

## Arab Society of English Language Studies

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From the Selected Works of AWEJ for Translation & Literary Studies

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Spring May 15, 2022

### “A National Literature of Irrationalism”: Horror and the Weird as Foundations for an American Literature Survey Course

Ali Chetwynd, *Arab Soecity of English Language Studies*

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**Ali Chetwynd**

English Department

American University of Iraq, Suleimani, Iraq

Email: [ali.chetwynd@auis.edu.krd](mailto:ali.chetwynd@auis.edu.krd)

Received: 3/24/2022

Accepted: 5/4/2022

Published: 5/24/2022

**Abstract**

While recent pedagogical scholarship has examined how to teach horror and “weird fiction” in the American Literature classroom, there has been no study of the possibility of organizing an entire American Literature survey course around such texts. I elaborate on my own experience teaching such a survey course, which used texts in the American “weird” tradition to examine the whole US literary tradition in terms of the nation’s originary conflict between the forces of reason and unreason. I pay particular attention to the first two weeks of the course, in which we set up this framework through readings of Langston Hughes, The Declaration of Independence, Jonathan Edwards, Michael Wigglesworth, and Phillis Wheatley. I discuss pedagogical considerations underlying the course design, and ways that readers might adapt the course’s principles beyond its immediate context.

**Keywords:** American literature, horror, Jonathan Edwards, Langston Hughes, Michael Wigglesworth, pedagogy, Phillis Wheatley, survey course, unreason, weird,

**Cite as:** Chetwynd, A. (2022). “A National Literature of Irrationalism”: Horror and the Weird as Foundations for an American Literature Survey Course. *Arab World English Journal for Translation & Literary Studies* 6 (2)2-25. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.24093/awejtls/vol6no2.1>

## Introduction

A recent special issue of the journal *Teaching American Literature* focused on “Teaching Horror in the American Literature Classroom.” The essays they collected on “ways to integrate supernatural and Weird fiction... into [American Literature] syllabi” testify to the variety of individual texts in the US literary tradition whose weird or horrific elements bear classroom study (Bostian & Brawley, 2020, p.2). But none of the assembled essays focus on how to construct whole “syllabi” on America’s literature of the “weird,” the “supernatural,” the “horrifying.” In this paper, I discuss how a single-semester American Literature survey course (which I have taught to Iraqi students) composed *only* of reality-destabilizing weird-horror texts can nonetheless provide a comprehensive introduction to the US literary tradition.

My course’s unifying titular thesis is that US literature constitutes “A National Literature of Irrationalism.” From Herman Melville to Toni Morrison, via DH Lawrence or Leslie Fiedler, authors and critics have found US literature—despite coming from a nation consciously founded on more “rational” principles than any other—defined by eruptions of that nation’s repressed irrationalities. Through texts that each deliberately foreground their weirdness while being self-conscious about their Americanness, we trace how the specific forms of US literary weirdness evolve in close, constant, and often deliberate relation to wider cultural understandings of America and Americanness.

In what follows, I’ll examine the underlying pedagogical principles of this thesis-driven approach to the survey course, will examine in depth how our first two weeks create the horror-weird framework that students can develop within and beyond throughout the semester, and will explain how we mitigate potential issues arising from the course’s tight focus and from our unusual institutional context.

## Conditions, Principles, and Focus.

I teach at The American University of Iraq, Sulaimani, where our English department covers three required core classes (Argument; Critical Reading and Writing; and Research), and offers majors in English Literature, Journalism, and Translation, with minors in all three, plus hosting an interdisciplinary minor in Gender Studies. Our one dedicated “American Literature” course is—though primarily for majors and minors—available to any student at the university (having only a core-class prerequisite).<sup>i</sup> American Literature’s students thus range from graduating English majors to lab scientists who have never read literature outside our core requirements.

The course thus can’t take for granted either literary training or background knowledge of US culture.<sup>ii</sup> The course’s official learning outcomes regarding Americanness are:

to “Gain appreciation for the ways in which literature and the arts illuminate and interrogate American experience,”  
to “Become familiar with key authors and texts that shape the field of American literature”  
to “Demonstrate knowledge of American literary history and its various periodic divisions.”

In terms of Bloom’s taxonomy, “appreciation” and “knowledge” are comparatively low-level cognitive skills: the course’s higher-order outcomes relate to more general literary matters. But as one of the higher-order goals of any national-literature survey course is to evaluate the synthetic principles by which texts cohere into a tradition, the course provides opportunities for students themselves to “illuminate and interrogate American experience” *through* attention to what has “shape[d] the field of American Literature.”

These basic conditions and requirements entailed two fundamental decisions about the course’s construction: one, how to deal with students’ lack of US cultural background in a course whose focus is primarily literary, and two, how far the course’s construction should pre-frame the national tradition: whether it should be thesis-organized, themed, or themeless.

Various scholars have discussed teaching US literature to non-native speaking students—for example, religious Israeli students, students living under US sanctions in contemporary Iran, or the generation of Romanians whose parents lived through the end of communist rule<sup>iii</sup>—whose “knowledge of American history is negligible, and their impression of the American ethos comes exclusively from popular culture. Therefore, approaching a survey course in American literature requires much groundwork and preparation...” (Major, 2017, p.1). The standard solution is to devote “much” reading and class time to that “groundwork and preparation,” with historical and sociological material prioritised as preconditions for literary study.<sup>iv</sup> Laura Major emphasizes the need for “background and elaboration before any literary text can be approached” (2017, p.2), which, as Roshanak Akrami notes, “leaves little time for discussing and appreciating the actual literary works” (2018, p.83). Given our course’s predominantly general-literature-skill learning-outcomes and the “little time” of its one-semester survey, I chose to completely prioritize literary readings, willing to skimp on comprehensiveness and even accuracy of background knowledge as long as students could maintain a sense of chronological development from reading to reading. The American culture would have to be legible *through* the literature rather than conveyed as a separate ongoing foundation, with the relationship between literary texts providing the referential scaffold for a workable sense of American context.<sup>v</sup> This decision itself determined my choice to select readings according to their contribution to a thesis.

While the question of how tightly to theme a course has been widely studied in fields as diverse as history and language acquisition, there is little theoretical or practical research on how this affects learning in literature classes, let alone survey-courses specifically. An unthemed national-literature survey where texts are selected only for instructor interest, independent quality, or consensus significance allows for maximum focus on each text’s internal qualities, but leaves loose the tradition’s principles of coherence. A themed course in which texts are selected by topic or genre gains in coherence, but may lose representativeness (excluding nationally significant texts that don’t focus on the theme). And a thesis-driven course, where texts are selected to develop a particular contention about the surveyed tradition, is *per se* coherent but must be even more partial and unrepresentative in excluding texts that don’t directly develop that overarching thesis.

I judged that the longer a survey’s allotted curriculum time (for example, the common US division of American Literature into two 16-week semesters) and the more background students

have in American history and culture, the more appropriate an unthemed approach becomes: enough texts will be covered for points of convergence to emerge organically, and students' cultural familiarity should allow them to independently determine what's American about these commonalities. In my contrasting situation, with one 14-week semester for students with no systematic background in US culture or history, the in-built unity of the thesis-driven approach seemed best able to convey the coherence of a whole, specifically American literary tradition, through the literature itself, without giving over class time to non-literary texts and materials.

I needed, then, a course-thesis that could be conveyed through literary texts alone, that could organize a selection of texts that evolved chronologically as a coherent literary tradition, that did so in relation to a wider vision of American culture, and whose account of US culture could be conveyed—from zero—quickly enough for students to work independently within its terms before week four brought their first major assignment.

The course-organizing thesis of “A National Literature of Irrationalism” was that US literature is a crucible for one of US culture's organizing perplexities: a nation officially founded on more explicitly rational principles than any other before or since, but correspondingly haunted by eruptions of irrationalism. Literature's basic medium of *language* is particularly apposite for examining this tension, since it has both rational structures of syntax and semantics, and intrinsic a-rational elements—from sound-structure to connotations, ambiguity to cross-lingual echoes, distorted etymologies to dead clichés—that pull against their stable ordering. American literature exploits these aspects of its basic material to reflect on and contribute to a national cultural tradition in which this duality of rationalism and unreason plays out in evolving interaction, more weirdly and horrifically the more that either pole is strained for.

As the editors of *American Gothic: New Interventions in a National Narrative* (1998) note, the US literary tradition finds horror in one pole of every dualism the culture defines itself through. It is thus “fundamentally ironic—an ‘essentially gothic’ culture produced by a civilization driven ‘to be done with ghosts and shadows’” (Martin & Savoy (Eds.), 1998, p.viii). Crucially for keeping my survey-course unrepentant, the editors stress the “multivalent” (Martin & Savoy (Eds.), 1998, p.vii) manifestations of this irony, weirdness, horror, which not only makes itself felt in repeated plots and images, but is more fundamentally and variously “realized in a syntax, a grammar, a *tropic field*” (Savoy, 1998, p.4; my italics). Our course followed the national literature's non-teleological evolution through more than 300 years of that “tropic field.”

This meant drawing from the pool of texts that each at once A) explicitly address America or Americanness, B) engage with the thematics of the irrational, and C) draw on the tropes or affects of the uncanny, the weird, the gothic, the haunting, or the straightforwardly horrific. Finally, D) each new text had to distinctively develop this three-element “tropic field” beyond its permutations in the preceding readings. This hardly limits the range of available texts, since as a rule, the more a US literary text evolves the weirdness-field, the more it is likely to be self-conscious about its Americanness, and *vice versa*. A survey that leans entirely on the weird or horrific can thus simultaneously be an entirely representative course on American Literature's Americanness.

This thetic approach gave the course coherence without requiring students to *accept* the thesis. Otherwise I could simply have pointed them to some secondary reading: the claim that America has a privileged relation to unreason, like American Literature’s to the weird, is hardly new, nor only accessible through literature. Susan Jacoby’s *American Unreason* (2009) surveys the cultural history. For the literature, DH Lawrence saw the US culture’s “frenzy for getting away from control of any sort” leading to a defining “pitch of extreme consciousness” in its literature (Lawrence, 1923, pp.15, 12). Lawrence took Poe as the most representative of US authors in his emphasis on the permanent threat of horrific eruption: “All this underground vault business in Poe only symbolises that which takes place *beneath* the consciousness. On top, all is fair-spoken. Beneath, there is the awful murderous extremity of burying alive” (Lawrence, 1923, p.78). This sense of bifurcation, with a strenuously constructed surface repressing the more fundamental horrors below, also animates Leslie Fiedler’s (1960) identification of something pathological in US literature’s dealings with “Love and Death,” defining the nation’s entire literary tradition in terms of oscillating attraction to and repulsion from the horrors of life’s most irrational inevitabilities.

Perhaps the ur-text for these visions of American literature haunted by the imminent return of its repressed others is Herman Melville’s (1850) famous argument that “Shakespeares are now being born on the banks of the Ohio,” wherein “American genius needs [no] patronage in order to expand. For that explosive sort of stuff will expand though screwed up in a vice” (Melville, 1850, pp.240-1, 242). He finds a paradigm in Hawthorne: ostensibly “a pleasant writer with a pleasant style [...] A man who means no meanings,” but having in common with Shakespeare “this great power of blackness in him,” which lets both “insinuate[] the things which we feel to be so terrifically true that it were all but madness for any good man, in his own proper character, to utter, or even hint of them” (Melville, 1850, pp.237, 238, 239). Here is the genesis for everything in Lawrence or Fiedler. The contrast of the dark side’s “explosive” “power” with a deceptively “pleasant” surface: of a socially “proper” “good man” with darker, “true[r]” but un”utter”able “things” within him; the blurring of the line between rational and irrational in “meanings” identified with “madness,” which can emerge only by “insinuat[ion]” and “hints”; and that stress on “blackness” as at once a metaphysical horror-principle and the very concrete, visible social and political problematic of race, which could—as Toni Morrison analysed 150 years later—only be recognized in America’s early literary tradition by implicit insinuations: a “linguistic struggle” to create legible though coded “responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (Morrison, 1992, p.5).

American Literature, then, has long defined itself and been defined in terms of a weirdly indirect struggle with irrationality that requires little prompting to “expand” into a “frenzy” of aversive horror. Here is the set of readings I put together to take students through its tropic horror-field.

Week	Reading
1	<b>Hughes</b> - “Let America be America Again” “The Declaration of Independence,”
2	<b>Edwards</b> - “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” <b>Wigglesworth</b> - excerpts from “The Day of Doom,” and <b>Wheatley</b> – “Thoughts on the Works of Providence” & “On Being Brought from Africa to America”
3	<b>Poe</b> - “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Tell-tale Heart,” & “The Man of the Crowd”
4	<b>Melville</b> – <i>Benito Cereno</i>
5	<b>Bierce</b> – “Chickamauga” <b>Whitman</b> – “The Wound Dresser” & “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry”
6	<b>Dickinson</b> – various poems
7	<b>Chandler Harris</b> – “Brer Rabbit Fools Sis Cow,” and <b>Chesnutt</b> – “Po’ Sandy” <b>Perkins Gilman</b> – “The Yellow Wallpaper”
8	<b>Wharton</b> – “Afterward” <b>Lovecraft</b> – “The Horror at Red Hook”
9	<b>West</b> – <i>Day of the Locust</i>
10	<b>Jackson</b> – “The Lottery” <b>Ellison</b> – “Battle Royal”
11	<b>Miller</b> – <i>The Crucible</i>
12	<b>Sexton</b> – various poems <b>Pynchon</b> – “The Secret Integration”
13	<b>Didion</b> – “Slouching Toward Bethlehem”
14	<b>Hong Kingston</b> – “No Name Woman” <b>Erdreich</b> – “Saint Marie”

These texts have in common a generally uncanny mode, a self-consciousness about their own Americanness, a self-consciousness about their proximity to genres of gothic or horror, and a concern with the interaction between the rational and the irrational. Why, the course asks, should the specific linguistic forms of US literary weirdness constantly evolve in close and often deliberate relation to the broader cultural understanding of America and Americanness?

I’ll discuss later how I mitigate some of the limitations of a thesis-driven course that lacks non-literary contextual readings after the first week, as well as ways in which readers unbound by my specific Iraq/Kurdistan context might adapt some of the course’s principles. The bulk of what follows, though, I’ll dedicate to explaining how the first two weeks establish the basic premises of the class and pave the way for our subsequent semester-long engagement with American weirdness.



### The First Two Weeks: Reason, Tyranny, and Insinuation in Irreal Early America

One of the most fundamental insights in *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning* (Brown et al, 2014) is that students learn more and more permanently if skills taught early in a program of learning are repeated with modulation and development, and with greater student freedom to adapt and extrapolate, throughout the rest of that program. As such, I aimed to get the basic “tropic field” of “A National Literature of Irrationalism” fully established within the first two weeks, so that students could subsequently take more control of our discussions, using, adapting, challenging, and developing the framework themselves for each new reading.

Beginning with an in-class reading of Langston Hughes’ “Let America Be America Again” (1936), our first two weeks addressed five texts out of chronological sequence—1936, 1776, 1741, 1662, 1773—to cover the pre-1800 part of our survey and establish the course’s thesis-vision—an America pulled between “murderous extremities” of reason and unreason, and a literature whose “linguistic struggle” to “insinuate” what’s going on leads to strange and uncanny forms—before we reverted to chronology from week 3 onward. There’s an implicit thesis in this organization, of course:<sup>vi</sup> that US literature post-1800 evolves ideas, tropes, complexes that have been diagnosable from its beginnings. And so our first week, before we get to the horror, sets Hughes alongside the Declaration of Independence to establish a cross-century perspective on the ways in which “America” and its literature have developed inseparably (disappointingly, suggests Hughes) from its founding principles.<sup>vii</sup>

Day one’s main focus is on students’ preconceptions about America. After briefly finding out what American literature students have previously read,<sup>viii</sup> I ask for five words or concepts that they associate with “America.” I then let students in pairs discuss and report points of connection between the presented terms, so as to start thinking of “America” as a field of related ideas and discourses. We then, with weirdness in mind, dwell on the connections students establish between terms that might seem contradictory or incompatible.

Most recently, the terms mentioned more than three times were “revolution,” “freedom,” “opportunity,” “law,” “imperialism,” “individualism,” “Trump,” “slavery,” “money,” “American dream,” “capitalism,” “democracy,” “big landscape,” and “violence.” Without too much prompting, students began our semester with illuminating considerations of how the scale of the US landscape raises problems for representative democracy, of how US wealth depends on its global adventurism as well as its huge natural resources or political organization, of the interdependence of a revolution for some and slavery for others, of how the social structures of the money system depend on an individualist view of persons, of how violence threatens freedom while being one of the things we might be free to enact, and so on. Before we get to Hughes, most students have thus touched on the relationship between the “American dream” and some forms of repression or violence.

At this point we turn to reading Hughes’ poem out loud uninterrupted, a student per stanza, with the directive only to note wherever our previously discussed terms arise, and to start considering how Hughes’ compositional choices put those terms into the kinds of complex relationships that students themselves have just generated. “Let America Be America Again” is



simultaneously a lament for America’s failed promises, and a loosely addressed call to “let it be the dream it used to be” (Hughes, 1936, line 2). Our preceding concept-work on Hughes’ keywords “freedom,” “justice,” and “dream” helps students pick out his basic argument and register, and as the class ends they’re ready to read The Declaration of Independence in light of Hughes’ basic critique. However, before we get to the Declaration, day two begins with finer attention to Hughes’s language and compositional complexities, which offer our first forays into the semester’s weirdery.

“Let it be the dream it used to be,” for example, flips the usual relation of present to dream: dream here is not the concrete present’s unacted future but a lost past that could retake the present. And if “opportunity” is the dream and dream is the only place where “opportunity is real” (Hughes, 1936, line 13), then dream becomes reality, and the concrete undreaming present—the “today” in which “the dream [is] almost dead” (Hughes, 1936, line 51)—insists that Hughes’ readers live in a kind of unreality. As we’ll see, this idea has a long American lineage, and Hughes develops its vision of intersecting realities in a break that asks “[w]ho are you that mumbles in the dark? / and who are you that draws your veil across the stars?” (Hughes, 1936, lines 17-8; original italics). This itself provides another sphere for destabilization, as the poem’s answering speaker lays claim to being at once “the one who dreamt our basic dream” and to embodying a whole list of marginalized US figures, culminating in the claim “I am the people” (Hughes, 1936, lines 39, 34). This “one” dream-generating multi-subjective “I,” uncanny enough in itself, has an ambiguous relation to the “you” of the star-veiling question, so that it is not only multiple in terms of identity, but also of grammatical location between subject and object (complicating the boundaries of “our”), and in terms of location (concrete America, or the realm of the veil). Hughes’ easily rhythmic but not strictly metrical prosody, intensified with sporadic movement between mid-line rhymes, repetitions, missing rhymes, half-rhymes, is similarly shifty in implication. As students often point out, it could bear two directly opposed allegorical implications, either as the yet-imperfect form approaching a final crystalline dream-order, *or* as a deliberate refusal to be bounded within the restrictive social forces that threaten the dream. Hughes keeps the poem suspended between the two, weirder in both its poetics and its ontology than we might have suspected from day one’s initial message-focused reading. It’s with this double-valence in mind that we reach the Declaration of Independence (Jefferson et al, 1776, n.p.).

Having heard already from Hughes of its dubious promises, students can immediately bring the Declaration under the sign of literature and read for its moments of weirdness. Hughes makes easily legible the Declaration’s organizing exclusions: women or “merciless Indian Savages” (Jefferson et al, 1776, n.p.), for example, are not the “men” who “are created equal” in “civilization” and among whom “Governments are instituted.” And there are three distinct versions of “justice,” ranging from practical legal structures, to a transnational human principle—the “native justice and magnanimity” of “Brittish brethren” (Jefferson et al, 1776, n.p.)—and finally a characterization of the declarers’ own project, since their interlocutors have “been deaf to the voice of justice and consanguinity.” Here we get our first polarization of reason and unreason. Appeals to “men’s” “natural” capacity for self-governance and mutual organization on the basis of “consent” frame the justice of US independence in terms of right reason (Jefferson et al, 1776, n.p.), contrasting Britain’s tyrannical unreason. Once students have identified this I supplement

our material with two key US quotations: first, Thomas Paine’s earlier attempt to frame both independence and his way of promoting it as naturally reasonable and intelligible:

I offer nothing more than simple facts, plain arguments, and common sense, and have no other preliminaries to settle with the reader than that he will divest himself of prejudice and prepossession... It is repugnant to reason, to the universal order of things, to all examples from former ages, to suppose, that this continent can longer remain subject to any external power. (Paine, 1776, n.p.)

And then Alexander Hamilton’s later claim that

It seems to have been reserved to the people of this country, by their conduct and example, to decide the important question, whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force. (Hamilton, 1787, n.p.)

Their nation of “reason,” committed to individual and mutual “reflection and choice,” is defined in opposition to figures of subrationality like “accident” and “prejudice.” But as we’ve seen Hughes claiming to “say it plain” then “expand” into metaphysics and ambiguity, so the “plain arguments” of Paine, Hamilton, and the Declarers cannot banish irrationality by “simple” say-so.

With Hughes’ ambiguities in mind, I ask students to identify the figures of irrationality against which these texts define justice and reason: they easily identify royal England, whose irrationality is so central that claims to the writers’ own reason emerge mainly by implicit contrast. The crown operates not on grounds of universal reason or consent, but by unconstrained “will alone” (Jefferson et al, 1776, n.p.), an “external power” whose “force” has no more rational ground than the “accident” of mere whim. This is “Tyranny” and “absolute Despotism,” framing reason-issues in terms of political organization (Jefferson et al, 1776, n.p.). But recall Melville’s image of expansive “genius” “screwed up in a vice”: unreason can’t be safely constrained within the crown. Unreason is not simple human “prejudice,” but a supra-human and unavoidable “force” like “accident,” so that wherever the Declaration strains “to be done with” its “explosive stuff,” it persists and “expand”s in that Lawrence/*Gothic* vision of perturbations intrinsic to the efforts at constraint. The “civilized” can’t simply expel the “barbarous,” but has its own “convulsions within,” like “excited domestic insurrections” (Jefferson et al, 1776, n.p.). The then-standard medical connotations and pathological implications of “excite” emphasize the Declaration’s own affective susceptibilities—like Paine’s foregrounding “repugnance” even as he tries to banish “prepossession”—undermining its claims to rest only on “simple facts.” As with multifarious Hughes, then, all is not so “plain” here; we read the Declaration after him precisely to see how much of his vision’s strangeness is legible in the original text it riffs on. The Declaration’s final appeal to a “firm reliance on the protection of divine Providence” (Jefferson et al, 1776, n.p.), meanwhile, points us on to “Sinners in the Hands of an Angry God” (Edwards, 1741): this is not the only echo that we’ll find horribly reconfigured there.

The first week's reading has hinted at the semester's horror to come only by weird implication and active teacherly anticipation. But Jonathan Edwards' sermon is an ur-text of American horror, and week two reveals how much of Hughes' or the Declaration's language actually comes straight from its store. "Sinners" is a literary text insofar as it aims less to make an argument than to construct a "dread": to quote its mid-point citation of Luke's gospel: "I will forewarn you whom ye shall fear, fear him, which after he hath killed, hath Power to cast into Hell; yea, I say unto you, fear him" (Edwards, 1741, p.17). Fear, fear, fear: Edwards is explicit about his goals, and self-conscious about his methods.<sup>ix</sup>

I begin by asking students to read Edwards' "murderous extremity" in light of the Declaration's concluding "reliance on the protection of divine Providence." Edwards' central insistence is that none can "rely" even infirmly on Providence's protection: God is capricious, man is loathsome, and whim alone, not care or protectiveness, defers divine punishment. Edwards' God, as students quickly identify, is thus an extreme version of the Tyrant the Declaration had railed against, legitimized by "force" and governing by a "will alone" so "external" to men that they have no capacity to understand it, agency to resist it, or right to protest it. The difference is that *God's* tyranny is warranted because "justice" has no relation to "consent" or to "natural" inalienable human rights, but is defined purely by conformity to the momentary disposition of God's "will." Tyranny and Justice were not only terms of the reasoned quest for US Independence, then, but also of earlier America's organizing forms of religious and social paranoia.

Indeed, so direct are Edwards' inversions of the Declaration, and riffs on its registers, that students often have to be reminded it was he who came 35 years earlier. God figures as royalty: men by mere existence "have offended Him infinitely more than a stubborn Rebel did his Prince" (Edwards, 1741, p.15). The Declaration's royalty-aversion and lament of power based in "will alone" come together as God out-threatens "absolute Monarchs, who have the Possessions and Lives of their Subjects wholly in their Power, to be disposed of at their meer Will" (Edwards, 1741, p.16). And while "[t]he World would spue you out, were it not for the sovereign Hand of him who hath subjected it," this sovereignty is not like the human version attended with corresponding duties: God handles us "without any Promise or Obligation at all" (Edwards, 1741, p.14), which challenges both the Declaration's notion that a ruler's failures of duty to subjects warrant revolution, and Hughes' idea of America as an unfulfilled promise that we might ask some power to "let" be fulfilled again. Edwards further pre-empts on justice: the one happy note for his damned is that "you shall not suffer beyond what strict Justice requires" (Edwards, 1741, p.18). When students compare this to the Declaration's three different rational warrants of "justice," they can see that when justice is defined "strictly" as conformity with God's immediate "mere will," its seemingly rational "requirement" is unconstrained by reason's external strictures. Mid-1700s America thus shows itself operating within two conceptions of Tyranny: a political imperative to resist tyranny in the name of human justice, and a religious imperative to accept total subjection *as* justice. How this contradiction felt to live under might explain the ever-present dread and horror in the sermon's weird conception of "subject."

Students have already seen Edwards's God figured as a political tyrant with subjects, "subject[ing]" "the World"'s unruliness by force. But further uses of "subject" suggest that the

final significance of the power-relation between God and Man is not so much in its practical dynamics as in the kind of subjectivity, of horror, of "fear...fear...fear" that it cultivates. Both senses of *subject* are present, for example, in "[t]o what a dreadful, inconceivable, inexpressible Depth of Misery must the poor Creature be sunk who shall be the Subject of" *eternal* damnation (Edwards, 1741, p.18). While this emphasizes the sufferer's lowly nature as a "creature," what they are "subject of" here is not the creator, but the experience the creator has consigned them to. Toward the end of the sermon, as Edwards brings his argument from the metaphysical to the social world, "[t]here is Reason to think that there are many in this Congregation now hearing this Discourse that will actually be the Subjects of this very misery to all Eternity" (Edwards, 1741, p.22). Echoing "reason" and prefiguring Hughes' uncanny temporal blurring, Edwards here completes the shift to a focus on phenomenological subjectivity, as his hearers are first-person "subjects of"—not passive objects of—the suffering they *may* be subjected to. Thus he creates a sermon-listening "now" that is already weirdly saturated with "all" eternal punishment. As the "subject of" his "discourse" is the misery his hearers will become "subjects of," so he aims to make them the kinds of subjects whose subjectivity is defined by fully appreciating eternal misery's eternal imminence. With these linguistic techniques, he can subject his audience to experience and understanding that approach the "inconceivable."

Edwards' intersections with the Declaration of Independence help establish his horrifying vision's distinctive Americanness, which we further explore through a passage from the "Author's Defence" of Cotton Mather's earlier landmark of American weirdness, *Wonders of the Invisible World* (1693). Mather, defending his role in the Salem Witch Trials, enumerates, to help "countermine the whole PLOT of the Devil, against *New-England*" (Mather, 1693, p.iv), the supernatural threats that lurk invisibly all around that region.<sup>x</sup> On his account, America, being the only place on earth approaching truly holy community, has become the Devil's main target, clarifying the particularly American stakes of Edwards metaphysical and social paranoia.

How, I thus ask students, does the distinctive subjectivity we've identified as Edwards' project correspond to the ontological structures of the universe his sermon conjures? Mather renders conspicuous Edwards' metaphysics of parallel worlds, and the insistence—familiar from Hughes—that the world we live in day to day is in some final sense less real, and less substantial, than its supernatural counterpart. Yet while for Mather America's invisible counterpart world could, with good faith, be banished, Edwards' America is always itself liable to vanish: every stone in New England a transient manifestation of God's whimsically supportive hand. What *is* real is "Hell's wide gaping Mouth open, and you have nothing to stand upon, not any Thing to take hold of, there is nothing between you and Hell but the Air; it is only the Power and meer Pleasure of God that holds you up" (Edwards, 1741, p.12). This is the passage students most often identify for a nexus of Edwards' tyranny-argument and his ontology. While for Mather, America was a project distinctively worth concretizing, realizing, and defending, Edwards' unreal America is just further transient matter, all equally liable to—"Subject" to—immediate evaporation. Even religion itself—rituals or good deeds—reduces to this ephemerality: such observances too are "Things," and no enlightened person can trust in things, "now they see that those Things that they depend on for Peace and Safety, were nothing but thin Air and empty Shadows" (Edwards, 1741, p.15).

Thus Edwards adds land, nation, objects, deeds to the Declaration’s divine “protection” as immaterial delusions that we cannot “rely on” in the face of capricious yet justified providence. He similarly undermines trust in language. Where the Declaration conceives itself as an effectual Austinian speech act, where Hughes’ “Let” is a serious plea, and where Mather aspired to write the Invisible legibly enough to purge it, Edwards insists that the more “real” something is—for his sermon’s purposes, hell, and God, and little else—the less it can be articulated. His subjectivity is constituted by conscious proximity to an “inconceivable, inexpressible Depth of Misery”: hell’s eternity upon contemplation, let alone experience, “will swallow up all your Thoughts and amaze your Soul, and you will absolutely despair... All that we can possibly say about it gives but a very feeble faint Representation of it; ‘tis inexpressible and inconceivable” (Edwards, 1741, p.21). The etymology of “amaze” conveys the paralyzing *cognitive* powerlessness, while the repeated pair of “inconceivable and inexpressible” conveys what would become a fundamental predicament of the gothic and its US inheritors: being stranded within that Melvillean experience that is “madness... to utter,” and that without communicating to others you cannot fully comprehend even to yourself. As we’ve seen above, Edwards’ insistence on the limits of “Discourse” is part of how his own discourse impels his readers to conceive the inconceivable. Thus his language throughout collapses poles toward paradox. US literature’s base mode of uncanny simultaneous experience—articulating two contradictory poles at once while insisting on the inaccessibility of either one—comes fully formed as early as Edwards.

My final question to students is what kind of social dynamics the sermon propounds. Edwards’ ramping up of fear, they note, relies on his listeners hearing side by side in the same congregation. It has some of Mather’s social paranoia (developed in Hawthorne’s later “Young Goodman Brown” (1835)): that you may be surrounded by the evil and not know it. But Edwards finally downplays this for a more sympathetic ground of greater horror: what must it be like, he asks, to look around you and know that through no fault of their own the person next to you may be falling foul of God’s mere will, and doomed to eternal pain: “if we knew who it was, what an awful Sight would it be to see such a Person!” (Edwards, 1741, p.22). So common is the fate, and so beyond control, that every congregation necessarily provides that sight. But we don’t know in whom exactly, thus the mere sight of any one of them must be equally potentially awful. Furthermore, since that visible eternal sufferer may be you yourself, you must also suffer in seeing that any one of the others may by contrast be saved: “How awful is it to be left behind at such a Day! To see so many others feasting, while you are pining and perishing” (Edwards, 1741, p.23). Thus the sight of *any* person must cause you torment, showing you either their potential eternal suffering or your own, each unpredictable and indistinguishable. This would not apply “if we knew” what actions might make someone more or less likely to be saved. But Edwards insists on incomprehension.<sup>xi</sup> As there is “nothing you can do, to induce God” the whole of individual existence must be the horrific knowledge that you are “hanging over the Pit of Hell” (Edwards, 1741, p.16), while the social world offers only a constant reminder of how uncertain it is whether you will be lucky enough to stay hanging. In this vision, it is not confusion and unreason that bring fear: the more accurate your perception and the more competent your reasoning, the more fully you will realise that your every experience should be saturated with horror. Such pervasive horror ratchets daily life up to Lawrence’s American “extreme pitch of consciousness.” The dread in Edwards’ sermon supercedes its quaint body-horror (“He’ll crush out your blood and make it fly”



(Edwards, 1741, p.19)). And the prescribed response is not—cannot be—some kind of reasoned change of behaviour: we can come closer to God only as we more all-consumingly cringe in conscious, reasoned fear of him. This total vision of *existential* terror, of social torment entailed by the intrinsic paranoia of competent religious consciousness, provides a vocabulary that animates or haunts the whole tradition—from optimistic rationalism to pure horror—that follows.<sup>xiii</sup>

The final day of our first two weeks' out-of-chronology groundwork combines two very different poets: Michael Wigglesworth and Phillis Wheatley, the former straining after horror, the other insinuating beneath a pleasant surface.

We read only the early and concluding stanzas of Wigglesworth's "The Day of Doom" (1662)—about 200 lines from its full 1800—but these are enough to show how deep the roots of Edwards' vision go, and how they evolved. The "Day" in question begins normally—"calm was the season, and carnal reason / thought so 'twould last for ay" (Wigglesworth, 1662, lines 3-4)—but the Doom swiftly arrives, and the poem then follows how the "giddy heads" of "carnal" man respond to "the Son of God most dread; / who with his train comes on amain / to judge both quick and dead" (Wigglesworth, 1662, lines 46-8). Wigglesworth begins like Edwards with explicit imperatives to fear: within seventy lines "All kindreds wail, all hearts do fail: / horror the world doth fill" (Wigglesworth, 1662, lines 85-6). More than a thousand lines later, we're still there: the damned "gnaw their tongues for horror" as the poem dwells Edwards-like on eternity's pangs (Wigglesworth, 1662, line 1636): "there must they lie, and never die, / though dying every day: / There must they dying ever lie, / and not consume away" (Wigglesworth, 1662, lines 1677-80). Wigglesworth even takes an Edwardsian break to relish in directly addressing his reader (also legible as Christ addressing those he has caught in the poem's world): "How cheer you now? Your hearts, I trow / are thrilled as with a sword" (Wigglesworth, 1662, lines 59-60). Once we've established that he too makes horror of God's pending judgment, I ask students to identify what else the poem has in common with Edwards' sermon, and then, more significantly, where they differ.

For commonalities, students pick up on the repeated use of "dreadful," the emphasis on futile efforts to "this fearful sight, / and dreaded presence shun," and the use of the word "[a]mazed with fear" to stress our human paralysis and impotence in the face of God (Wigglesworth, 1662, lines 95-6, 39). Beyond simple vocabulary repetition, Wigglesworth shares Edwards' interest in revealing dimensions previously inaccessible to "carnal reason"—Christ's "flaming eyes hid things doth spy, / and darkest things reveal" (Wigglesworth, 1662, lines 103-4)—and stresses both the carnal world's final insubstantiality and the beyond-reason ineffability of divine manifestation. The apocalyptic experience "doth more than terrify" (Wigglesworth, 1662, line 108), and once the carnal world dissolves into the undergirding divine—leaving "no dark veil between"—the "tongues of men (nor Angels' pen) / cannot the same express. / And therefore I must pass it by, / lest speaking should transgress" (Wigglesworth, 1662, lines 125-8). This fear of transgressing highlights where Wigglesworth diverges from Edwards.

Edwards had no fear of transgressing some rule of representation, because we cannot have any idea what deeds would or wouldn't please God. The first difference students usually note is



Wigglesworth’s comparatively stable, happy resolution: visions of heaven and hell are eventually both one vision of justice, so that saints watching torture “do proclaim / that just are all his ways” while they themselves finally shed their carnal remnants, made “perfect” as “all the sin that dwelt within / their mortal bodies freed” (Wigglesworth, 1662, lines 1750-1, 1785-8). The dissolution of the “carnal” “mortal” world into Edwards’ “thin air” is for Wigglesworth a liberating joy: something like a successful revolution or freeing from tyranny, rather than an evaporation of all obstacles to eternal torment. But the key underlying difference is in the writers’ respective attitudes to blame, and to how far our fate depends on ourselves or on “external power.” Wigglesworth identifies each member of the damned by a particular “sin” or “transgress”ion, by contrast to Edwards’ insistence on the inaccessible standards of a capricious justified tyrant God. In Wigglesworth’s hell, the damned endure “tort’ring pain, which they sustain / in body and in soul.” The pun on “sustain” here emphasizes the sufferers’ own culpability: their conscious transgression impels their tortures. But while Wigglesworth depicts more specific instances of these tortures, his more conventional philosophy of morality, action, and punishment make *The Day of Doom* finally less horrifying than “Sinners,” lacking for all the shared vocabulary the fully theorized existential dread of powerlessness and incomprehension.

We read them thus anti-chronologically to highlight what might seem unintuitive. American horror doesn’t dissipate or dilute as the colony emerges from its fugitive puritan beginnings toward a national self-conception premised on universal human reason. Instead, as self-governing rational nationhood approaches, and as the registers of public political life and apocalyptic religiosity intersect, the “dark, abiding” irrationality deepens into a more all-consuming coherent existential terror in Edwards than in Wigglesworth. And it expands from there. For the rest of the semester, reason and horror will never be so separable—nor so reconcilable in “just” apportionment of fates to faults—as in Wigglesworth’s early mapping of their “tropic field.”

Phillis Wheatley then takes us back away from explicit horror, while further establishing US literature’s intrinsic mode of “dark, abiding” paradox and double-minded insinuation. I give students more introductory framing than usual on Wheatley: her basic conditions—brought across the Atlantic rather than born into slavery, enslaved and then emancipated, the first African American to publish a volume of poetry, tested in court to prove that a slave could truly produce such competent work—and her subsequent reception (defined by disagreement over whether she merely parrots conventional “white” forms and beliefs, or develops any distinctive form, subjectivity, or argument). With this in mind, we read two of her most apparently solicitous and convention-conforming poems.

“Thoughts on the Works of Providence” (1773b), despite its title, is less preoccupied than our prior readings with how things come to be, what we can do to affect this, and how that should determine our orientation to the world. Instead it circles, with interjections of Wheatley’s own meditations, a debate between Reason and various unrulier mental capacities about their relative divinity: “amid the mental powers a question rose, / ‘What most the image of the Eternal shows” (Wheatley, (1773b), lines 104-5). Associating reason with day, the emotive forces with night, Wheatley finally resolves that though night-time provides an essential foil, human access to

Eternal divinity comes through the meeting of Reason and daylight Love. Why, I ask students with biographical context in mind, might Wheatley have come to this very conventional conclusion? As a black slave whose production of such competent poetry landed her in public court, propounding Reason and Christian restraint might have helped refute connotations between dark skin and the forces of night, or presumptions of uncivilized emotional incontinence. The poem self-consciously addresses such concerns: blackness is what lets emotions run free behind “the sable veil that Night in silence draws” (Wheatley, (1773b), line 53), while her vow to “raise my mind to a seraphic strain!” puts her in a personally “low” position even as it generalizes about poetry’s ability to ‘raise’ the human to the angelic (Wheatley, (1773b), line 10).

Yet amid this strenuous conventionality and self-deprecation, the poem’s most vivid passage is nightwork:

As reason’s powers by day our God disclose,  
So may we trace Him in the night’s repose.  
Say what is sleep? And dreams how passing strange!  
When action ceases and ideas range  
Licentious and unbounded o’er the plains,  
Where Fancy’s queen in giddy triumph reigns. (Wheatley, (1773b), lines 84-89)

Associating “licentious” night with both darkness and femininity, swiftly abandoning God on the unbounded plains, this passage takes what was threatening or lamentable in Edwards or Wigglesworth—the unbounding, the giddiness—and valorizes them. The shared vocabulary—dream, reason, power, plains, giddiness, royalty—locates this poem well within our “tropic field,” and though it finally tries to re-box them in comfortable subordination to a conventional, reasonable piety, the passage’s never-answered questions persist like Hughes’ unfulfilled dream beyond its conclusion. A “pleasant” surface “insinuate”s something less articulable, but “dark, abiding.”

I thus ask the students: do they think Wheatley in this passage *deliberately* undermines her poem’s wider ostensible celebration of daylight reason? Here I quote a contemporaneous but non-American source: William Blake’s compliment that “[t]he reason Milton wrote in fetters when he wrote of Angels and God, and at liberty when of Devils and Hell, is because he was a True Poet, and of the Devil’s party without knowing it” (Blake, 1793, p.35). Was Wheatley a True American Poet, of the Night’s party without knowing it? Or a conscious, reasoning insinuator? Or just a mildly incompetent mimic of classical models? “Providence” doesn’t give most students enough to make a firm judgment, but a more compressed and complex poem tends to get them judging.

I ask students to note, as we read it two or three times aloud, any detail they see in “On Being Brought from Africa to America” that could bear double-valences like Edwards’ “subject,” Hughes’ half-form prosody, and our other examples of American ambiguity. Most of what students find clusters in the short poem’s first line and second half:

'Twas mercy brought me from my pagan land  
[...]  
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,  
'Their colour is a diabolic dye.'  
Remember, *Christians, Negros* black as *Cain*,  
May be refin'd, and join th' angelic train (Wheatley, 1773a, lines 1, 5-8).

In line one, "mercy" may be supra-human divine power or may flatter slave-traders and owners as conscientious civilizers. In line five, "sable race" may simply identify race by dark skin, or may be ironic since sable is a fur, not a skin, and so is not as deeply race-defining as it may seem (recall also the "sable veil" that separates reason and day from licentious night on "Providence," while in line two here Wheatley calls her earlier self "benighted"). "Our... race" may refer not only to dark-skinned people, but to humans as a whole, sable-dark in some more figurative sense, be it of tainted souls or of night-like creative capacity. "Diabolic dye" raises again the question of intrinsicness, since a dye would suggest no *inherent* blackness, while diabolic could either imply that devilishness causes the skin colour, *or* that skin-marking (even just re-marking on skin) is the devilish thing to do. "Their" is apparent quotation about Africans, but contradicts the "our" that referred to Africans immediately beforehand, suggesting that the colour (or act of coloration) may in some sense belong to the scornful-eyers. In line seven, the punctuation may address Christians to think about "negroes," or address Christians and negroes as equivalents, or identify *some* Christians: those who are negroes. Meanwhile, Cain's blackness may be purely figurative for his flawed character, may be partial if we read "mark of cain" as a literal physical mark, or may (against standard biblical readings) suggest that Cain was visibly African-black. And in the final line, "refin'd" can be read as a dead metaphor simply meaning "purged of impurity," or as a live metaphor drawing on the common association between indentured Africans and the brown-to-white plantation process of refining sugar. It may even hint at the false conflation of Christian practice with "refined" training in bourgeois etiquette. What different overall readings, I ask, might emerge from combinations of these various ambiguities?

The two obvious poles are that on one hand we have a vision of pre-christianized blackness as devilish, fundamental, scornworthy until externally cleansed, and requiring death to liberate salvagable soul from tarnished body, a process for which blacks should be grateful to merciful whites. On the other hand, there's a reading that identifies racialization as an artificial process, the wilful racializers as devilish, and American Christianity as an arbitrary system of manners, while implying that black Africans unexposed to US Christian practice may be just as ready for God as pious Americans (perhaps more, because of not perpetuating diabolical practices of artificial colour-division). Students usually find this bivalence too coherent and finely balanced to emerge in an eight-line poem by accident. When I then cast them back to judging whether to read Wheatley as a conscious insinuator, a night-thinker "without knowing it," or so flawed a classical mimic that her poems accidentally undermine themselves, the balance of students opting for each version tends to be about 75/25/0. By the end of our second week, then, students are attuned to the "buried alive" ambiguous weirdness of American literature, insinuated and expanding unbounded beneath more or less strenuous claims to unprecedented degrees of public reason.

From these five authors, only occasionally horrific, we already have the base materials of the semester’s “tropic field”: reason against unreason, tyranny and rebellion, incorporation and exclusion, the forest-bounded village and the unbounded plain, double-valences within plain speech, supernature and apocalypse as imminent sources of dread or of joy, parallel worlds divided by permeable veils, the insubstantiality of the concrete, ineffability in communication and inconceivability in experience, and the interrelation of agency, destiny, and providence in making new things and recovering lost things. Binding these together, that “grammar” of double-implication, of opposite poles erupting the more strenuously their counterparts are insisted on. And out of that tension, the basic ontological sense of doubleness, simultaneousness, uncanniness, weirdness. From that, an irreducible affective saturation that ranges from amusing incongruity to grotesque horror to overwhelming terror to, perhaps most often, “dark, abiding” dread. This is already an American Literature that Melville, Lawrence, Fiedler, Morrison would recognize. For the course’s remaining twelve weeks few new ingredients are needed: we follow instead how these basic materials evolve and reconstellate as the national tradition takes shape.

### **Mitigating the Limitations of a Thesis-Driven Course**

With the course’s basic terms thus established, my own (semi-tyrannical) framing role also recedes, as student insights and interests take on much more power to direct each class meeting’s attention. A thesis-driven course risks narrowness, and students’ success in a class with no theme-based learning outcomes shouldn’t depend on their accepting the thesis that provides its framework. The theme needs to serve general understanding of US culture and higher-level cognitive skills in literary interpretation and connection-making, not to become an end in itself. As such, I take a number of measures to let students direct their work—and their fulfilment of the course’s US-culture-knowledge and general-literary-skills outcomes—outward from the course’s basic thetic spine.

Major assignments, for example, prioritize working with off-syllabus material in line with students’ individual interests. The first, worth 10% of the final grade, is a short close reading exercise (to make an interpretive argument based on the significance of one language detail in any reading, beyond what we’ve already discussed in class) that students can rewrite after the first grade and feedback, to ensure their basic skills in textual work. The second, worth 30%, requires students to develop a new argument about one of the texts we’ve read in light of an off-syllabus piece of non-literary US writing, from history to cultural criticism to political speech. And the third, worth 40%, requires students to establish a place within the national tradition for an off-syllabus piece of US literature published since 2000, by making it illuminate some of our earlier readings, and explaining how those help illuminate the newly chosen text.

Students can thus bend major assignments to their own interests, while maintaining at least some branch connection to the course’s core of reason-unreason-horror readings. I always create assessments on the presumption that the best trial of students’ skills is to demonstrate them on unfamiliar material. Assignments that keep one foot in the syllabus and one foot outside it allow for a balance of structure and freedom, cultivating skills of synthesis, illumination, and extrapolation, while also letting students take some more personal ownership of the course material

as they reconfigure it in light of their outward work. Overall, no student suffers in graded work for being less invested in the course’s framework thesis than another.

By the same principles, each student has to make three five-minute discussion-generating presentations at some point after week two: one to begin a class by establishing points of connection between the day’s reading and the previous readings; one to circulate a nonliterary source from outside the syllabus and explain how it illuminates the day’s reading; and one to do the same with a short literary text.

The continuity presentation gets students to think synthetically about the core question of what makes a national tradition cohere, and lets subsequent discussion prioritize attention to how the new text departs from and evolves the prior trajectory. Off-syllabus non-literary presentations, meanwhile, can use anything from literary criticism of the day’s reading to an essay on a related theme to (the usual choice) primary documents from the same era. The goal is to illuminate what’s on the syllabus, but this practice allows students to develop their own interests and propound those interests to their fellow students, giving them stakes in the course. Sometime these presentations are entirely within and sometimes entirely separate from the course’s overarching thesis, and overall the effect is to leaven the course’s tight inbuilt focus. Details of American culture, history, and experience outside the literary tradition come more piecemeal than if I myself were to dedicate class time to establish them for each reading, but students build up a mosaic of background American context, whose sporadic diffusion brings potential for surprisingly sparked connections and unpredictable offshoots. The further literary readings presented, meanwhile, can’t be examined in much detail, but expand students’ awareness of what’s out there in the US tradition, get them to practice close elaboration as they narrow in on small details to explain each text’s relevance and interest, give other students exposure to new authors they might want to follow up on in their own time, and allow students to deliberately rectify some of the gaps in coverage that follow from our single-semester, whole-history compression.<sup>xiii</sup>

The thesis-focus developed in our early readings is thus not finally too constraining, because after week two I hand the basic framework over to students to develop and exceed as their selection of supplements contextualizes our thesis-coherent required readings. Students invested in the thesis often supplement with more explicitly horror-genre material, while others establish outward bridges to very disparate turf. The presentations and assignments thus get students to self-consciously engage with the principles of inclusion, coherence, and continuity in a national literary tradition, articulating their own ideas in relation to the foil of the course’s own thesis. And grades depend on students’ ability to do this work on sources whose argumentative relevance *they* have to determine, and which can be as tightly or as loosely tied to our thetic trajectory as they each prefer.

### **Later Readings and Potential Expansions**

Though each further syllabus reading contributes something new to the evolving “tropic field,” the student-cued approach means that our discussions of each are less pre-determinate than of the initial five authors. The constant focus is how each new text’s modulations of the horrorweird relate to its Americanness. Texts self-conscious about one tend to be self-conscious about the



other, and the syllabus’ most crucial texts are those that relate their American concerns to self-conscious appropriations of the *genres* of horror.

For example, Melville’s *Benito Cereno* (1855), presents us with a self-consciously “Good American” character encountering old-world Spaniards and enslaved Africans, making sense of the increasingly perplexing situation by overlaying it with gothic clichés before finally having to face up to a deeper “malign evil” unprepared by recognisable genres or tropes (Melville, 1855, p.52). A familiar genre of horror provides him (and the reader) national paradigms and pat recognitions that a newer, less “conceivable” horror finally blows away. Charles Chesnutt’s “Po’ Sandy” (1899) provides a post-slavery counterpart to Melville’s attack on the moral simplifications of Stowe-style sentimentalism, as its ghost-story-within-a-story dramatizes how weird narratives can rationally manipulate sentimental audiences. As the central tale blends African-heritage Conjure with an anglo-conventional lovelorn ghost and some noisily gory body horror, it at once communicates the real horrors of slavery and shows how they themselves function in a practical, even cynical, national narrative economy. Its key line of irony—the sentimental audience exclaiming “what a system it was... under which such things were possible!” before giving the storyteller free lease on a building he has convinced her is haunted (Chesnutt, 1899, p.17)—reflects its multi-layered irony. An indiscriminating audience conflates the incredible “possibility” of supernatural events with the historical record of a “system”’s unconstrained cruelty, and the unreal is shown to be a more viable currency for marginalized people than the real. American rationality consists in working within these terms, however inauthentically this requires narrators to handle their own experiences and inheritances.

Nathanael West’s *Day of the Locust* (1939) too addresses audiences fed stories that feed their irrationalism, scrutinizing the national, local, and personal pathologies cultivated by early Hollywood’s commitment to “excite” undirected desire and resentment. Tracking the build-up of repressed violence in the interactions between a film artist, an actress, a retiree, and the background mob of celebrity-chasers, West elucidates how the culture industry thrives on ratcheting unfulfillable desire in an audience that can neither name nor direct the excitement this generates, until an “explosive” scene of final mob horror in which rage, perversity, and paralysis “expand” to consume the entire film-set nation. By contrast, our final reading, Louise Erdrich’s “Saint Marie” (1984), ratchets its explosive intensity within the smaller scale of confrontation between one nun and one Native American schoolgirl, through the latter’s self-consciously flipped projection of a messiah-vs-devil, chosen-against-heathen conflict. With an emotional register veering from paragraph to paragraph between election and damnation, “Saint Marie” recalls us to the early weeks’ visions of “merciless... savages” ranged against “civilized... providence” over the mouth of Hell. Tracing current problems back to originary exclusions and contradictions, Erdrich is much less sanguine than Hughes about simply admitting everyone into the elect subjectivity initially reserved for the colonizers.

These self-consciously uncanny engagements with genre cast deliberately strange light on America, but our single-semester span and non-native speaking students place upper bounds on our texts’ weirdness, especially regarding length and linguistic complexity. But other *Arab World English Journal* readers and their students may not be so constrained. Were I teaching a longer



course for native speakers, I'd include more novel-length works, and—recalling Morrison's stress on "linguistic struggle" and the *New Interventions* editors' emphasis on the deep "syntax" and "grammar" of American terror—more texts whose weirdness animates their sentence-level constructions. In particular, with extra weeks and fluent students, Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and Thomas Pynchon's *Mason & Dixon* (1998) would conclude the syllabus, replacing Pynchon's "The Secret Integration" (1964) and Ellison's "Battle Royal" (1947). *Beloved*'s ambiguous supernaturalism, its blending of haunting and gore, and its language pulled between all these forces make it a perfect case study of how horrifying ideation generates distinctively American proseforms. *Mason & Dixon*, meanwhile, looks back directly to the acts of America's establishment, self-conscious throughout about how the nation's founding attempt to banish the weird in the name of the rational gave rise to social pathologies that persist today. With its fantastical incidents couching a sympathetic treatment of how the establishers must have felt to realize themselves "changing all from subjunctive to declarative, reducing Possibilities to Simplicities" (Pynchon, 1997, p.349), *Mason & Dixon* may be more weird than horror but is the irrationalist US tradition's natural stock-taking twentieth century endpoint. What comes next with the dawning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is for my students' final paper to establish.

One final, under-appreciated novel has a rightful place earlier on this syllabus, worth expanding the framework-setting pre-1800 segment by a week to accommodate: Charles Brockden Brown's *Wieland: or The Transformation, An American Tale* (1798). *Wieland* may be the American tradition's first novel-length work of horror, and more than any of the five early-American authors I've discussed above it attempts to create a syntax and grammar for the *first-person* experience of this new subjectivity, suspended between reason and unreason, of American terror. Coming before Jane Austen established the default forms of psychological narrative for English language fiction of any nation, *Wieland*'s ungainly weird syntax reflects a "linguistic struggle" to represent "extreme pitch[es] of consciousness" in all their complexity without any template to work from. And what is more paradigmatically American than building without comparison?

Much has been written about *Wieland*'s distinctive Americanness; Brockden Brown even sent a copy to Thomas Jefferson. Its basic dynamics match the terms I've discussed from Wigglesworth to Hughes, as an old-world family immigrant to America, retreat into its countryside to synthesize a new intellectual life merging classical religious philosophy with enlightenment freedoms... and end up infanticidal, insane, or spontaneously combusted. Principles of rational self-organization at the social, familial, or psychological levels evaporate into "thin air" with a little help from a mischievous ventriloquist, and the survivors retreat to Europe with only horror, loss, and despair as souvenirs. While scholarship stresses the novel's allegorization of contemporary national perplexities, less has been written of its adaptation of those perplexities and their horrors into new prose, giving awkward phenomenological form to the co-presence in early American consciousness of the Declaration's rationalism and Edwards' pervasive terror. Brockden Brown's hyperattention to the structure and subordination of our mental faculties in immediate experience conjures an ugly but fascinating prose of mental processes in constant conflict, and of an emergent self-consciousness that makes horror out of reason's awareness of its modulation by inseparable unreason.

Horror in *Wieland* comes as much from watching one's own alien mind at work as from outbreaks of gory violence. Here, for example, we see the early realization that the mind becomes less explicable to itself the more it seeks for cohesion:

That these incidents were fashioned in my sleep, is supported by the same indubitable evidence that compels me to believe myself awake at present; yet the words and the voice were the same. Then, by some inexplicable contrivance, I was aware of the danger, while my actions and sensations were those of one wholly unacquainted with it. Now, was it not true that my actions and persuasions were at war? Had not the belief, that evil lurked in the closet, gained admittance, and had not my actions betokened an unwarranted security? (Brockden Brown, 1798, p.98)

The language of sleep and dream, of wish and compulsion, of belief and action, of lurking evil and of internecine war, will all be familiar from our thesis-establishing readings. As our central consciousness gets further into the novel's sensational “contrivances,” the language of psychological perplexity gets ever more recursive:

The intimation was imperfect: it gave no form to my danger, and prescribed no limits to my caution. I had formerly neglected it, and yet escaped. Might I not trust to the same issue? This idea might possess, though imperceptibly, some influence. I persisted, but it was not merely on this account. I cannot delineate the motives that led me on. I now speak as if no remnant of doubt existed in my mind as to the supernal origin of these sounds; but this is owing to the imperfection of my language, for I only mean that the belief was more permanent, and visited more frequently my sober meditations than its opposite. The immediate effects served only to undermine the foundations of my judgment and precipitate my resolutions. (Brockden Brown, 1798, p.168)

The consciousness of imperceptible forces, the co-presence of past and immediate forces, the conjuring of doubt by its imperfect negation, the mention of sobriety that serves to ratchet up the hysteria, and the zero-sum competition between judgment and action... *Wieland's* is a prose designed to undermine foundations, and has its own roots in Edwards' vision of reason-revealed groundlessness.

*Wieland* is an ideal early text for an American Literature survey organized in relation to horror, or to reason and unreason, since it's one of the great early attempts in any national tradition to do horror by experiments in prose. And its new contortions of first-person subjectivity are clearly defined in relation to the perturbations of the wider national culture. Just as early advances in film technology derived more than most people realize from experiments in conjuring supernatural spectacle, *Wieland's* technical contributions to the hyper-attentive fine-grained psychological-novel tradition have probably been underestimated because of its genre identification. But *Wieland* helps to remind us that Jane Austen and Henry James, the English-language virtuosos of realist psychology, came to their form-defining achievements (say in *Emma* (1815) and *The Golden Bowl* (1904)) only after test-running their prose-forms in self-consciously gothic or weird exercises (*Northanger Abbey* (1803) or *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) and *The*

*Sacred Fount* (1901)). *Wieland* in its own clunky way is as attentive as James to the precisely subordinated movements of reason’s imbrication with unreason, and offers an even more extreme account of self-consciousness as intrinsically gothic, haunted, horrific. There is not much more distinctively American in American literature.

## Conclusion

All of which goes to support our course’s underlying thesis: there is a specifically American “tropic field” of horror and weirdness, emergent from the intensified self-consciousness about the interactions of reason and unreason in a nation founded to banish one in the name of the other. And so even for a course whose learning outcomes have no official connection to horror, texts selected to develop that thesis can nevertheless constitute a truly representative American Literature survey, conveying without redundancy the national tradition’s full shape, development, and potential.

## About the Author:

**Ali Chetwynd** is Assistant Professor and Chair of the English Department at the American University of Iraq, Sulaimani. He co-edited *Thomas Pynchon, Sex, and Gender* (University of Georgia Press, 2018), and has published on Pynchon, William Gaddis, Ben Jonson, and the rhetoric of non-realist fiction in a variety of journals and collections.

ORCID <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9163-4097>

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## Notes:

<sup>i</sup> English majors have to take two of American Literature, British Literature, or World Literature, and usually take all three, while minors must study one national tradition: American or British.

<sup>ii</sup> In our most recent first-day discussion of what US literature the students had already read, the first 6 suggestions were actually British: while students were conscious of watching American *films*, very few had read American literature with attention to its Americanness. Eventually we were able to identify American things that students had read (from Ernest Hemingway to John Green), but the students had not previously found those texts' Americanness salient.

<sup>iii</sup> See Major 2017, Akrami 2018, and Moffett 2020 respectively.

<sup>iv</sup> As Roshanak Akrami says, "[t]o speak of epochs such as early American literature, American Renaissance, or Harlem Renaissance, would not be possible without speaking of the history of the Puritan settlements, slavery, the American Revolution, the notion of Manifest Destiny, Indian Removal, the advent of industry and transportation, or the Civil War" (Akrami, 2018, p.82).

<sup>v</sup> Another way to avoid ceding literature-time to non-literary background reading is to emphasise elements of the readings that share concerns or cultural dynamics with the local situation. Joe Moffett writes of

Romanian students' liking for Emerson's "Self-Reliance" in the wake of their parents' generation emerging from communist rule: "Any lasting effect of Communism's emphasis on the collective rather than the individual did not appear to hamper the students' ability to discover virtue in Emerson's words" (Moffett, 2020, p.10). The same is true for our students in Iraqi Kurdistan, who often define themselves and the "critical thinking" education they seek at our institution against their high-school experiences or against the rigid group distinctions and intra-group hierarchies of their surrounding culture. Iraq's current situation—both the wider nation and the Kurdish governate where we're based and that most of our students come from—makes early American literature pretty intelligible. Our students live every day with questions of what makes a nation of sects and ethnicities a single nation, of what justifies secession and independence (cf the Kurdish independence referendum of September 2017) or of the role of a constitution in establishing a culture (cf Iraq's inconsistently enforced 2005 constitution, which was *written* with much US consultation/interference). Hence they don't need to read separate US history to appreciate the basic dynamics of early US literature. To more fully explain how we used such connections throughout the semester would take this paper away from my focus on American weirdness as a survey-device, but suffice to say that US literature's background dynamics can be conveyed to international students in many ways beyond non-literary background lectures or readings.

<sup>vi</sup> Which, again, students are free to reject or challenge as a whole or in relation to particular texts.

<sup>vii</sup> For more on the pedagogical logic of beginning a survey semester with an out-of-chronology pairing of a literary and a nonliterary text, see Thifault 2017.

<sup>viii</sup> As mentioned above, often not very much, and even more rarely with any conscious sense of its Americanness.

<sup>ix</sup> Such is his "murderous extremity," to quote Lawrence 1923, that I have to explicitly remind students that he was not a fringe figure but one of early America's most celebrated philosophers, held up as a standard for the new colony's independent intellectual capacities.

<sup>x</sup> Students we can't rely on for familiarity with 17<sup>th</sup> century theology have often, usefully, seen *The VVitch* (2016), the most conspicuous recent filmic conjuring of Mather's early-colonial US universe and its supernatural paranoia.

<sup>xi</sup> It's worth noting that when I say "Edwards" here I'm referring to this particular sermon as it makes sense in the context of this particular class: Edwards' wider philosophy is far more sanguine—and has far greater faith in the capacity of language and reason to help us make progress—on questions like the will of God, humans' capacity for free will, and the possibility of aligning ourselves with God's wishes.

<sup>xii</sup> Paul Huh's *American Terror* (2015) is an excellent Edwards-rooted theorization of how America's dealings with reason generate its literature's distinctive forms of terror, horror, weirdness. Its thoroughgoing poststructuralism makes it a hard sell to even good undergraduate students (I've occasionally shared the introduction with those who particularly buy into the course's thesis) but it's well worth reading as an instructor.

<sup>xiii</sup> For example, students often note that black writing gives the course a stable through-line of minority literature at the expense of reading much from other minority communities: we don't read anything by Spanish-speakers, Arab Americans, anything overtly LGBT, and so on. Off-syllabus presentations let students fill those gaps and discuss their implications.