traits in, and of, themselves. Such reconfiguration of things brought about a change in the way we think the boundaries that demarcate the relationship between the self and the other. The concept of abjection questions the integrity of the identity and of the self, while the very notion of abjection, of what is excluded, rejected, makes the boundaries of that self somewhat hazy and porous. In short, Kristeva's theory proposes that the other – and indeed that any instance of the other who is taboo, who is paradoxically desired and repudiated – maybe already part of the self. Thus, the self would possess defining qualities capable of breaking through the surface and denouncing the falsity of the self's apparent integrity. Furthermore, Kristeva understands that the body, its excretions and secretions, denounce the material qualities of what is made abject, since the body would be constantly engaged in processes of abjection, which would include the rejection of given substances, something that, in itself, would be already accusing the illusion of wholeness and integrity attributed to the body and the self.

I do not seek to negotiate the relation of Gothic fiction to sexuality, but rather to approach works in which this element proves to be central and determining. I believe it is more pertinent to question or discuss how sexuality, as an object of analysis, is represented – or concealed – in the text, especially in relation to other themes or issues that are not, or do not appear to be, directly related to sexuality. It

is a similar approach to that adopted by Artel Haefele-Thomas (2012) when investigating the intersections between Gothic and social, cultural, gender and queer theories considering representations of sexuality in Victorian Gothic. From this point on, I draw an overview of Gothic fiction, analyzing issues related to the representation of dissident sexualities from the perspective of the theory of abjection. In this sense, queer becomes, in a way, a type of insurgent force based on the action of reviewing, rereading, rethinking and recontextualizing Gothic fiction. As Warner (1993) comments, it is not a matter of finding the queer in the theory or in the criticism, but rather making criticism and theory queer.

### 3. Queering the gothic: An overview

"I am the love that dare not speak its name," says one of the handsome young men in the last verse of the poem "Two Loves" (1892), by Lord Alfred Douglas, Oscar Wilde's lover. This verse, in a way, serves as the motto for the analysis proposed in this essay. "The love that dares not speak its name" was used as evidence against Wilde in the trial on *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890). Michael Warner (1993) comments that the term "sodomy" was once seen as a nameless perversion, just as Wilde's trial exemplify; Wilde was tried and convicted, condemned to two years of prison with hard labor for "gross indecency". Warner (1993) approaches clinical texts and reports to discuss the obscurity related to "sodomy" and, in this logic, to homosexual love. This issue is related to Kristeva's notion of the abject, since society needs homosocial relations, but it also needs to make certain bodies, subjects and sexualities abject in order to guarantee the maintenance of the status quo.

In queer Gothic, issues relating to body, gender and sexuality are always in tension. Representation of divergent bodies, genders and identity performances are revealed as objects of what the hegemonic discourse simultaneously desires and transmutes into something abject. It is this instance of that unheard and unnamed perversion that I seek to present and discuss in this essay. Three influential early Gothic novels serve as examples of such issue.

*The Castle of Otranto* (1764), by Horace Walpole, is considered the first Gothic novel. In the work, the representation of genders is based on a hyperbolic notion, one of the features that authors such as Hogle (2002) and Punter and Byron (2004) identify as defining of Gothic fiction. Manfred's heightened masculinity can be read as a product of homophobia, which in turn is dependent on both the presence of misogyny and gender-related anxieties. The novel also associates the forbidden desire, although it is not necessarily a queer desire, to the supernatural, investing it with a sense of uncertainty. It would be this uncertainty, added to the formally and thematically deviant nature of the novel, that would make it possible to find something queer in the work. Furthermore, it is worth considering the probable homosexuality of Walpole, sometimes referred to as "effeminate," although there is no consensus on the matter. However, the primacy of male potencies, alongside the panoply of secrets, ghosts and sins hidden "in the closet" – sometimes literally

– could suggest the return of a suppressed desire or the sublimation of a desire that would be ultimately queer.

William Beckford's *Vathek* (1786) emphasizes the paranoia that relates the "effeminate" to the deviant and, consequently, to the monstrous, making it abject through this process. In the novel, the monstrous and the demonic take on the decadent veneer and can be read as queer, as they are produced by a condemnatory and recurrent discourse referring to the "nameless sin", namely, sodomy, which transmutes the homoaffective desire in something abject. The body plays a central role in the work, especially in relation to the character Vathek, who performs an identity ultimately queer to the hegemonic discourse. As far as authorship is concerned, Beckford was a dandy and a notoriously queer man, although there is no agreement as to whether he was gay or bisexual, as Beckford maintained significant relationships with both men and women. In 1784, some of his letters to William Courtenay, the future 9th Earl of Devon, were intercepted and published in newspapers. Due to the scandal, Beckford left England.

*The Monk* (1796), by Matthew Gregory Lewis, is permeated with queer themes and elements. The glances between the characters give the thermometer to the homoerotic tension, while the use of ellipses hides this tension, since the ellipses refer, in the text, to what was suppressed or remained unsaid. And, thus, the expression of a dissident sexuality would be hidden. Furthermore, in Chapter 11, Agnes de Medina is subjected to a literal abject situation. Expelled from the convent, that is, from the body of the Catholic Church, due to her sexual experiences and consequent pregnancy, she is thrown into a dungeon, in the company of a putrid head crowned by worms, as well as the decomposed body of her illegitimate offspring. As her experiences are deemed dangerous to the moral integrity of her social context, she is confined in order to protect those who might be put in moral and spiritual danger because of her transgressions. In other words, she becomes queer to her ecclesiastical context due to her sexual "deviations," which have a strong political basis. However, it is interesting to note that Agnes is not only regarded as a sinful and impure creature, she is abject from life itself, since she was cloistered with the dead. In a way, she becomes a dead excretion from the ecclesiastical body. Lewis' persona, on the other hand, has an ambiguity similar to Walpole's. We might think that there was something queer about the author, considering his alleged relationship with William Kelly. On the other hand, regarding to sexuality, we would hardly be able to go beyond speculation.

Those three early Gothic works are permeated by tensions that often mark the homoaffective dynamics in this type of fiction. Of course, the list is long and other works could be mentioned. For example, Sedgewick examines homoaffective relationships in James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824), demonstrating how the relationship between the characters is permeated by a tension produced by the conflict between aversion and homoerotic desire. Based on this, the author highlights that "[t]he Gothic novel chrySTALLIZED for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between homosexuality and

homophobia, in which homophobia appeared thematically in paranoid plots" (Sedgewick 2015: 92).

Now I would like to draw attention to a particular issue concerning Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839). In the tale, we are introduced to twin siblings, Roderick and Madeline, who live in their family's decaying manor. The story is told in first person by an unnamed narrator, a resource Poe relies on to enhance mystery and uncertainty in the narrative. Both of them are afflicted by mysterious illnesses, perhaps related to something very *fin-de-si cle*, considering the decadent tone marking some of Poe's texts. Roderick seems assailed by synesthesia, a condition that produces transferences of meaning in the sensory apparatus, and in Poe's text also in the character's aesthetic perception. Madeline, in turn, suffers from some unknown affliction. The unnamed narrator mentions that she has strange habits, being reclusive and having a morbid appearance. At some point, he states that Madeline is identical to Roderick, which not only suggests the androgynous features of the characters, but also the vagueness of gender produced by such characterization. In Poe's criticism, incest is often mentioned as the deviant element here. Other readings are undertaken on social anxieties regarding the similarity between Roderick and Madeline. However, it was easy to miss one detail about the siblings' representation: they are identical. And twins can only be identical if they are monozygotic, meaning they would have the same assigned sex. In other words, Madeline would be a trans woman, by far the most interesting facet of Poe's text in relation to queer Gothic.

Perhaps it would be essential to comment on Oscar Wilde. When discussing the historicity carried out by the term queer, Max Fincher places Wilde in a prominent place: "[t]he risk of the charge of anachronism in using queer is a risk anyone must confront who reads fiction queerly before the most widely recognized queer, Oscar Wilde" (Fincher 2007: 8). Today, perhaps the biggest portion of Wilde's fame is precisely because of this: the continual and extraordinary symbolic resonance of his personality, his life and his tragic fate. *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890) is considered a Gothic masterpiece (PUNTER; BYRON, 2004) and can be read as queer. Wilde was distantly related to Charles Robert Maturin, author of *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), a text whose decadent aura resonates with *Dorian Gray*. Wilde even adopted the name Melmoth in his exile in Paris after being released from prison. The young Dorian Gray sold his soul for youth through a Mephistophelian pact, and Lord Henry seems to trace, in one of his famous aphorisms, a prophecy and sentence concerning Dorian's life: "[t]he only way to get rid of a temptation is to yield to it. Resist it, and your soul grows sick with longing for the things it has forbidden to itself, with desire for what its monstrous laws have made monstrous and unlawful" (Wilde 2011: 74-75). After that, Dorian starts to commit all kinds of sins. But what would such sins be? What would be the temptation? What are those forbidden and monstrous things? That is never told to us, Dorian's sins are not mentioned, although he is morally and socially judged by them. It is worth remembering, however, that sodomy was the "nameless sin," the "unspeakable crime" and, in this logic, it is "the love that dares not speak its name"

mentioned in the final verse of the poem by Alfred Douglas, Wilde's lover. This argument and other passages from *Dorian Gray* were used against Wilde in the trial that sentenced him to two years in prison.

From the 20th century onwards, particularly from the 1980s onwards, queer Gothic began to gain consistency. Among the abundant number of works of this type, it is possible to mention Alan Hollinghurst's *The Folding Star* (1994), a novel that received the James Tait Black Memorial Prize, one of the most traditional literary prizes in Great Britain. Although Hollinghurst is not specifically a Gothic author, this particular novel can be read under the scope of queer Gothic (Palmer 2016). The work is concerned with narrating the homoaffective relationship between Edward Manners and his student Luc, exploring mainly the relationship between what is sanctioned and what is taboo. In the novel, queer desire appears associated to the return of the phantasm of desire, something that metaphorically haunts the characters. The phantasm of desire, or spectrality, also acts upon the thematic development of the work and reveals the type of forces the hegemonic discourses exert on those characters.

The trans author Poppy Z. Brite wrote *The Lazarus Heart* (1998), a novel set in the multimedia universe of James O'Barr's comic *The Crow* (1989). Brite introduces the twins Benny, who is gay, and Lucrece, who is trans, in a world full of references and reinterpretations of the work of Edgar Allan Poe. The novel subverts the logic of *The Crow's* fictional universe, which the central trope relies on a man who comes back to life to avenge the death of his murdered lover. In the novel, it is Jared who comes back to life to get revenge for the death of Benny, his boyfriend, which in itself makes the novel queer. Here, I would like to revisit *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), as well as the possibility of Madeline to be a trans woman. Brite seems to weave an interesting parallel between Roderick and Madeline and Benny and Lucrece. At the conclusion of the novel, Brite takes the protagonism out of Jared's hands, placing Lucrece at the center of the plot. She was killed and literally destroyed, her body dismembered by a serial killer. However, she returns from the dead seeking revenge. Lucrece's body had been portrayed as something despised, feared and, in certain instances, also vulnerable to hegemonic discourses. But Brite re-establishes the character's body under a new meaning. Lucrece becomes a subject gifted and recognized for her own desires. Furthermore, Lucrece's rebirth operates as a naturalization, as Lucrece returns from the dead in her "original" state, and her "original" state is that of a trans woman. To some extent, the resurrected Lucrece is also a resurrected Madeline, and in this way Brite redefines the body hegemonically labeled horrendous as a body endowed with energy and life.

#### 4. Final considerations

My goal in this essay was to go through exponential works marked by the centrality of issues related to sexuality, which characterizes queer Gothic. It is evident that I had to select titles, and that some works ended up being left out of the present panorama. In essence, a critical work is also a work of delimiting the scope. However, the selected works allowed the realization of an interesting literature



review on Gothic studies, focusing on queer Gothic, in addition to rescuing the issue of authorship, sometimes left aside in literary studies.

Of course, there are certain difficulties in discussing the queer nature of Gothic, problems that authors such as Hughes and Smith (2009) recognize and do not shy away from. While queer designates difference, the term does not always indicate distinction in relation to the spectrum of desire and/or sexual practices, for example. Queer also represents a notion of transgression and, therefore, performing a queer identity comprises an effort to break with binary tensions and social constructions, such as the hegemonic notions that regulate gender identities – such as the representations of bodies and sexualities that hegemonically determine an idea of "man" and "woman".

Re-examining questions about authorship, character representation and Gothic narrative tropes allows us to understand that dissident bodies and sexualities are both desired and made abject, based on a symbolic relationship that operates by transference. To that extent, queer desire is articulated with supernatural or psychological phantasms, assuming a liminal feature that denounces the fragmentation of the queer subject in face of hegemonic society. On the other hand, the representation of queer sexualities also has subversive potentials, as it sometimes allows a subject to perform a dissident identity on the margins of hegemonic discourses.

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