

**American Horror Story**  
**A final year module to be taught in English or American Studies**  
**Hannah Lauren Murray, University of Nottingham**

Why do Americans like to scare themselves? This module asks this question in covering the development and multiple manifestations of the horror genre in America. Engaging with work from 1790s to 2010s, this module examines historical and cultural issues represented in American horror including the frontier, slavery, scientific developments, and American foreign policy. Furthermore, this course asks how and why these issues are filtered through horror's distinct stylistic aspects.

This course will use primary literary, cinematic and televisual texts in synthesis with historical context and literary and film theory. Kristeva's work on abjection helps us to consider the visceral effect of horror and our dual desire to both look at and hide from the disgusting. Scarry and Bakhtin's theories on the body illuminate reading the violated or fantastical body as a site of comic celebration or of painful creative possibility. Both Poe and Lovecraft's essays on writing alert us to the aesthetic considerations and tropes of genre fiction. Goddu's *Gothic America* (1997) asks us to consider the legacy of settler colonialism, slavery and class oppression on American literature, which enables us to expand the horror genre to include authors such as Harding Davis, Melville and Jacobs.

This course moves chronologically but the end of the module includes texts that reference the nineteenth century (Palahniuk, *American Horror Story*), to reveal the legacy of Poe's sensationalism and the effects of America's 'nightmare of history' (Goddu) on its national psyche.

### **Learning Aims**

This course builds on students' prior knowledge of social issues in and aesthetic aspects of American culture from 1790s onwards. It will encourage students to apply historical context and critical theory to individual works of literature, film or TV in order to develop an understanding of horror's cultural and aesthetic functions and its distinct generic qualities.

### **Learning Outcomes**

At the end of the module students will be able to apply different critical approaches to American horror and explain how historical and cultural factors influence the production and reception of these texts. In their written work they will demonstrate a synthesis of historical material, critical scholarship and primary texts and present clear, coherent and independent arguments.

### **Teaching**

Students meet for one hour-long lecture per week for eleven weeks and one hour-long seminar per week for ten of those weeks. There are two hour-long workshops on the written assessments. For three weeks there are optional screenings of the cinematic and televisual texts.

### **Assessment**

Participation is assessed on the student's contribution to seminar discussion (10%). During the course of the module, students are expected to present once on a short piece of scholarship, giving a summary and providing their response. Selected works of secondary criticism will be made available digitally.

A short critical analysis of 1500 words is due in week 7 (30%). Students will engage with a passage of critical theory from a range provided, and relate it to a text read in the first half of the module. For example they might consider Kristeva's theory of abjection in relation to Poe's reanimated female corpses or use Lovecraft's essay on horror writing to illuminate his science fiction terror 'The Colour out of Space'.

The final assessment is by a 4000-word research essay (60%). Students are encouraged to devise their own essay title in consultation with the tutor or choose one provided. Furthermore, they are free to write on a suitable text/s outside the syllabus that addresses the same concerns of the module.

### Lecture and seminar schedule for 11 weeks

Week	Content
Week 1	Lecture: What is horror? Overview of module Seminar: Readings from Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, Elaine Scarry, Teresa A. Goddu, H.P. Lovecraft
Week 2	Lecture: Native encounters; American gothic Seminar: <i>Edgar Huntly</i> (Charles Brockden Brown)
Week 3	Lecture: The slave narrative as horror; the horrors of slavery Seminar: <i>Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl</i> (Harriet Jacobs),
Week 4	Lecture: Edgar Allan Poe and sensationalism; the uncanny Seminar: 'Fall of the House of Usher', 'Ligeia', 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue', 'How to Write a Blackwood's Article', 'The Philosophy of Composition'
Week 5	Lecture: Scientific horrors, medical science, genetic engineering Seminar: 'Lauth' (Frank Norris), 'The Birthmark' (Nathaniel Hawthorne), 'The Colour out of Space' (H.P. Lovecraft), 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' (Edgar Allan Poe) Workshop: writing a critical analysis
Week 6	Lecture: The horrors of work Seminar: <i>Life in the Iron Mills</i> (Rebecca Harding Davis), 'Bartleby the Scrivener' (Herman Melville), selections from Marx
Week 7	Lecture: Southern gothic; Anne Rice No seminar (students to read Rice and work on short assessment) <b>Short written work due at end of week</b>
Week 8	Lecture: The vampire; adaptation theory Screening: <i>Interview with a Vampire</i> (Neil Jordan) Seminar: <i>Interview with a Vampire</i> , film and novel
Week 9	Lecture: American monsters; the monster movie Screening: <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> (George A. Romero) Seminar: <i>Night of the Living Dead</i> Workshop: writing a research essay
Week 10	Lecture: Grotesque and body horror; torture porn; Abu Ghraib Seminar: <i>Haunted</i> (Palahniuk)
Week 11	Lecture: The horrors of history Screening: <i>American Horror Story</i> – selected episodes from series 3 Seminar: <i>American Horror Story</i> <b>Essay due after Week 11</b>