

Gothic Shorts:
A Survey of the American Short Story to 1900

DETAILS

Instructor: Don James McLaughlin
Where: Fisher-Bennett Hall 025
When: Summer Session II (2016)

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Despite the grandiosity of the novel among fiction-telling genres, the short story has long kept certain superlatives to itself. A good short story revels in an economy of language, distilling something great in a narrative ironically small. In his influential essay “The Philosophy of Composition” (1846), Edgar Allan Poe famously contends that this matter of length makes short print media a superior form, in that it makes possible a “unity of impression.” “If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting,” Poe observes, this “unity” is immediately sacrificed, “for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and everything like totality is at once destroyed.”

In Poe’s case, the “impressions” he attempted were inextricable from the gothic sensibility he’s remembered for today. In fact, this was true for many of his contemporaries and predecessors as well: the best-known writers of the short story in the antebellum United States tried their hand at the gothic regularly. This affinity begs a couple of questions: to what extent are the gothic and short media intrinsically compatible? If, as our syllabus suggests, the two modes have a long history of evolving in tandem, how might we make sense of their cultural overlap aesthetically, politically, and intellectually? With these questions in mind, “Gothic Shorts” investigates the uncanny intimacies between short narrative, broadly conceived, and the gothic across various scenes of literary print culture, as well as sermons, medical case studies, slave narratives, curiosity cabinets, spirit photography, oral folklore, and *art nouveau* book illustration. The majority of our readings will come from the 17th through the 19th centuries, when this affinity was beginning to cohere in innovative ways. Texts we’ll explore include Salem witch trial testimonies; Jonathan Edwards’ “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God”; Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*; Edgar Allan Poe’s *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*; *The History of Mary Prince, A West Indian Slave*; editorials from Frederick Douglass’s *The North Star*; Harriet Beecher Stowe’s “The Freeman’s Dream: A Parable”; Louisa May Alcott’s “Blood & Thunder” tales; Charles Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Woman and Other Conjure Tales*; and Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw*.