

Gothic Re-Visions: 20th- and 21st-Century EcoGothic and Eco-Critical Perspectives in British Horror Fiction

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Abstract

By employing ecocritical viewpoints to analyze how 21st-century British horror literature revives the Gothic tradition, this essay focuses on how ecological disaster, environmental anxiety, and the human–nature split are portrayed in modern stories. This paper situates its analysis within the emerging field of the EcoGothic, drawing on the underlying theory put forward by Andrew Smith and William Hughes in their characterization of Gothic as inherently linked to ecological critique (EcoGothic, 2013/2016, p. 4). Emily Horton's 21st-Century British Gothic (2024, p. 112) also offers helpful theoretical support, particularly in the chapter on "Wet Gothic," which explores ecofeminist horror in books such as Zoe Gilbert's *Folk*, Daisy Johnson's *Fen*, and Julie Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea*. Using examples of British horror fiction as case studies, this paper focuses on works such as Helen Oyeyemi's *White Is for Witching* and Marian Womack's *The Swimmers*, arguing that the Gothic genre foregrounds ecological agency and environmental retribution. The reading demonstrates how the sense of place, the uncanny landscape, and monstrous nature in Ross's epic poem work as crucial registers of climate anxiety, gendered environmental violence, and post-Anthropocene dread. In the final analysis, the article concludes that it is in ecocritical Gothic voices that the most potent cultural critiques and imaginative antibodies for the salient disaster of an ecologically despoiled world are found, rewriting the conventions of the Gothic itself.

Keywords: EcoGothic, eco-criticism, British horror fiction, Gothic, Wet Gothic, environmental anxiety

إعادة رؤى القوطي: المنظورات الإيكو-قوطية والإيكو-نقدية في أدب الرعب البريطاني في القرنين

العشرين والحادي والعشرين

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المستخلص

من خلال توظيف وجهات نظر نقدية بيئية في تحليل الكيفية التي يحيي بها الأدب البريطاني الرعب في القرن الحادي والعشرين التقاليد القوطية، يركز هذا البحث على كيفية تجسيد الكوارث البيئية، والقلق البيئي، والانفصال بين الإنسان والطبيعة في السرديات الحديثة، ويضع هذا البحث تحليله ضمن الحقل الناشئ المعروف بـ "القوطية البيئية" (EcoGothic)، مستنداً إلى النظرية التي طرحها أندرو سميث وويليام هيزوز في توصيفهما للقوطية باعتبارها مرتبطة بشكل جوهري بالنقد البيئي (EcoGothic)، (2016/2013، ص 4). كما تقدم إميلي هورتون في كتابها *القوطية البريطانية في القرن الحادي والعشرين* (2024، ص 112) دعماً نظرياً مهماً، خصوصاً في الفصل الخاص بـ "القوطية الرطبة" الذي يستكشف الرعب الإيكو-نسوي في كتب مثل *فولك* لزوي غيلبرت، و*فين لدايزي جونسون*، و*زوجاتنا تحت البحر* لجولي أرنفيلد.

وباستخدام أمثلة من الأدب البريطاني الرعب كدراسات حالة، يركز البحث على أعمال مثل *الأبيض للسر* لهيلين أويوييمي و*السباحون* لماريون وومك، مجادلًا بأن النوع القوطي يبرز الفاعلية البيئية وفكرة الانتقام البيئي، وتُظهر القراءة كيف أن الإحساس بالمكان، والمنظر الطبيعي الموحش، والطبيعة المتوحشة في الملحمة الشعرية لروس تعمل كمسجلات جوهريّة للقلق المناخي، والعنف البيئي الموجه جندرياً، ورعب ما بعد الإنسان.

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وفي التحليل الأخير، يخلص المقال إلى أن الأصوات القوطية البيئية النقدية هي التي تحتوي على أشد أشكال النقد الثقافي فاعلية، وتمثل بمثابة "أجسام مضادة تخيلية" في مواجهة الكارثة البارزة لعالم منهوب بيئيًا، وبذلك تعيد كتابة تقاليد القوطية نفسها.

الكلمات المفتاحية: القوطي البيئي، النقد البيئي، أدب الرعب البريطاني، القوطي، القوطي الرطب، القلق البيئي

1. Introduction

The Gothic has consistently served to embed fear, inheritance, and lost space, such as haunted houses, in darkening social/moral/psychological/cultural spaces (Punter & Hillard, 2022, p. 45; Briggs, 2020, p. 12; Hogle, 2021, p. 34). In the twenty-first century, British horror revisited the Gothic tradition by incorporating environmental concerns into its narratives. The new subgenre of EcoGothic places human fear within larger ecological frames, underscoring human agency in depredations of the environment and (according to the shorthand adopted here) in the "paybacks" resulting from the disruption of systems established by nature (Smith & Hughes, 2013/2016, p. 7). Gothic remains a powerful medium for addressing urgent global issues, such as habitat degradation, species extinction, and climate change, particularly when combined with ecological critique and reimagined by twenty-first-century writers.

Critical viewpoints on these tendencies are rebalanced by Emily Horton's 21st-Century British Gothic (Horton, 2024, p. 112), in part due to the encompassing phrase "Wet Gothic." Watery landscapes, such as rivers, marshes, wetlands, and coastlines, are valued in this Gothic horror concept as transitional areas where human and nonhuman actors interact. Ecological brutality and female subjugation are prevalent in wet Gothic stories, as seen in those written by Lagosian authors, demonstrating how the natural environment can be both a setting and a contributing factor in Gothic

horror (Horton, 2024, p. 115).

Modern British horror increasingly incorporates ecological themes; nonetheless, there is a lack of critical clarity regarding the specific adaptations of Gothic conventions to convey ecological agency, environmental punishment, and worries related to the Anthropocene. Recent criticism alludes to an emerging EcoGothic domain; nonetheless, there is a scarcity of studies that systematically examine how particular Gothic topoi (such as the haunted house, damp landscapes, and multispecies agency) function as ethical agents that reconfigure human–nonhuman relationships. This study seeks to fill that void by inquiring: How can twenty-first-century British horror novels utilize Gothic elements to depict ecological disaster and attribute agency to landscapes and nonhuman entities? The study aims to provide detailed analyses of selected texts to illustrate the aesthetic and ethical functions of EcoGothic tactics.

This paper will explore exemplary case studies from 21st-century British horror fiction, providing a detailed close reading of Julie Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022, p. 56), Daisy Johnson's *Fen* (2016, p. 89), Zoe Gilbert's *Folk* (2018, p. 134), Helen Oyeyemi's *White Is for Witching* (2009, p. 23), and Marian Womack's *The Swimmers* (2021, p. 77). By analyzing these texts, the study examines how modern authors utilize Gothic topoi—haunted locations, eerie landscapes, and an environment made monstrously human—to challenge anthropocentric worldviews and place

ecological disaster concerns at the center of their aesthetics.

In addition, like *EcoGothic*, *EcoGothic* literature continues traditional Gothic narratives in unsettling not merely the integrity of the human psyche or family unit, but also the relationships of mutual or opposing dependence between humans and other-than-human, animate, or inanimate entities (Smith & Hughes, 2013/2016, p. 9). These illustrations highlight the potential for Gothic fiction to address complex issues of ethics and ecology by bringing multispecies interactions, environmental injustice, and post-Anthropocene worries to the forefront (Punter & Hillard, 2022, p. 58).

From this position, the present study poses the question: how do contemporary British horror texts use the conventions of Gothic to represent ecological catastrophe? What does it mean for landscapes, climates, and nonhuman agencies to act as involved agents of horror and ethical consideration? According to the study, Gothic literature can confront the social, ethical, and psychological aspects of the Anthropocene and reshape the genre's themes and aesthetic bounds by situating contemporary writings within the framework of ecocritical methods (Horton, 2024, p. 118).

2 .Literature Review

2.1 EcoGothic Foundations

EcoGothic, edited by Smith and Hughes (2013/2016, p. 3), is a seminal work. It positions itself as the "first study of how the Gothic engages with ecocritical ideas" and marries ecological critique with Gothic tradition. Essays included in the collection explore themes such as space, materiality, the apocalypse, and artificial landscapes—from *The Wicker Man* (Hughes,

2013/2016, p. 211) to American road texts (Smith, 2013/2016, p. 156)—recent academic discourse positions *EcoGothic* at the confluence of Gothic studies and the environmental humanities. Smith and Hughes (2013/2016) are the first to utilize this frame, demonstrating that Gothic aesthetics can reveal systemic ecological brutality. Later work has added ecofeminist and post-Anthropocene interpretations to the mix (Punter & Hilliard, 2022; Horton, 2024). Eco-criticism offers conceptual tools—such as the agency of nonhuman actors, multispecies ethics, and environmental justice—that facilitate the interpretation of Gothic motifs not solely as atmospheric elements, but as ethical interventions. This literature thus promotes interpretations that regard landscapes, weather, and species as rhetorically influential, influencing narrative causality and moral accountability. By combining these different parts, *EcoGothic* readings can move beyond viewing nature as a metaphorical setting and begin to examine how the environment plays a role in the story's struggle.

2.2 Defining EcoGothic

Underlining the importance of fear and the natural world in *EcoGothic*, "forests, cabins, and strange lands work as spaces of dissolution and fear" (Punter and Hillard 2012, p. 48).

2.3 Contemporary British Gothic

Horton (2024, p. 110) explores eco-feminist horror through water-connected stories (*Our Wives Under the Sea, Fen, Folk*). Thus far, scenes such as ecological uncanny, patriarchal brutality, and spectral coastline demonstrate how the genre addresses the climate crisis. (Horton, 2024, p. 118).

2.4 Creativity and Cultural Reception

Reviews highlight the growing popularity of ecocritical horror in contemporary speculative literature, characterizing Marian Womack's *The Swimmers* as an "eco-gothic tale" (Womack, 2021, p. 14).

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This work uses a qualitative textual analysis that is ecocritical and informed by the Gothic. It emphasizes Gothic themes in ecological issues by utilizing Smith and Hughes' EcoGothic framework (Smith & Hughes, 2013/2016, p. 9). The genre is influenced by Horton's taxonomy (e.g., *Wet Gothic*) (Horton, 2024, p. 103). The study examines thematic symbolism, environmental representation, geographical representation, and narrative development through close readings of specific texts. Along with discussing the idea of environmental violence and the personification of nonhuman agents and the landscape, the page also explores how these Gothic techniques relate to anthropocentrism (Punter & Hillard, 2022, p. 51). For example, when viewed through an EcoGothic lens, Oyeyemi's *White Is for Witching* can be seen as a sign of cultural and ecological inheritance, with the "haunted house" serving as a symbol of this. The building's power is evident in how it can alter the protagonists' wants and fates. In Marian Womack's *The Swimmers*, the water also acts as an ethical actor, not just a backdrop, and it has an impact on people who get too close. These examples illustrate how the framework views material settings as agents whose interactions will be examined in the study.

4. Analysis and Discussion

4.1 Monstrous Women as Water: our sea-dwelling wives, FEN, and people

"Monstrous feminine encounters with watery

spaces" are identified by Horton (2024, p. 115) as the central theme of *Wet Gothic*, redefining water as liminal and transformational while also undermining anthropocentric hierarchies. In Julie Armfield's *Our Wives Under the Sea* (2022, p. 63), the sea is at once an intimate setting for erotic love and grief, and an alien, potentially dangerous force. The story links environmental instability to personal trauma, showing how the unrest of nature mirrors that of human beings. In contrast, the psychological and spiritual influences on characters affect the choices they make and how they see themselves (Mulvey-Roberts, 2021, p. 56; Luckhurst, 2022, p. 89). The landscape is a horror in and of itself, teeming with ecological and psychological disquiet. The island of Neverness serves as a site of ecological haunting, clan violence, and folklore in Zoe Gilbert's *Folk* (2018, p. 140), illustrating how Gothic interpretations can simultaneously reflect social and environmental concerns.

Throughout these texts, aqueous landscapes unsteady traditional human-centered narratives, giving the natural world an ethical and affective presence (Smith & Hughes, 2013/2016, p. 12).

4.2 Haunting House as Ecological Allegory: *White Is for Witching*

Summary of the Gothic House: The Gothic house is a descendant of the traditional castle, serving as both a psychological and ecological agent in the works of Oyeyemi and Lovecraft. A house alive not just with family trauma but also with environmental toxicity and historical injustice, it imprisons the characters as well as the audience in its inevitability. The narrative illustrates how the effects of more extensive ecological and cultural harm can be observed even in a house, which is typically regarded as a private and secure

environment (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 31). The Gothic home thus represents the connection between human agency and the ecology of disaster, linking the destruction of nature and location to human moral responsibility (Punter & Hillard, 2022, p. 51). In *White Is for Witching*, the Chelsea mansion is described not only as a place where family trauma occurs but also as an ecological subject that influences how characters behave. For instance, the narrative often connects the house's "taste" and "smell" to the main character's physical condition, suggesting that the house and the person are connected materially. This reciprocity serves an ecocritical function: the house establishes a moral geography wherein human sins and entrenched biases result in environmental degradation. Reading the house as an ecological actor reveals the role of residential spaces in larger systems of destruction and hereditary violence.

4.3 Gothic Multispecies: The Swimmers

By depicting nonhuman beings and ecosystems as active agents of horror, *The Swimmers* (2021, p. 80) expands EcoGothic concerns to encompass interactions across several species. The novel portrays human intrusion into natural systems as a frightening and tense situation, demonstrating the Gothic potential of environmental destruction. Water becomes a story, as well as a moral force that organizes human experience and produces ethical outcomes (Womack 2021, p. 84). Womack's Gothic is an exemplary model of this post-Anthropocene sensibility. This horror stems not only from human behavior but also from the effects of that behavior on nonhuman actors and environments (Smith & Hughes, 2013/2016, p. 21). In Womack's *The Swimmers*, water serves as an ethical force, influencing people's intentions through sound, touch, and narrative. The novel's

repeated images of "cold tides" and the community's dread ceremonial responses show how the sea regulates: it punishes and disciplines when people fail to keep their boundaries. From an EcoGothic standpoint, the sea's ability to reshape social dynamics—such as gender roles, collective guilt, and memory—demonstrates nonhuman agency acting as a moral arbiter rather than a passive backdrop. These scenes support the paper's argument that Gothic elements shift agency from a solely anthropocentric focus.

4.4 Eco-Anxiety and Gothic Landscapes

Throughout these, the landscape—whether marshy and aquatic or controlled by sentient structures—serves as a vehicle for ecological critique and Gothicism. Gothic surroundings serve as emotive, ethical spaces that transform human fears into an engagement with the consequences of environmental destruction, as Punter and Hillard (2022, p. 50) emphasize. In recent British horror, such locations are not passive settings but actively participate in narrative tension, characterization, and moral reflection (Horton, 2024, p. 118). The uncanny dimensions of such landscapes — ghostly, shifting, and morally charged — provide a resource for writers to explore the psychological aspects of climate anxiety, suggesting what the Gothic might offer in understanding or engaging with pressing ecological issues.

4.5 Gothic as Social and Ethical Critique

The texts considered together demonstrate how twenty-first-century EcoGothic fiction combines a social indictment with an environmental critique. Drawing on both Gothic tropes and ecocritical consciousness, writers also expose patriarchal violence, race, injustice, and ecological despoliation (Smith & Hughes, 2013/2016, p. 15).

For instance, the interaction of humans with the environment in "Fen" or "Our Wives Under the Sea" is employed to stage the moral consequences of humans entangling themselves in natural systems. White Is for Witching also meditates on the correspondences between domestic trauma and ecological devastation, emerging as one of these Gothic fantasies of both social and ecological responsibility (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 35).

In general, this extended Analysis reflects that in contemporary British horror fiction, Gothic conventions are employed to reinvent human and nonhuman relationships with the environment. This 'literary projection' enables readers to engage with Anthropocene concerns and more effectively reframe human ethics within ecological figurations, rendering landscapes, water, and inhabited spaces morally and affectively agentic (Horton, 2024, p. 123).

5 .Conclusion and Future Research

In this paper, I show how British horror literature of the twenty-first century 'eco-renews' the Gothic tradition by introducing ecocritical viewpoints and emphasizing the roles of landscape, nonhuman beings, and ecological violence. These pieces challenge conventional notions of horror by examining humanity's role in ecological violence, as well as the human-centered terror that results. Close reading of focus texts - including *Our Wives Under the Sea* (Armfield, 2022/2022, p. 63), *Fen* (Johnson, 2016/2016, p. 92), *Folk* (Gilbert, 2018/2018, p. 140), *White Is for Witching* (Oyeyemi, 2009, p. 31), and *The Swimmers* (Womack, 2021, p. 84) - demonstrates the ways in which authors deploy Gothic devices such as haunted spaces, monstrous nature, and uncanny atmospheres to foreground urgent ecological issues. By portraying nature as both a menace and

a moral agent, these narratives create a literary space for ecological ethics, gendered forms of environmental violence, and the psychology of climate anxiety.

This study also highlights the adaptation of the Gothic in a world facing environmental emergencies. Trans-species contact, climatic trauma, and post-Anthropocene fears are all topics covered in 21st-century EcoGothic fiction, whereas early Gothic novels frequently concentrated on terror, inheritance, and the uncanny in relation to humans (Smith & Hughes, 2013/2016, p. 7; Horton, 2024, p. 115). This transformation announces not just an alteration in thematic preoccupations, but a more widely diffused cultural concern with ecological ethics and with the responsibility —and/or capability — of literature to influence environmental awareness.

5.1 Future Research Directions

Future work may significantly enrich the study of EcoGothic fiction along multiple lines. First, in keeping with the Gothic tradition, future scholars can investigate further subgenres, such as Technogothic, Brexit Gothic, or Pandemic Gothic, and how they respond to contemporary social, political, and environmental challenges (Horton, 2024, p. 123). Comparative work between British EcoGothic and global Gothic traditions might yield cross-cultural narratives for representing ecological trauma and post-human anxieties.

Second, it might be worthwhile to consider multidisciplinary methods that blend media studies and eco-criticism to examine how Gothic stories might be presented in movies, virtual reality, or interactive storytelling and how these horror-inspired evocations can influence and refocus participants' perspectives on environmental issues (Smith & Hughes, 2013/2016, p. 156).

Third, more empirical studies might investigate how readers respond to EcoGothic literature and whether this combination of environmental criticism and terror evokes moral, emotional, or cognitive responses. Literary pedagogy, environmental humanities, and comprehending how fiction promotes ecological consciousness might all benefit from this research.

Lastly, a longitudinal study of emergent authors and tendencies could reveal how EcoGothic develops in response to increasing climate crises, injustices, and technological interferences in human-nature relationships. In making ecology narrative agency the heart of 21st-century Gothic horror, artifice ceases to exist as a means of introducing terror; instead, it represents it. Instead, it becomes a method of engaging the Gothic in ethical and engaged ways. Together, these lines of research also provide exciting opportunities for us to engage with Gothic literature's ongoing vitality and adaptability as we confront the existential threat of the human epoch.

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