

The Peripatetic Approach to Teaching the Gothic

By Sandy Feinstein

Southwestern College in rural southern Kansas enrolls little more than 600 full-time students.

Not surprisingly, Medieval and Early Modern literature, the fields I teach, are not in great demand in the pragmatic rural environment of Kansas. If I want to teach a specialized course, I must find creative ways to do it.

As both director of an honors program and a professor of English, I want to offer a greater variety of English classes as well as develop interdisciplinary honors classes that fulfilled the goals of the program. A course on Gothic literature serves two functions: It adds a genre course to the English curriculum and is also well suited for fulfilling the goals I had defined for the Honors program: community service, experiential learning, and research.

By providing an “integrative” or interdisciplinary approach, the course also fulfills the expectations

of the core curriculum. Moreover, the class was likely to draw student interest: Gothic is “in,” a fact I exploited when I omitted the word “literature” from the title in the course schedule.

The community service component of the class may also have indulged the popular view of the Gothic: I suggested students consider giving blood. Less ghoulish, but equally scary for students, the course paper was intended to develop both writing and research skills so integral to education in general and English in particular.

The experiential structure of the course was modeled on science laboratories or field courses, which made possible another means of addressing scientific issues and concerns in the texts. The structure also provided an interdisciplinary approach that included characteristic methodologies of specific fields. Gothic literature proved ideal for fulfilling these goals and one more: that Honors students engage in an

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education of risk.

The Gothic course involved re-enacting the literature's setting as a means of fulfilling the experiential component of the Honors program. To reinforce the importance of time and place in the literature—its conventions and character—as well as to subvert the notion of what can constitute class space and time, I left the hour of class meetings flexible.

Sometimes we met at the “published” time of 7:00 p.m., with class running as scheduled until 9:30. Often we met later, at least once running until midnight, a particularly significant hour in the literature. This flexibility was not merely a symbolic gesture or a test of conservative assumptions about education, but a practical necessity since I had to adjust to the schedules of those who would contribute their time or space to the class. For not only was the hour subject to change, so was the “classroom.”

The class gathered every week at the originally assigned room in the library, but, once everyone arrived, I would lead the group to another location, one intended to represent some aspect of a particular text's landscape or some important issue that the landscape foregrounded. Since our destinations were as much fictional constructions as those of the texts, the journeys from one landscape to another, one

learning space to another, also served to complement another convention of the genre: the journey as a process of discovery, as both physical act and psychological experience.

In short, changing the class hour and locale drew attention to key aspects of Gothic: suspense, mystery, and terror as reflected in setting, both time and place. These changes also demonstrated how authors adapt the landscape they know to the landscape they do not know.

Just as my students may be familiar with the Kansas Flint Hills and Ann Radcliffe with the cliffs of Dover, neither she nor they ever stepped foot in Italy, where much of her novel, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, is set. The appropriation of the local landscape for the purposes of enacting the text actively demonstrated the role landscape plays in the genre as sensibility, metaphor, idea, even character.

Since the class met only once a week, I could not afford to “waste” a day. On the first day, therefore, I knew I would use the time both to begin to define the genre and provide background for it. I asked the students to do a five-minute “freewrite” listing their associations with the word Gothic.

They read their definitions aloud, and we put some key words

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and images on the board. I supplemented the students' key words with those used by John Ruskin to define Gothic architecture—"Savageness," "Changefulness," "Naturalism," "Grotesqueness," "Rigidity," "Redundance"—and showed slide images of Gothic cathedrals.

Then I provided excerpts from various precursors of the Gothic: Homer's figure of Discord, Virgil's figure of Fame.¹ I asked the students which of their definitions or Ruskin's could be associated with the classical figures. The basic distillation was of a "scary" character who creates chaos in an evocative landscape.

From the very short passages of Homer and Virgil, we looked at sections from Dante (the monster Geryon), Shakespeare (the ghost scenes in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*), and Milton (the scene of Sin, Death, and Satan).

To prepare the students for their first on-site re-enactment of the literature, I asked them to underline what they thought were Gothic images or actions, then be prepared to read a tercet or more of Dante aloud in their best imitation of a Gothic voice (prompting any number of Bela Lugosi imitations).

We identified and discussed Dante's images, motifs, themes, and word choice that could be associated with our definitions of Gothic: the journey through hell itself, the

bizarre and monstrous inhabitants, including the mad steersman Phlegyas, disembodied voices from darkness, ghosts. We also identified words that are literally translated such as "dark," "evil," "hell-dog," "slime," "shadow," "curse," "black word," "pack," "howling," as well as animal similes, for instance, the scorpion's stinger, God and the absence of God.

Slides of medieval Gothic architecture reinforced student awareness of Dante's architectonics and demonstrated the relationship of his poetic landscape to the architecture of the period. As the students had noted the Gothic characteristics of the poetry, they also identified the key characteristics of the architecture: pointy spires and dramatic arches, dark stones, gargoyles and grotesques, stone-carved animals and leaded stained glass windows.

I tried to get them to make connections between the visual and the verbal, between Ruskin's definition and their own. By way of contrast, I provided slides of 18th-Century art, Fragonard and Boucher's whimsy, as well as the artificially constructed romantic landscapes seen in architecture books of the time and later used by Tom Stoppard as a symbolic structure in *Arcadia*.²

Classes scheduled to last for nearly three hours benefit from

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varying the activities and pedagogic approaches. My intention was to build on background and definition. I wanted all the time available to be used for this purpose, even break time.

My last in-class reading assignments for the first day, from Shakespeare, were to be presented through performance. Groups were formed, parts chosen. The break would be the journey to the performance space. We walked up the hill to the administration building, proceeded to the third floor, where we came to a sign on the men's lavatory: Reserved for Gothic Class.

I had gotten all the necessary permissions for my various field trips, and the college indulged my first request: to let me hold class on the roof of the building, the access to which is through the men's bathroom. An extension ladder had been set up and a campus security guard stood waiting at the top of the stairs to help students through the small rectangular opening leading to the roof.

On the way to the roof-top stage, I pointed out another "stage" outside that I had already prepared with candles (not yet lit), in case anyone expressed a real fear of heights. It was there I sent two students who, though they tried, did not make it to the roof.

On the roof, with its barbican crenellations, three groups performed rampart scenes from Act I of Hamlet, another performed the banquet scene from Macbeth. The discussion focused on the relationship between performance and text, site and text, and what it all had to do with defining Gothic.

Three students dropped the class for various reasons: the demands of the reading, the demands of an open-ended class time, discomfort with an unconventional class (though this last was never actually admitted).

Interestingly enough, the two students who did not climb the ladder to the roof were not among the three who dropped. During the course of the semester, both students faced other climbs and both surmounted these challenges, which they described in their journals as one of their achievements, as a personal way of understanding the literature. They realized that by alternately indulging and overcoming fear, they had reenacted the situation faced by a number of Gothic heroines.

The remaining students, 16 now, were excited about the peripatetic, experiential approach to learning, and only one missed any classes. The one who missed a class did so on the day she miscarried (she was one of two nontraditional students).

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Not all the field trips required students to climb or crawl. The second trip, for example, provided the set for *The Castle of Otranto*. We walked to the most Gothic house of worship in town, an Episcopal church. The site seemed appropriate to represent the distortions of Catholic worship and ritual created by the Anglican Horace Walpole.

On the way to the church, students formed groups whose members assumed the roles of specific characters in order to enact the action and interactions of characters, including: trying to “escape” from one another, discerning possible hiding places on the way to the church, and identifying lurking threats analogous to Gothic constructs within the text.

These field trips and the many that were to follow taught me an important personal lesson: I not only learned about what the community has to offer—its natural resources, its architecture, its history, which this teacher and her students had vastly underestimated—I learned about the people who live there. I learned how willing people are to make a contribution, no matter how eccentric might seem the request.

Everyone wanted to know what I was doing, not out of suspiciousness so much as curiosity. When I told them what I was doing and

why, people went out of their way to help me give shape and form to literary landscapes I had re-imagined locally: from the college’s support when it agreed to allow class to be held on the roof of the administration building to the Episcopal minister leaving his church open after 7:00 p.m., so I could use it at an “appropriate time.”

I had no particular leverage. I was not a member of his congregation, nor am I even Christian, which he knew. This experience, however, made me aware of another advantage of involving the community: The Gothic may have an ominous ring in rural, Christian communities, something too easily associated with Satan worship and “radical” teens wearing black. I provided one corrective to these associations by identifying the specific texts that would be read in a particular place.

At another of these evening field trips, we met at a local bed-and-breakfast where two of my colleagues provided “entertainment,” 18th-Century music on recorders (the B & B serving as the pump room of Northanger Abbey’s Bath). Later that same night, we met at the old library in town, now a dance studio, that served us as an English ballroom, where another colleague provided the students with lessons in 18th-Century dances.

These entertainments, like

Dressing-up made the students conscious of how clothes inform behavior and manners.

everything else, had more than one purpose: contextualizing the genre, demonstrating how culture contributes to informing behavior, and providing a window into the fictional universe and the daily life that Jane Austen delights in satirically contrasting.

Computer technology enabled me to make period invitations to the ball, which were delivered by hand. The invitations were modeled on actual 18th-Century invitations, though mine reminded the recipients to “dress appropriately.”

The students responded in kind. Four ladies had a page deliver the RSVP, another hand wrote his RSVP, and all came “dressed” for the occasion. Though I had not defined “appropriate dress,” a number of students had contacted the theater department, which obliged by providing tails for the gentlemen and white gowns and gloves for the ladies.

Just as the formal invitations elicited formal responses and assumptions on what to wear, the fancy clothing changed the students’ behavior as well, which the students themselves remarked.

This awareness of how dressing-up affected their movements, conversation, and self-image made the students conscious of how clothes inform behavior and manners, and demonstrated the importance of clothing in the texts.

Interestingly enough, it was not only the students who got involved with Austen’s novel by dressing up. The personnel at The Marland Mansion in Oklahoma, which the following week served as the abbey itself, prepared for my class by reading *Northanger Abbey*, researching 18th-Century clothing, and then dressing “accordingly” (one woman made her dress for the occasion!).

The most unlikely field trip of all involved tunnels with professional guides. The deputy warden of the state correctional facility located in town agreed to give the class a tour of the prison’s underground tunnels.

This was no venue for Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* but for Bram Stoker’s *Dracula*. This time, for teacher and students alike, the fear was real and palpable. After we were checked in by security, three officials guided the group through two different secret underground passageways.

Before getting started, however, the warden asked the students what Gothic was and what tunnels had to do with their reading. The students answered in a rush, identifying the tunnels in *Dracula*, but also mentioning their presence in *The Monk* and *The Castle of Otranto*. He couldn’t keep from smiling at their enthusiastic explanations,

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though eventually he cut them short to begin the tour.

When I bumped into him two months later in a drugstore, I asked him if he remembered me. He asked if I were kidding. Then he added that he and the other warden who had accompanied us find themselves describing actions by the inmates or specific environments at the prison as "Gothic." The trickle-down of the course struck me time and again.

Because I had modeled the structure of the class, to some extent, on that of a field biology class, I wanted scientists to contribute to shaping student access to the literature and its concerns. To reinforce the differences in methodologies and authorial awareness of how science and its methods have historically affected people's perceptions and behavior, I asked three of my colleagues in the sciences if they would be willing to offer "labs" for two books, *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*.

One chemist created a lab in which the students experimented with "chloral," the formula of which appears in *Dracula*. A biologist discussed bats—he provided many skins to examine and then joined us for an on-campus bat walk, though not to the "bat cave," where we discussed *Dracula* later that same night. And a biochemist constructed an experiment that

engaged students in both biological and ethical issues with a "life creating" DNA experiment.

She also joined us in a night walk to a nearby cemetery intended to recall the graveyard scenes in *Dracula* and *Frankenstein*. This walk was used to extend the discussion of ethics to assumptions about propriety, prompted by being at a cemetery after hours, the discomfort of which led, in turn, to examining the importance of transgression in the construction of Gothic.

An optional anatomy lesson on an actual corpse followed the walk among the buried dead (for those who, like myself, did not welcome the thought of dissecting a cadaver, I had prepared a creative writing exercise. I was stunned that only three students demurred).

These experiments emphasized the increasing role of science in the literature, a role represented as problematic "progress" in Gothic, as a threat both potential and actual that must be exposed, addressed, debated, and explored for good or ill.

By bringing the genre into the community and asking people to contribute to recreating scenes, the Gothic is demystified. Town and gown unite for the purpose of education. Both students and residents benefit by learning about the place

they live and about one another, as well as about an unfamiliar literature.

If, in a town of 10,000 founded in late 19th-Century Kansas, it is possible to find "Gothic" locations, then, I suspect, few places would have difficulty doing the same.

The students' enthusiasm for being surprised—as the Gothic requires of its characters—affected how they perceived and read the texts. Moreover, this enthusiasm kept students invested in both the literature and the course, making them "active" readers. They are "afraid" not to read the books all the way through and to miss class because they think they really will miss something. They enjoy trying to figure out which landscapes from the books will be recreated, for they do not know in advance what local site will serve as the fictional place.

With Gothic literature paralleling the rise in the role of science and its perceived significance—specifically field biology and experimental chemistry—offering the Gothic as a "field" course does more than integrate the disciplines. It enables students to experience the disciplines actively while provoking them to consider how both literature and science contribute to our perception and understanding of the world.

This is only one approach to how I have adapted to what has been called a crisis in education, to students' declining interest in learning and diminishing skills across the disciplines: There are as many means of adaptation as there are teachers willing to discover new ways to offer what they know is well worth teaching. ■

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Endnotes

¹ See, for example, Victor Sage, ed. *The Gothick Novel* (London: Macmillan, 1990), 24, who also refers to these and other texts as "precursors."

² See, for example, Humphrey Repton, *Hatchlands in Surrey*. Recently exhibited in "To Observe and Imagine: British Drawings and Watercolors, 1600-1900" (New York: The Pierpont Morgan Library, 1998), which contains watercolor illustrations that are "fitted with movable flaps that accommodate before-and-after depictions of sites to be improved." Tom

Stoppard's, *Arcadia* as staged in New York and San Francisco (1995), used a flip chart of before-and-after plans in the style of Repton; these, however, were used to represent the tension between two markedly different attitudes to nature, architecture, gender, and love, among other things.

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