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GOTHIC NARRATIVE 1970-2012

Paulina Palmer



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Queering  
Contemporary  
Gothic Narrative  
1970–2012

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*for the queer community in Cambridge*

## PREFACE

This book develops my interest in the intersection between Gothic and different queer sexualities and genders in contemporary fiction that I first explored in my earlier publication *Lesbian Gothic: Transgressive Fictions* (1999). Having noticed the popularity that motifs with Gothic associations, such as spectrality, the vampire and the witch, were enjoying in contemporary lesbian feminist novels and story collections and that, rather than being employed in a misogynistic or lesbophobic way as had occurred in earlier periods, they were utilised affirmatively, in the manner of a form of counter-discourse, to represent and explore lesbian sexuality, I started researching the roles they play in these texts. My research was assisted by the stimulating intellectual environment furnished by the English Department at the University of Warwick, where I taught for a number of years. I was also fortunate, while writing the book, to enjoy access to several feminist and LGBT bookshops such as Sister Write, Silver Moon and Gay's the Word in London, Libertas in York and Out in Brighton that, on account of the exorbitant increase in rents in city centres and other reasons, have now sadly folded.

On retiring from Warwick University, I taught for several years as a sessional lecturer for the MA in Gender and Sexuality at Birkbeck College, University of London. It was while I was teaching there that I became aware of the important role that the concept of the uncanny, as defined by Sigmund Freud and other theorists, plays in queer theoretical discourse and fiction. My research in this area culminated in the publication of *The Queer Uncanny: New Perspectives on the Gothic* in 2012.

With reference to this book, though I refer on occasion to the uncanny, I return in general to my earlier interest in motifs and narrative structures that are distinctively Gothic. As in *The Queer Uncanny*, I discuss works of fiction focusing on different queer sexualities and genders. They include lesbianism, homosexuality, transsexuality and – a topic reference to which has entered fiction relatively recently – intersex.

While writing the book, I've had access to several lively intellectual environments. Discussions that I have held with students while teaching workshops at the City Lit in London have contributed to its production, as has the exchange of ideas at the conferences run by the Contemporary Women Writers' Association and the International Gothic Association. My contribution to the work of Encompass, a Cambridge-based organisation that aims to promote a better quality of life for LGBTQ people in the Cambridge and surrounding areas, has also influenced the book. I'm grateful to Xavier Aldana Reyes, Ann Burgess, Grant Chambers, Patricia Duncker, Ardel Haefele-Thomas, Ruth Heholt, Emma Parker, Maria Romero Ruiz, Robin White, Gina Wisker and other friends and colleagues for their encouragement with writing it. I'm especially indebted to Terry Ryman for his support in this respect.

Although the majority of bookshops cited above are no longer available, Gays the Word is thankfully still flourishing. In fact I discovered some of the novels that I discuss in this study, including Meg Kingston's *Chrystal Heart* and Michelle Paver's *Dark Matter*, on the shelves there. I am grateful to the staff for alerting me to them and taking an interest in my writing.



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## Introduction: Queering Contemporary Gothic

### QUEERING CONTEMPORARY GOTHIC

Alice Nutter, the protagonist of Jeanette Winterson's *The Daylight Gate* that is a contemporary work of queer Gothic discussed in this study that re-casts events relating to the witch trials that took place in Lancashire in 1612, is portrayed living near Pendle Forest. The location is regarded by the locals as a haunted place where the spirits of the dead allegedly roam and men are transformed into hares. Alice is represented as queer both in terms of her sexuality and the role of social outsider to which the community relegates her. Though born in Pendle, on the death of her husband she moved to London where she assisted Dr Dee, astrologer to Queen Elizabeth, in his experiments to create the elixir of life. While acquiring from him an interest in scientific discourses, associated in the period with magic, she fell in love with Elizabeth Southern, another of his assistants, and lived with her for several years. When the relationship with Elizabeth Southern ended she became involved in an illicit romantic relationship with the Roman Catholic Christopher Southworth. In refusing to re-marry after her husband's death and expressing what today we would call her 'bisexuality', Alice challenges both heterosexual conventions and the view, implicit in the twentieth-century concept of identity categories, that the individual's sexuality is defined in terms of the gender of his partner.<sup>1</sup> In attempting to protect a group of vagrant women who are

accused of witchcraft, she lays herself open to a similar charge. Her decision to shelter Southworth, who is accused of being involved in the Gunpowder Plot, in her home hastens her downfall. She finds herself trapped in the cultural and religious contradictions of the period for, as she fatalistically tells her accusers, ‘If you cannot try me as a witch, you’ll charge me as papist.’<sup>2</sup>

I have opened my study of the queering of contemporary Gothic with reference to Winterson’s *The Daylight Gate* since, as well creating a vivid representation of an oppressive episode from early seventeenth-century history, it introduces the reader to some of the themes and narrative strategies that typify fiction of this kind, ones that we shall encounter again in the novels and stories discussed in the following chapters. Teasing out the connections between ‘Gothic’ and ‘queer’, Winterson employs a fictional genre familiar to readers for its focus on transgressive sexuality and its association, as Fred Botting describes, with ‘liminality’ and ‘ghosts of the mind’,<sup>3</sup> to recount the story of a female protagonist whose behaviour and sexual preferences are regarded by society as disruptive. As is frequently the case in queer Gothic, Winterson’s treatment of the tension between fantasy and realism, the uncanny dimension of existence and the material world, metaphorically evokes the tension between queer and hetero-normative perspectives. Whereas queer sexuality is associated in the novel with a secret realm of magic and illicit erotic encounters, heteronormativity is described in terms of the everyday reality of family life and church attendance. The interrogation of the concept of ‘the real’, in which Winterson engages, and the ambiguities and questions that it provokes, connect queer sexuality to the illicit and the taboo. The reader is uncertain whether the erotic encounter that Alice experiences with Elizabeth in the final chapters of the novel and the transformation of Southworth into a hare while seeking to escape his pursuers that she thinks she sees really take place or whether we should interpret them as examples of what Steven Bruhm terms “magical” animism,<sup>4</sup> in which emotions of fear or excitement deceive the individual into believing that his fantasies assume material form. Alice herself is unsure whether these events actually occur or not, and, watching them through her eyes, we share her confusion. Ambiguities of this kind are, of course, integral to the operations of the uncanny and the Gothic novels and stories depicting them. It is the ability of Gothic to interrogate the reader’s preconceptions about reality and expose the unfamiliar underlying the mundane that, as Rosemary Jackson explains, makes it well suited to treating topics conventionally

branded as taboo.<sup>5</sup> Topics of this kind include different forms of queer sexuality for, as Freud, citing Schelling, explains, ‘The *unheimlich* is the name for everything that [according to social convention] ought to have remained . . . secret and hidden but has come to light.’<sup>6</sup> The Gothic genre, as *The Daylight Gate* illustrates, is admirably suited to representing their relegation to the realm of the secret and taboo and – as illustrated by the public interrogation to which Alice is subjected at her trial – their eventual disclosure.

Winterson’s *The Daylight Gate*, as well as illustrating the ability of queer Gothic to explore the interrelation and tension between queer and hetero-normative sexualities, furnishes an insight into some of the themes and motifs that fiction of this kind prioritises. They include, in addition to sexualities that tend to be regarded as deviant, the vilification of certain sections of society as monstrous, a topic illustrated in the novel by the demonising of Roman Catholics and the branding of women who exist on the margins of society and reject sexual convention as witches. The grotesque body, another motif frequently employed in Gothic, is also to the fore. It is exemplified on a physical plane by the injured body of Christopher Southworth tortured by the Protestant authorities and, on a supernatural, by the transformation from human to animal that some of the characters enact or fantasise. References to mysterious rural and urban locations also feature in the novel. They are exemplified both by Pendle Forest, described in terms of its treacherous mists and its association with magic, and Dr Dee’s laboratory in London where he and his assistants attempt to discover the elixir. In addition, the progress of the narrative is interrupted on occasion by incidents of spectral visitation, as is illustrated by Alice’s unexpected meeting with Dr Dee when, prior to her arrest, his ghost appears to warn her of the dangers that beset her. Topics such as these, as well as being significant to Winterson’s text, give us a foretaste of their recurrence in the other novels and stories discussed in the chapters below where they assume different manifestations.

Winterson’s decision to commemorate a group of women hanged for witchcraft in seventeenth-century Lancaster by re-creating their lives and experiences in a work of Gothic agrees, it is interesting to note, with the emphasis that present-day critics and historians place on the importance of investigating the oppressive, as well as the positive, aspects of queer history. Heather Love, defending her ‘decision to look on the dark side’, criticises the tendency of ‘contemporary critics to describe the encounter with the past in idealising terms’.<sup>7</sup> She argues that, instead of disavowing the difficulties

that queer people living in earlier centuries experienced and constructing ‘a positive genealogy of queer identity’ and ‘female experience’ (p. 32), as the 1970s lesbian and gay liberation movements, with their emphasis on the celebration of gay pride, tended to do, we need to acknowledge the oppressive aspects of their lives. The historiographer Carolyn Dinshaw, describing her investigation into lives of women in medieval history as motivated ‘by a queer historical impulse, an impulse toward making connections across time’,<sup>8</sup> describes the aim of her research as the building of an imagined community of the marginal. It is, she admits, necessarily imagined since, due to the fact that the majority of women living in earlier eras lacked literacy skills and could not record their experiences, the researcher has little relevant material on which to draw. Winterson adopts an approach of a similar kind to the histories of the women and queer individuals that she depicts. In representing the persecution of a group of seventeenth-century women who, on account of their unorthodox lifestyles and the fact that their sexualities conflict with hetero-patriarchal conventions, were eventually imprisoned and executed, she foregrounds the dark side of the past and creates a similar community of the marginal. The emphasis that Love and Dinshaw place on the need for writers and historians to address the oppressive aspects of queer history is, as we shall see, also relevant to some of the other works of contemporary queer Gothic discussed later.

### FICTION, GOTHIC MOTIFS, AND QUEER SEXUALITIES AND GENDERS

*The Daylight Gate*, characterised by Winterson’s interrogation of ‘the real’ and her representation of the persecution of a group of women living in the seventeenth-century who were suspected of practising witchcraft, illustrates, of course, only one of the forms that contemporary queer Gothic fiction takes. There are also numerous others. I have selected the novels I discuss with the aim of illustrating its versatility in terms of its treatment of sexuality and gender, as well as its utilisation of Gothic motifs and narrative strategies.

As we might expect from Freud’s reference to the individual’s experiencing of an uncanny event, such as seeing a ghost, as furnishing a metaphor for the return of his repressed desires and fears,<sup>9</sup> several of the novels examined in the chapters here focus on the topic of spectral visitation. Contemporary writers frequently employ the ghost story as a vehicle to explore queer history and the influence it exerts on the present. Whereas

Steve Berman in *Vintage: A Ghost Story* represents his teenage narrator's encounter with a ghost giving him an insight into male homosexual life in the 1950s and indirectly helping him to clarify his own desires and needs, Louise Tondeur in *The Water's Edge* employs the haunted house narrative to explore family history, elucidating the interplay between heterosexual and lesbian sexualities that it can reveal. Jim Grimsley's version of the haunted house differs radically from the one that Tondeur constructs. Setting it in South Carolina, he depicts the different houses in which the family live as haunted by the father's acts of domestic violence, as seen from the viewpoint of his young son Danny. Also of interest in Grimsley's narrative are the compensatory fantasies of the imaginary figure of 'the River Man' that Danny conjures up, his androgynous persona inspired by the river that runs near his home.

Reference to the Gothic monster and the hybridity and body horror associated with the figure are also to the fore in contemporary queer Gothic fiction. Writers utilise them to represent the way in which society projects on to the homosexual and the transgender individual an image of monstrosity and the grotesque. Peter Ackroyd treats the topic in *The Case Book of Victor Frankenstein*, a metafictional re-working of Mary Shelley's famous novel notable for its innovative re-casting. The shape-shifting abilities that the grotesque figures, such as Richard Marsh's *The Beetle* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, who appear in Victorian Gothic display, also furnish writers with a vehicle for queer representation. Kathleen Winter employs them to describe her eponymous intersex narrator Annabel's view of the physical changes that she unexpectedly finds her body undergoing when she reaches puberty, and to represent the ridicule and monsterisation she encounters when she decides to transition.

Reference to different forms of shape-shifting and their uncanny associations also feature, as the reader might expect, in Gary Bowen's *The Diary of a Vampire*. As well as exploiting the sexual potential of the vampire narrative, Bowen employs vampiric existence to metaphorically represent the queer individual's anxieties about coming out and the revelation of his sexuality it will involve. Susan Swan, in addition, employs the Gothic motifs of the double and magical transformation to represent her teenage narrator's incredulous response to the changes in embodiment from female to male that she sees her transsexual friend Paulie unexpectedly enact by means of body movement and gender performance. The queer view of gender as a discursive production dependent on performance and cultural fantasy also informs other works of fiction discussed below.

Geographical locations, as well as contributing significantly to Gothic fiction, are also relevant, as Judith Halberstam argues, to queer people's existence and experience.<sup>10</sup> Although, as she observes, theorists and sociologists have focused considerable attention on documenting the role that urban and metropolitan locations play in the life of the queer community, they have until recently paid little attention to rural areas. However, writers of queer Gothic fiction, in contrast, frequently incorporate reference to them in their texts. Whereas Winterson in *The Daylight Gate* employs Pendle Forest as an appropriately eerie context for her female characters' unorthodox lifestyles, Michelle Paver locates her ghost story *Dark Matter* in the snow-bound landscape of the Arctic.

The novels selected for analysis in this study, in addition to employing a variety of Gothic fictional forms and motifs, differ significantly in the approach towards them they adopt. Whereas Berman in *Vintage: A Ghost Story* focuses his narrative on his protagonist's encounter with a ghost, other writers, such as Alan Hollinghurst in *The Folding Star*, employ spectral references metaphorically to represent queer erotic fantasy. Still others, such as Winterson and Paver, treat the supernatural ambiguously, encouraging the reader to interrogate the paranormal events that the protagonist or narrator thinks that he experiences and queries if they are real or imagined.

As well as being of interest in literary and stylistic terms, the works of fiction discussed in the following chapters introduce the reader to a wide range of topics and experiences relevant to lesbian, male gay, bisexual and transgender people. Topics they address include: Victorian London as the location of lesbian relationships and spiritualist practices, as represented in Sarah Waters' *Affinity*; the gay man's experience of city life, described by Hollinghurst in *The Folding Star*; and the crises that the AIDS epidemic provoked in British and US cities in the 1980s, depicted by Vincent Brome in *Love in the Plague*. Kathleen Winter's *Annabel* is especially innovative in this respect since the theme of intersex, on which it focuses, seldom receives fictional treatment.

The novels and stories discussed, as well as differing in the sexualities and genders on which they focus and the Gothic strategies and motifs they employ, also vary in date of publication ranging from Swan's *The Wives of Bath* published in 1993 to Meg Kingston's *Chrystal Heart* in 2013. They also differ in terms of the fame of the writers who have produced them. Whereas the names of Waters and Ackroyd will no doubt be familiar to readers, other writers such as Kingston, Berman and Winter may be less well known.

Also of interest are the different theoretical perspectives that writers employ in representing the sexualities and genders on which they focus. Do they create a predominantly queer approach that depicts identity as provisional and contingent and foregrounds the mobility of sexuality and the re-signifiable nature of gender or do they write predominantly in terms of identity categories, echoing in this respect the perspectives of the lesbian and gay liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s? The two approaches are, in fact, not mutually exclusive. As Michael Warner explains:

Queer politics has not just replaced older modes of lesbian and gay identity: it has come to exist alongside those older modes, opening up new possibilities and problems whose relation to more familiar problems is not always clear. Queer activists are also lesbians and gays in other contexts – as for example when leverage can be gained through bourgeois propriety... or through minority-rights discourse.<sup>11</sup>

Judith Butler, though having played an instrumental role in initiating the growth of queer theory, also supports the use of identity categories when the situation and context require. Though referring to them ambivalently as a ‘necessary error of identity’,<sup>12</sup> she nonetheless acknowledges their importance as tools for challenging sexism and homophobia. As she argues,

It remains politically necessary to lay claim to the identificatory terms ‘women’, ‘queer’, ‘gay’ and ‘lesbian’, precisely because of the way these terms, as it were, lay claim on us prior to our full knowing... in order to refute homophobic deployment of the terms in law, public policy, on the street, in ‘private’ life. (p. 229)

The novels discussed vary considerably in the approach to sexuality and gender they employ. In addition, the polysemous nature of fiction and its dialogic structure frequently result in them avoiding articulating their ideological perspective explicitly and render their perspective on sexuality and gender to a degree ambiguous. The term ‘queer’ is, of course, multifaceted in significance and can assume different meanings. Although it is generally employed in academic discourse in accord with the theoretical perspectives of Butler and Eve Sedgwick to foreground the instability of the categories ‘hetero’ and ‘homo’, to critique the regulatory nature of identity categories and to foreground sexual mobility, it can alternatively be employed as a shorthand term for ‘lesbian’, ‘gay’ and ‘trans’.<sup>13</sup> I use it in a similarly versatile way, with the context of the text indicating its significance.



## QUEER GOTHIC AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

Before turning to the discussion of the novels referred to above and others that feature in this study, I need to focus on another topic that is significant to it. This is the development of the form of fiction known today as ‘queer Gothic’ and the contribution that critics and theorists writing in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have made to it.

Comments voiced by William Hughes and Andrew Smith in the introduction to *Queering the Gothic*, a collection published in 2009 that has helped to establish the importance of fiction of this kind, are pertinent here. Drawing attention to the complex implications of the term ‘queer Gothic’, they describe Gothic narratives as ‘queer’ not only in their frequent reference to non-normative sexualities and genders but also, more generally, in foregrounding ‘a systematic stylistic deviance from perceived norms’.<sup>14</sup> They alert attention in addition to the fact that, while reference to homoerotic themes and episodes, as illustrated by Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk: A Romance* (1796) and Ann Radcliffe’s *The Italian* (1797), has characterised Gothic fiction since its advent in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, queer Gothic as a specific literary form and the critical texts that analyse and define it have developed relatively recently. They emerged in the climate of debate promoted by the 1970s and 1980s lesbian feminist and gay liberation movements exemplified by the theoretical writing of theorists such as Adrienne Rich and Alan Sinfield, and the focus on queer perspectives on sexuality and gender that appeared subsequently in the late-1980s and 1990s in the work of Sedgwick, Butler and Diana Fuss. These movements and political trends, by promoting an interest in sexual politics and post-modern approaches to literature, have created a fertile ground for the critical re-evaluation of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and the references to queer sexuality and gender it introduces. They have also, of course, helped to promote the production of contemporary queer Gothic fiction.

Sedgwick’s writing, though referring chiefly to male gay sexuality and making little reference to lesbianism, has been influential in furnishing a theoretical frame for the analysis of Gothic, as well as encouraging the recognition of the genre’s importance as a vehicle for representing queer sexuality. After discussing a number of texts produced in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, she concludes that ‘The Gothic was the first novelistic form in England to have close, relatively visible links to male homosexuality at a time when styles of homosexuality, and even its

visibility and distinctiveness, were markers of division between classes as much as between genders'.<sup>15</sup> She also pioneered the concept of paranoid Gothic, employing it with reference to James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* to investigate the emotionally fraught situation of two men entrapped in a relationship in which feelings of aversion and antagonism conflict with homoerotic desire. As she observes, 'The Gothic novel chrystallized for English audiences the terms of a dialectic between homosexuality and homophobia, in which homophobia appeared thematically in paranoid plots'.<sup>16</sup>

The critical writing of George E. Haggerty and the contribution it has made to the development of queer Gothic also merit reference. William Veeder's homoerotic reading of Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, as well as being developed by Elaine Showalter with reference to nineteenth-century medical science, is augmented by Haggerty in the Foucauldian context of the tension between behaviour/identity in the analysis of homosexuality.<sup>17</sup> Combining a psychoanalytic reading of fiction with reference to the development of different queer sexualities, Haggerty also usefully demonstrates that the narratives produced by Walpole, Radcliffe and Lewis in the eighteenth century furnished 'a testing ground for many unauthorized genders and sexualities'<sup>18</sup> that, though predating the sexual codification that the sexologists introduced, nonetheless prepared the ground for it. The wide-ranging nature of Haggerty's research interests is illustrated by a recently published essay in which he evaluates recent developments in queer historiography.<sup>19</sup> Some of the observations he makes in it are in fact relevant, as I indicate in the following chapters, to the treatment of history in contemporary queer Gothic fiction.

With reference to transgender and transvestism, although their representation in the Gothic fiction produced in earlier centuries has taken some time to receive critical attention, they are now arousing interest. William D. Brewer discusses the sexual and psychological complexities of transgender in Lewis's *The Monk*,<sup>20</sup> while Kelly Hurley examines the sex changes that the figure of the eponymous beetle undergoes in Richard Marsh's novel.<sup>21</sup> I comment on the representation of female same-sex erotic attachments and gender performativity in Antonia White's *Frost in May* and, with reference to contemporary fiction, the treatment of transsexuality and transgender in Stella Duffy's *Beneath the Blonde* and Patrick McGrath's *Dr. Haggard's Disease*.<sup>22</sup>

As is indicated by the number of different discourses (literary, historical, sexual and psychoanalytic) to which the critics and theorists cited above refer, the critical study of queer Gothic tends to be interdisciplinary in nature, incorporating a variety of different intellectual strands. One particular strand that, since it has played an important role in its development features in some of the contemporary novels discussed below, merits discussion here is 'Female Gothic'. As its name suggests, it refers to female-authored works of fiction and their treatment of the problematics of femininity in phallogentric culture. Critical interest in 'Female Gothic' and the lesbian component that it includes has stemmed partly from the critical intervention that Claire Kahane made in 1985. In a groundbreaking essay developing ideas proposed by Ellen Moers,<sup>23</sup> Kahane challenged the way in which, despite the major contribution that women writers have made to the production of Gothic, Gothic critical studies tended to be dominated in the 1980s by both a focus on male-authored texts and a phallogentric viewpoint. She also drew attention to the fact that, although the majority of critical readings of Gothic, predictably ones produced by men, focus on male writers and characters and 'attribute the terror which the Gothic by definition arouses to the motif of the incest within an oedipal plot', frequently underlying the representation of paternal authority in the text are references to the maternal and 'the problematics of femininity that the heroine must confront'.<sup>24</sup> The latter topic, as Kahane describes, is symbolically represented in several texts by the spectral apparition of the heroine's mother. After discussing in the essay the treatment of mother and daughter attachments in the fiction of Ann Radcliffe, Kahane continues to explore Shirley Jackson's representation of female relationships, lesbian as well as maternal, in *The Haunting of Hill House*. Critics writing subsequently, influenced by the agenda of the lesbian feminist movement, continued Moers and Kahane's 'Female Gothic' project by analysing the treatment of lesbian sexuality in Gothic fiction and film. Bonnie Zimmerman pioneered the discussion of the cinematic representation of the lesbian vampire,<sup>25</sup> while Terry Castle alerts attention to the way in which nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century writers, by portraying the figure of the lesbian in spectral imagery, effectively negated her corporeality and sexuality.<sup>26</sup> As a result of these and other critical and theoretical interventions, the importance of Gothic motifs in female-authored texts and the significant role that female and lesbian sexualities play in Gothic fiction by both men and women are increasingly achieving recognition. The topic of Female Gothic and the

debates it has generated are re-evaluated by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith in the publication *The Female Gothic: New Directions*.

With reference to the present-day critical reception of Gothic fiction with a homosexual, lesbian or trans content, it has of course taken a number of years for works of this kind to receive attention and the topics they treat to be regarded as suitable material for academic and scholarly analysis. Homophobic attitudes, on occasion endorsed by the government, have helped contribute to this neglect, inhibiting the reception and discussion of queer fiction in colleges and, more especially, schools. Section 28,<sup>27</sup> instituted by the Conservative government in 1988, as well as denigrating lesbian families by describing them as ‘pretended’, prohibited local authorities from ‘promoting’ homosexuality by devoting funding to educational materials or cultural events with a queer focus. The Section also had the effect of suppressing or limiting the discussion of queer sexuality and gender and the purchasing of texts focusing on them in state-funded schools and colleges, as well as preventing the funding of LGBTQ drama and literary festivals. People such as myself, who were involved in the running of lesbian phone help-lines, queer social groups or arts events that relied on council funding, remember the oppressive effects that the Section had on these organisations and activities, as well as its intimidatory effect on the queer community. Indications exist, however, that, with the repealing of the Section in 2003 and introduction of civil partnerships and marriage, attitudes are now changing. The interest that the topic of queer Gothic is arousing in academia is illustrated by the fact that several major collections of critical essays published in the past fifteen years, as well as studies by individual writers, either intersperse reference to queer topics throughout or include individual chapters focusing on them.<sup>28</sup> However, despite the increasing interest in fictional representations of queer sexuality in academia and society in general, novels and stories with a queer sexual focus continue to be marginalised, as is illustrated by the lack of reviews they receive in mainstream journals and newspapers. This, of course, is unsurprising considering the erasure and neglect that queer culture has habitually experienced. Calvin Thomas refers with a justifiable sense of anger to,

the thousands of pages of straight literature, the countless reels of mainstream film and hours of compulsorily heterosexual television, that lesbians and gays have suffered through for years without finding any such specific and positive trace of recognition but only the dominant culture’s silence, hatred and derision.<sup>29</sup>

Older members of the queer community, though no doubt many younger ones as well, will share Thomas's sense of indignation and endorse his spirited protest.

While the recognition that queer Gothic fiction is now receiving in academia is of course to be welcomed, certain features of its critical treatment, as critics themselves acknowledge, can be problematic. E.L. McCallum, for example, expresses the fear that the critical analysis of fictional representations of queer sexualities and genders in a Gothic context, since it is enclosed within the parameters of a genre that, though in certain respects transgressive, nonetheless has conservative features, may obscure their radical import.<sup>30</sup> Other critics refer to problems relating to the concept 'queer' itself. Iain Morland, for example, criticises what he regards as the concept's increasingly narrow academic connotations and lack of political vigour.<sup>31</sup> Problems also emerge from the limitations that essays discussing works of contemporary queer Gothic, on occasion, display. Whereas critics analysing Victorian novels with a homosexual or homoerotic component, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde* and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, frequently contextualise them by referring to relevant sexual-political events that occurred in the period of their production such as the Oscar Wilde trials, the institution of the closet or the harshness of the sodomy laws,<sup>32</sup> critics discussing present-day novels with a queer content seldom refer to their sexual-political context. Topics that might merit reference in this respect include the emergence of the lesbian and gay liberation movements in the UK and the USA in the 1970s, the AIDS crisis of the 1980s, the advent of the queer movement and the theoretical perspectives associated with it in the 1980s and 1990s, and, of course, the recent introduction of civil partnerships and marriage. Other problems also exist. In contextualising the works of fiction they discuss, critics sometimes mistakenly imply that the years from the 1970s to the present-day in the UK and USA have taken the form of an uninterrupted upward flow of increasing sexual tolerance and social acceptance. This, of course, is by no means the case. They included periods of severe homophobic backlash against the achievements of the lesbian and gay liberation movements, as is illustrated by the oppressive response that the right-wing governments that achieved power in the USA and UK in the 1980s evinced towards people with AIDS. Section 28 was in fact instituted in this era. In addition, any increase in sexual tolerance that has occurred over the years has not happened by chance, as critics sometimes imply. On the contrary, it has been achieved by means of human agency — by struggles waged by queer people and their supporters, frequently at the cost of family divisions, loss of jobs and promotion opportunities.