

3. Dark Chocolate from the Literary Crypt: Teaching Contemporary Gothic Horror **Gina Wisker University of Brighton**

As a genre, Gothic horror has never been more popular on the university syllabus, yet, because it is often seen as low brow, popular culture, distasteful schlock, horror hides behind the 'Gothic', its more respectable half, or behind speculative fiction, or period studies. Gothic horror appears in the work of classic and many contemporary writers. It is ubiquitous, a form of choice with which to deal with everything from concerns with identity, poverty and violence to cultural and gendered difference. This chapter will argue that teaching Gothic horror enables academics and students to co-construct culturally inflected understandings through engaging with literary and media representations of those issues that matter in life, such as identity, domestic securities, sexuality, race, the family, culture, the body, equality, sustainability, the future. The main examples I take here are Bram Stoker's highly influential *Dracula* (1897) and, more extensively, the Gothic horror of Neil Gaiman. While Stoker's canonical text raises issues of cultural and psychological responses to terrors concerning sexuality, race, migration and Otherness, Gaiman's work deals with similar issues but does so through referencing another horror master, H.P. Lovecraft, splicing horror with the comic. In so doing, his work offers opportunities, in terms of teaching and learning, for us to use digital media and devices to co-construct knowledge through research, popular cultural references, and a seemingly live interaction with the author and his own comic Gothic horror writing processes.

Introduction

US academic Frances Auld calls Gothic horror, 'the dark chocolate, the Guinness stout of Speculative Fiction. It is strong and chewy. It demands an intellectual analysis of what and how we experience' (Auld, 2009). She captures its visceral nature and its intellectual, social and personal challenges so 'In the classroom, on a good day, genre fiction begs interactive reading. Gothic horror fiction allows a rupture of emotion, an embrace of the abyss perhaps, but within the hospitable, shared gallery of the classroom. Gothic horror fictions and their analysis allow for real discussions' (Auld, 2009). Gothic horror is entertaining, it draws you in, but that is not its only function. At once destabilising and engaging us personally, culturally, aesthetically, it causes us to consider our awareness of how values are culturally and contextually constructed, how they can manipulate us into dangerous blind compliance, and how the nice dose of paradox, irony and critical scrutiny which Gothic horror can offer can enable critical thinking.

Neil Gaiman's Gothic horror is an ideal focus for new interventions, questionings and re-conceptualisations. Discussing the teaching of Gaiman's short stories as Gothic horror, this chapter

considers interactive practices, ways of teaching, learning and assessing which make the most of the personal, cultural, imaginative troublesomeness and transformational thinking offered by Gothic horror, channelled through irony, parody, comedy. It uses the theories of threshold concepts (Meyer and Land, 2003), arguing that working with Gothic horror can lead students to troublesome, transformational thinking, understanding and knowledge construction. This it does with us and our students through a variety of learning and teaching activities, including personal reflection, critical reading, group work and active involvement with textual sources, responses, the author and the world enabled by the digital.

Teaching horror

US academic and horror writer Mike Arnzen links the destabilisation horror produces, the uncanny and the uncertainty, with active creative questioning and critical thinking, all good learning outcomes for study in any context. He says:

Horror provides an excellent context for learning. It raises the serious questions that allow critical inquiry to transpire. This is, perhaps, patently true of all literary texts, but the omnipresent mode of 'uncertainty' that underpins most works in the horror genre inherently moulds the reading experience into the shape of a question mark. (Arnzen, 2009)

Gothic horror presents us with multiple reading pleasures of entertainment, critique of the everyday securities which so easily and dangerously slide into complacencies, and subversion of the orthodoxies of behaviour and belief. This causes us to scrutinise the familiar and the given, from hearth and home to political ideologies. The teaching and learning moments are crucial opportunities for dialogue, since even socially and culturally engaged Gothic horror might just pass us by as no more than schlock if we miss the elements of representation, of signification and argument. Just to take a couple of examples from earlier periods: reading or watching a performance and discussing Webster's *The White Devil* (1612) exposes the historically constructed demonising of women's sexuality and power, seen as spite and vice. Reading and discussing *Dracula* (1897) enables us to see the historically, culturally contextualised influences of gender, race and patriarchal power in the need to punish foreign others who seek to invade our homelands and the pure bodies of 'our' womenfolk (and so, offspring). Earlier, thinking about the processes and effects of Gothic horror I noted:

The dangerous pleasures offered by horror attract us from both sides of the night. It is wild and alternative, its energies, slow, relentless, creeping, exploding, match and encourage the release of our own. It is a catalyst, a catharsis. In horror, events, people, actions move from

the unthinkable into a bodied forth version of the unbearable, ... the sudden intrusion or extrusion of the unexpected and the violent; the stupefying feeling of having what you took for granted exposed as quite different, quite the opposite. And in horror we face up to this, and either explain it and close it down, return to order or, in more radical contemporary feminist horror, recognise it as a projection of, a part of ourselves, not Other to us. Then closing it down would be absurd, and futile. Horror figures – vampire, werewolf, femme fatale, a host of monsters, are recuperated, celebrated, or at least tolerated and recognised. (Wisker, 2005)

Arnzen, Auld and others were invited for a special edition of *Dissections*, to explore how and why they taught Gothic horror, and the ways in which students engaged with it so that disturbance and troublesomeness could lead to transformational learning (Perkins, 1999; Meyer and Land 2003). I have always loved working with Gothic horror but only latterly has this become respectable in the higher education classroom. Earlier I noted its ability to undercut complacencies. It is entertaining, 'wild and alternative' certainly, destabilising and defamiliarising .

The release of energies it involves exposes pomposity; hypocrisy; power games; the artifice of respectability, hiding deception and violence; the falseness of romantic relationships of family life, of social, political and work hierarchies. This radical, deviant, wild energy assaults and exposes the lies upon which we either base our sense of security or by which others, defended by a status quo which claims to be 'right', ordered, logical, good, healthy, in control, control us (Wisker, 2005).

In teaching horror we expose the ways in which it channels the fears and complacencies of the time, and using our critical reading and research skills we are able to explore their social and cultural origins, and so defuse the power of those controlling beliefs and behaviours. In using comic Gothic horror, Neil Gaiman takes us half way, his comic strategies exposing the overt and covert terrors and panics in the horror texts on which he builds his own work.

Teaching Gothic horror

The book *Horror Fiction: An Introduction* (2005), like the special edition of *Dissections* (2009), grew from teaching and working with the Gothic horror genre. I now use excerpts from both in my teaching. So these are active texts, which also evidence to students how we interact together with their work, in that we each write from our discussions, and as academics we encourage the students to write with confidence, each creating knowledge to share with others. Together we work with horror and how it enables us to see the world, and to consider serious issues. Context and choice of

texts are important, as well as how we teach and learn together. One *Dissections* contributor noted that teaching horror in the Appalachians was a very disturbing experience, since the everyday horror of peoples' lives – brutal, harsh – made it more difficult to dissociate the real from the fictional, and manage the real through the critical stance to enable understanding, the laughter as well as the shudder. Fiction offers an imaginative space in which to deal with what disturbs, but perhaps it is more difficult to gain the critical distance when horror is the lived experience.

Teaching

I will often start by asking for personal reflections on reading or watching Gothic horror, to engage students first with their own thoughts, then to share these in small groups or pairs. This surfaces some of the issues about definitions, characteristics, positive and negative reactions, favourite texts and films. It lays the way for making our work with Gothic horror lively and alive, related to their interests, sense of fear and disturbance, identity and power.

- What do you expect from a piece of horror writing?
- What horror have you read or seen on film?
- What are its stereotypical characteristics?
- Do you like horror?

Teaching *Dracula* (1897) in 2015

In my teaching I use reference to both topical issues and historical roots, so in 2015, with the humanitarian crisis of Syrian refugees, I related the political and media language of 'swarms' and 'hordes' to that used in Gothic horror fiction about zombies, who represent the terrifying, invasive, undead, inhuman Other, and we discussed how emotive political language stirs up hidden fears through such resonances. Teaching *Dracula* (1897) simultaneously with the crisis I was able to explore the xenophobia and racism of the 1890s that underpins a postcolonial reading of the text dramatised in the fear of Dracula's plan to bring his vampire family to Britain. Having bought a house in London and with plans for many more, Dracula himself has his coffin shipped to Whitby. He enters the country both surreptitiously and violently, in advance of the many coffins of his vampire relatives, which are shipped straight into the heart of London. Horror homes in on ongoing fears, such as the instability of identity and of domestic security, and those that are immediate and current. Doctoral research carried out by Linda Friday (2013) used documentary evidence in the form of newspapers and bills posted on walls to show that there was a blight of anti-Semitic terror of

the arrival of Jewish migrants in London's East End in the 1890s. This research, conducted by a student (albeit PhD student), used digitally presented maps of the period to show the positioning of Dracula's safe houses to which the coffins were being shipped, the Jewish immigration settlements, and the closeness to Jack the Ripper's Whitechapel murders. The elision of the terrors of the East End with Jewish migration in the newspapers set a perfect scene for the transfer of demonisation of the foreign other into the undead bodies of Dracula's frontrunners for his vampire hordes, his family, thus eliding also a disgust at the spawning of future vampires which underlies some of the sexual desire and disgust within the novel. The research is meticulous, historical, digitised, accessible, the argument about contemporary terrors embodied in contemporary Gothic horror novel convincing. The relationships with 2015 language, fears of the invading Other intent on using up the limited resources of the welfare state to feed their children and houses, is very similar to the fears and language of the 1890s. I also explore the demonisation of women by the representation of them in *Dracula* and other current texts and imagery (see Dijkstra's *Idols of Perversity*, 1986) as femmes fatales guilty of enticing and then emasculating and devouring men. This is the role played by Dracula's three vampire women, one of whom resembles the solicitor, Jonathan Harker's wife Mina, and the role played by the beautiful Lucy, who is desired by three men, her room and her body entered by Dracula himself, his vampire teeth piercing her skin and his disgusting sensual tongue drinking her blood. This demonisation of women's sexuality and their power, even their ability to type (Mina) is coincident with the rise of the New woman (1890s onwards), and with the legal focus on prostitution and sexually transmitted diseases which resulted in the Contagious Diseases Act (1864). Our reading of *Dracula* enables the exposure of sexualised terrors and misrepresentation of women as a way of controlling freedoms, particularly sexual, intellectual and economic, which terrors drive much of the novel's trajectory. So an ongoing issue can be discussed through a great horror text. The 2015 exploration of how *Dracula* vehicles the xenophobia and racism of this period of the late British empire was richer in 2015 because of the humanitarian crisis of those fleeing Syria and other parts of the Middle East from political and physical oppression. The postcolonial reading was brought right up to date. There will, I expect, sadly be maybe other examples to keep it topical. This reading exposed historical and current terrors and their dramatic exposition in horror. Reading *Dracula* enabled us to unpick how the Gothic horror literary text exposes such terrors, and to critique its psychologically based and propagandist nature and role, to expose the problems expressed in horror through exploring the text, in its times, and in its current topical resonance. When teaching Gothic horror I always share examples of the historical contexts of the work, and of the sources which influenced it, as well as engaging students with the theoretical perspectives (abjection, the uncanny, for example) which inform our reading of Gothic horror. And critical

dialogues about the texts we are studying, often for part of a lecture, will have references, quotations, video clips, and I hope provide a version of a model of ways of engaging with the texts. I record the lecture when I give it and make it available online along with the PowerPoint, but I don't just read from the script or a PowerPoint, I update, elaborate, ask the students questions and give them time to think, discuss and answer them, so that even a large lecture is interactive (Jenkins, 1991) and followed by a smaller interactive seminar with text extracts, questions and digitally based research and discussion activities. Some of the lecture and seminar work emphasises and engages research skills, indicates the longevity of figures of horror, their replay and reimagining, their consistent relevance. I use and ask students to use media, including YouTube clips, websites, author blogs, social media and web links that engage them with considering some of their own interests in relation to sources, context, influences, and interactions between author, world, text and readers. One of the aims or learning outcomes of all of this is to bring and keep texts alive, to encourage personal engagement and the imagination, valorising the importance of the imagination, storytelling and living with the dimension of the imaginary as well as the real and to move beyond the shivering fun of entertainment without losing it. Another is to enable us all to see that in our interactions with the history, context, sources, influences, critical dialogues, and the text through research, reading and discussion, we are co constructing knowledge, making something new.

Teaching Gothic horror, Neil Gaiman, H.P. Lovecraft, the comic, the digital

I have explored some of the issues in teaching *Dracula*, the use of the contemporary to the novel's production, and our own contemporary concerns, the use of archives and digitised artefacts such as maps and newspapers to enable students to conduct their own original research following the engagement with the novel, the historical context and the critical reading. I should like next to make a case for a focus on the fantasy author Neil Gaiman, seeing some of his work as comic Gothic horror. Gaiman is well known for his graphic novels, novels, film scripts and films and I shall discuss his work, much as I would in a lecture, then look at how we deal with context, sources, and reading his work in order to engage with comic Gothic horror and the contemporarity.

Neil Gaiman's work encompasses graphic novels, blogs, film scripts based on his own novels and short stories. In the tale discussed here we see a form of transatlantic comic horror translation, which moves from H.P. Lovecraft and Poe to Monty Python, Pete and Dud, and in its splicing of the comic with horror also splices American and British references and sensitivities, the great horror masters and the Britishness of sitcoms, comic duos, ironic juxtaposition, referencing a location, intertextuality and naiveté. Another tale I also teach 'Only the End of the World Again' (1998) splices all of these and California detective fiction, since it features an 'adjustor', private investigator, also a

werewolf, arriving in a small town, but destined to be sacrificed, off the edge of a cliff, to the elder gods (part of Lovecraft's myths) when the end of the world (much sought by the locals) is on the cusp of arrival.

Neil Gaiman's texts rely on translation and mistranslation. He is an expert in translation between cultures, between comedy and horror. His transatlantic comic horror combines the lurking fears of American horror masters Lovecraft and Poe, with international myth, fantasy, fairy tale, and a range of recognisably English humour, from deadpan to farce. When teaching Neil Gaiman's Gothic horror, it is useful to briefly explore the segues between and twinning of comedy and horror, each based on defamiliarisation. In considering Neil Gaiman's short stories, I look briefly throughout at H.P. Lovecraft's work (nicknamed 'The King of Weird' by Joyce Carol Oates, 1996). We focus in the main on 'Shoggoth's old Peculiar' (1998), mentioning 'Only the End of the World Again' (1998), both in *Smoke and Mirrors* (1998), two stories which exemplify Gaiman's horror/humour/cultural difference splice. I shall only discuss one of these, 'Shoggoth's Old Peculiar', here. Part of the teaching of Gaiman's work which builds on that of H.P. Lovecraft serves to also reveal the horror of that great influential author. Lovecraft was noted for his disgust at sexuality and miscegenation, rolling together both sexual and racial fears. He was also a master of creating indescribable terrors, a mythos comprising the great Cthulhu, and the elder gods, whose threat is ever present, who are insidiously gradually entering humankind through the bodies of women who spawn half human, half creature offspring. An eventual apocalypse or grand world changing arrival is imminent. Such arcanelly religiously fuelled terrors can also be found in the language of extreme religious cults. The disgust at sex and sexuality, the blame on women, and the terror at invading racially different others is of a piece with that informing *Dracula*, though Lovecraft's migrant hordes were the immigrated population of New York in which he briefly lived, and possibly the Portuguese settlers in Providence where he was born and died, and mainly lived, and his own sexual disgust both as a product of the times, and his own distaste (see Joshi and Lord, 2004). In Neil Gaiman's unique contribution, he revisits then undercuts the terrors of the unnameable, the unspeakable and the unmentionable histories, weird disturbing characters and scenarios frequent in horror, particularly Lovecraft's horror, and brings them into the everyday, with exquisitely amusing results. While inability to interpret and translate often threatens Lovecraft's characters, among others in narratives using the characteristics of fantasy (Todorov, 1975) and horror (Jancovitch, 1992; Punter, 1996; Wisker, 2005), effective translation from culture to culture, and between the nuances of language and interpretation offer Gaiman and his readers opportunities for richly amusing irony, satire or slapstick. The kind of cultural differences which threaten in Lovecraft are manipulated by Gaiman

using the same ploys of the uncanny (Freud, 1919; Royle, 2003), defamiliarisation and misinterpretation, but to comic effect, enriched by horror and mythic (Oktem, 2012) intertexts.

The juxtaposition of the homely, the banal and the inept, a tendency to misinterpret, endangers Lovecraft's characters, who are usually tangled up with the source of the often cosmic threat (frequently based in miscegenation) (Lord 2004) at the level of the elemental and otherworldly (Joshi, 2001). Much myth and fairy-tale as well as horror emphasises this level, this liminal space. Kin 'Only the End of the World Again', Gaiman takes the transitory, wolfman, private investigator (adjustor) in Innsmouth to the end of the cliff, where the end of the world and the rising from the deeps will take place once his blood is spilled. The seductive putrefying temptress beneath the waves reminds the protagonist narrator and us of bad sushi: 'She had a face like the stuff you don't want to eat in a sushi counter, all suckers and spines and drifting anemone fronds'. In 'Shoggoth's old Peculiar' (1998) , Gaiman gives us the naive American on a walking tour of the worst coastal towns in the North of England, who foolishly decides to stay at the bed and breakfast 'Shub-Niggurath' (named after a Lovecraftian fictional deity intent on procreation, 'The Black Goat of the Woods with a Thousand Young'), instead of 'Mon Repos'. In dipping his own fictional characters into Lovecraft's world Gaiman transforms it into the everyday, translating the horror into the comic. An encounter with two brown rain coated blokes in a pub, Wilf and Seth (reminders of the Whateley brothers in 'The Dunwich Horror' (1929), spawn of a devilish creature) becomes one with the Pete and Dud characters created by Peter Cook and Dudley Moore. They inform the traveller that the great Cthulhu will soon come and take over the world, but they cannot imagine quite how, so they suggest that once Cthulhu has read the papers he will 'come out of the ocean depths and consume the world utterly'. The old lady purchasing the Holy Grail from a charity shop, visited by Sir Galahad on his white charger in another of Gaiman's tales, 'Chivalry' (1998), is straight from Monty Python, *Fawlty Towers* (1975-9) and British sitcoms. Gaiman's work offers a comic horror mix of delightful richness based on the splicing and clashing of cultures, the translation between the banal, the everyday, and the language of slapstick, as much as of irony and the unspeakable, the unnameable, the unimaginable.

Gaiman can translate transatlantic misunderstandings, the elemental and the everyday – his characters miss the point. The irony takes us with him.

I should like to consider teaching Gothic horror though looking at working with one tale by Neil Gaiman – 'Shoggoth's Old Peculiar (1998) considering horror, Gaiman and humour, and using the digital to engage students in co-constructing knowledge .

Humour and horror

My first awareness of this liminal space between horror and the comic, the cusp of the boundary between the two, where one slips into the other, was reading and teaching the revenge tragedies. In *The Revenger's Tragedy* (Middleton, 1607) as the third round of revengers come on stage, skulls, daggers, blood, cloaks, politics, brutality merge into stylised comic without losing the visceral threat. Some of the humour of the revenge tragedies, including *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607) and *The White Devil* (Webster, 1612), is an acquired taste, since not everyone finds any humour in such dark, violent and psychologically threatening excess. It is black humour, laughing at the unthinkable, at death, funerals, and the movement between response to forms of the comic, and their overlap at the most uncomfortable, as well as the most unlikely, verging on the ridiculous. The excess makes us shudder and laugh at the same time. In facing discomfort, recognition, the embodiment of the things that concern, frighten, disturb, worry us – shuddering and laughing are remarkably similar responses, and uneasy, queasy laughing is where they overlap. Disgust, rejection and nervous laughing, laughing at the discrepancies between the expected and the unexpected, is where they dip into farce. Here we have the moments where horror, through becoming excessive, becomes burlesque.

Teaching Neil Gaiman stories – ‘Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar’ (1998)

‘Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar’ (1998) is a hilarious satire of H.P. Lovecraft, more so if you are familiar with the comedy routines of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore.

Hapless American Benjamin Lassiter, on a walking tour of the coast of England, discovers that it's not nearly as picturesque as he had been led to believe. He comes to an odd little village and meets two very strange men, Seth and Wilf. Fans of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore's mind-boggling deadpan conversational routines will instantly recognize these two, and Gaiman has acknowledged that historically one night, in a bar with a friend, he decided that the unavoidable (to him) relationship between Lovecraft's two strange Whateley brothers and the comic characters had to be realised and shared.

As a transatlantic writer and traveller from the south coast of England, Gaiman has caught the problems of translation perfectly, the translation of tourist guide descriptions and of English terminology into the ‘real’. ‘Shoggoth’s Old Peculiar’ (1998) is a travel tale, as is Lovecraft's ‘The Shadow over Innsmouth’ (1936), but one which adds cultural difference to the already complex misinterpretations possible for Lovecraft's warned off lone wanderer figure. The tale has traces of ‘An American Werewolf in London’ (1981), where Jack and his friend stumble wearily into ‘The Slaughtered Lamb’ on the Yorkshire Moors, are met with covert warnings and hints and threats

usually only found in that other familiar travel context, *Dracula* (1897), where Jonathan Harker travels to Transylvania to sell parts of London to the vampire count.

Locals always know secrets, keep them, warn the traveller a little, watch him or her fall straight into the trap, and sometimes, as in 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' (1936) or Kate Mosses' *The Winter Ghosts* (2009), set in Carcassonne, are *part* of the trap. *Wrong Turn* (2003) and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974) operate a similar trajectory, as does Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981). Travellers are always a little gauche, confused, liable to fear and misread the unusual, miss hints about the truly dangerous and strange, mistake the strange and excitingly different for the deadly and vice versa. Gothic horror's ability to nudge us out of our comfort zone is set perfectly in the context of the de-familiarisation of people and places, the misreading of signs.

Many travellers in such tales as Gaiman's, Lovecraft's, McEwan's escape completely unaware of what could have happened. Many so utterly misread the situation, inebriated (much of this work has pubs, cafes, meals) by difference, destabilised, that they are cast into being the consumed or consumable, rather than the guest, as in 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' (1936). In the latter, Lovecraft's inquisitive traveller might be in danger but he also faces one of the roots of abjection and Otherising: finding that surprisingly he is a part of what he has newly half discovered. In this case, he realises that is his family connection with the Lovecraftian Mythos influenced townsfolk, whose ancestors mated with the fishy folk beneath the waves in return for strange golden jewellery and sustained catches of fish.

The naïve American abroad tradition is as old as Henry James and Edith Wharton. Usually it ends in tears. In the British comic tradition, *An Idiot Abroad* (2010-12), *The League of Gentlemen* (1999-2002), and some of *Little Britain* (2003-5), all capture this – but Gaiman wrote his tale before these, so perhaps was looking at the often culpable naivety of *Carry On* films (1958-92). He takes British sitcoms and Ealing comedy humour and the witty banter of men in the pub, of Peter Cook and Dudley Moore (1960s), and transposes them onto the rather problematic creatures/people in Innsmouth, and in Dunwich (Lovecraft's 'The Dunwich Horror', 1929). In the latter, there are two strange brothers, the Whateleys, sons of Yog-Sothoth, a creature from inner/outer space. One, Wilbur, has tentacles beneath his waist, neatly covered by his long coat, and walks relatively freely among people, while the other, much taller, is shut up in the barn devouring cattle, pledging with the elder gods, intent on bringing about the end of the world as we know it.

Gaiman's tale is set in the North but recognisable and read as any seaside town on the coast of Britain. He combines the language of Lovecraft and insider knowledge, in this case of real ale popular

amongst the local working class drinkers in pubs in the North and Midlands or other edges of the UK. *Shoggoth's Old Peculiar* is modelled surely on *Theakston's Old Peculiar* and other dull, heavy local beers, Real Ale specialities, reliant on exclusive insider knowledge and choice, as much as on the insider language excluding and confusing Ben Lassiter, the American traveller in Gaiman's tale.

Ben Lassiter, naïve American tourist on the British coastal north in the off season on a walking tour, has been misinformed that British locals like Americans on walking tours, and can himself read between the lines of the guidebook, whose author, he believes, should be charged under the trade descriptions act. He learns how to translate 'charming' for 'non-descript' and ends up actually north of Bootle, just outside Liverpool. All three local bed and breakfasts are unlikely to be the choice of the discerning traveller. Their names, 'Sea View', or 'Mon Repos', are misleading, and their interiors would be damp and decayed. However, selecting 'Shub Niggurath', another member of **his** Mythos (the goat with a thousand young) signals for the discerning reader an insider joke referencing Lovecraft's horror. A 'frog faced' woman might merely be an insult to a local, but when we have become familiar with Lovecraft's 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' (1936), we know the sea creatures are just round the corner, about to emerge. The Lovecraftian intertextuality spliced with travel writing and British sit coms and comic routines is a double delight.

Ben, from dry Texas, is doubtful about pubs, even though recommended in 'A Walking Tour of the British Coastline'. Of course, the British always suggest pubs, thus excluding large chunks of the populace from the only real social hub of a town or village. The pub, 'The Book of Dead Names' run by proprietor 'Al-Hazred', references dubious Eastern foreigners and esoteric texts, the lure and threat of the exotic which underlies much of Lovecraft's fear of otherness, miscegenation and invading difference. The scenario is a mixture of the threatening, the disturbingly confusing and familiar. The sourcing of references to Lovecraft's work enhances this, as does all good intertextuality, without also excluding those who have no basis to recognise the references. In the lecture I explore and explain the sources, and in the seminar I invite the students to explore whatever they are interested in from the sources for themselves using their (shared) iPhone, iPad or laptops, so that they follow an aspect which interests them, and make a case for it, and also experience the ways in which sources and intertextual references are used in these texts

References to Lovecraft's works might supply frissons of horror, but the comedy is very British and also needs exploring. The bottle blonde barmaid is from the *Carry On* films, the two 'gentlemen' wearing 'long grey raincoats and scarves, were playing dominoes and supping dark brown foam-topped bearish drinks from dimpled glass tankards' (p.). are Pete and Dud, i.e. Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, recognisable to those who have seen the routines. However, these routines are of

Gaiman's generation or before, so students also need introducing to their kind of humour, which uses deadpan delivery to mimic and satirise a mixture of the serious made light and the banal made serious. The reversals and defamiliarisations of comedy and of horror are very similar in strategy, but usually used to different ends. In comic Gothic horror, orthodoxies and high seriousness (such as the Cthulhu mythos, the practices of oppressive regimes, culturally based, invented and enforced behaviours) are seen as constructions which can be deconstructed, myths that can be deflated, unreliable investments, however overwhelming they are to those committed to them. This is achieved through that splicing of the banal and the deadly serious.

Ben is offered a 'Ploughman's' but that, like 'Saloon Bar', fails to translate. 'The British treated food as some kind of punishment (p).' In cursing the English 'for choosing to dine upon such swill', the archaic language of Britain matches that of Lovecraft, as pointed out by Wilf and Seth, who debate the use of 'eldritch', and 'squamous', each elevated terms in ironic juxtaposition to the meagre reality.

Comedy and horror operate often on such ironic juxtapositions, defamiliarisation, understatement, misunderstanding, that we have to 'mind the gap' between the language and the reality we are offered for deadly or hilarious results. As readers and students we align ourselves as equally unwitting, only slightly more informed than the naïve and unwitting protagonist, and we each also translate the scenarios in which we find ourselves in Gothic comic horror, reliant upon the variety of our own experiences, often getting it all wrong.

The references to Westerns place Ben in a Wild West danger zone. He then falls into the linguistic trap of inquiring what they are drinking, which means he has to buy them a round and join them in a pint of *Shoggoth's Old Peculiar* referred to as 'full-bodied' as a goat, like the Devil, or Shub-Niggurath.

"You know what eldritch means?" Ben shook his head. He seemed to be discussing literature with the two strangers in an English pub while drinking beer. He wondered for a moment if he had become someone else, while he wasn't looking?'(p.)

Ben's estrangement and de-familiarisation as a gauche tourist is matched with the wildly unlikely scenario of being with two old blokes in a pub discussing language and literature, although that very disjunction between the esoteric and the familiar, the relationships between class and belonging, derive from the kind of comic gap that British comedy often pursues, with its use of satire, irony, farce and sometimes threat, its making fun of misunderstanding and painful unexpected conclusions.

Wilf, playing a Pete and Dud role, starts a joke tale about camels, humps and the desert. It's a witty banter based on preposterous pretence and conjecture, as often is the case in the comedy routines in Pete and Dud, where, in one exchange, for instance, they talked about being a judge and doing judging. This comedy routine and boasting, mimicked in Gaiman's story, is based on ignorance and brashness, wisdom fuelled by several pints. Another Lovecraft reference is the 'Tomb of Nyarlathotep', of which one of the men says 'you could have meant someone else with the same name'. Colloquialisms are juxtaposed with elevated language, and the sheer unlikeliness of the grafting of the bizarre and comic everyday with the cosmic threat posed in Lovecraft's tales removes any sense of threat. However, Seth and Wilf are 'acolytes' of 'Great Cthulu' and their routine, based on that of Pete and Dud, of being a judge, emphasises the disjunction between the serious and the funny. They say 'the acolytin' is not really what you might call laborious employment in the middle of its busy season, that is of course because of his 'bein' asleep'. Once Cthulhu has read the papers he will 'come out of the ocean depths and consume the world utterly'. Ben finds this funny because he sees an ironic juxtaposition between labels, e.g. 'Ploughman's' and 'Great Cthulhu' and what something turns out to be. His inebriated state offers him an angle on the absurd, bizarre, and mundane. Lovecraft's terrifying godlike figure Cthulhu is reduced to a dozing heap, his position in the depths transposed to just outside a pub near Bootle. Most readers would probably be 'tourists' in need of translation of terms to appreciate the full set of humorous references, and the effect of Gaiman's language and tale on the reader depends on being an insider of both UK and US cultures, and the scenarios of both Lovecraft and of Pete and Dud.

The realm of the mundane is at a ridiculous distance from esoteric elevations. Gaiman juxtaposes two cultures, history, horror, the comic and popular culture.

Travel and tourism horror in Gaiman

We have been treating Gaiman's story as comedy, but there is an undertow of potential threat, and that is the danger of the unusual and unknown to the unwary tourist. The tradition from which this comes is that of the horror of travel and tourism. E.M. Forster pointed out some of the problems of relying on guidebooks when his tourists in *Where Angels Fear to Tread* (1905) use Baedeker to find an idyllic Italy and are shaken by blood and a dead body in the fountain in Florence, dentists and laughing gas in Fiesole. The naively trusting tourist or self-absorbed traveller seeking adventure and the unusual as well as a resting place is a popular figure for contemporary horror. Using Venice, a labyrinthine city filled with historical secrets, to recuperate from work and revive a relationship, leads to mis-readings, torture and death in Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers* (1981). Seeking adventure in the less travelled areas, (*Deliverance*, 1972), turning off road to avoid pile ups or traffic

jams and driving through the wrong part of the Appalachians (*Wrong Turn*, 2003), hitching and taking a lift, or being towed when your car breaks down in the Australian outback (*Wolf Creek*, 2005) are all commonplace scenarios now in popular horror films. If Gaiman's 'Shoggoth's Old Peculiar' (1998) isn't directly influenced by the Gothic tourism inherent in these horror films, then contemporary readers will link from the text to them and more recent iterations. We read back into sources direct and indirect, both as pointed out overtly by authors, our own sources, and then we read out into the contemporary use of these works, influences on them, their influences on other work, of film, event and social media. This is a comic tale, and it grows from translating an American Abroad, the naïve traveller as in *An American Werewolf in London* (1981), into a local northern seaside pub in the winter season when everything is shut and all guidebooks misleading, so that, in an out of the way place, he might meet Lovecraft's Whateley brothers, the kind of strange incestuously or confusingly originated 'locals' who might provide fascinating entertainment for the tourist or who might prey on their insouciance, misinterpretation, lack of intuition in strange circumstance and lack of maturity. This is a story about entering a safe, comfortable space of the Other, and misunderstanding their intent, a common misinterpretation between cultures, often leading to serious consequences. The traveller in 'The Shadow over Innsmouth' (1936) is not really in major danger, because he is led to realise that these are also his ancestors from under the sea, his relatives, the strangely tentacled land and sea folk. The traveller in 'The Dunwich Horror' (1929) also is not in direct danger, but the Whateley brothers are a problem, since their existence is evidence of Lovecraft's major fear, miscegenation. Lavinia Whateley has mated with a beastly creature, sent by the elder gods, and the overarching plan is to take over the world. The two blokes in brown raincoats in the pub are intent on confusing Ben, the American tourist, so that he drinks, misunderstands their jokes and references to the great Cthulu and is led out into the wintry wet seaside air along the prom, potentially to his doom in the waves below, as a sacrifice.

Lovecraft's tales emphasise a racialised terror of the foreign Other, more terrible, more insidiously, intrusively dangerous when intermixed with our relatives. Gaiman's comic horror keeps the terror at bay without diminishing the Lovecraftian resonances, by using comedy. He also undercuts the racism, the horror at the unspeakable Other. Gaiman's is a 1998 tale, building on Lovecraft's work from 1929 and 1936. However, even for a 2015 student reader, it is possible to engage in discussions about Lovecraft's racism and sexism, his language of Otherising, his terror of immigration (from the sea, the stars, Africa, with Arthur Jermyn (Lovecraft, 1921)) and more fully understand the dangerous rhetoric of racism in the terrors over contemporary migration, where refugees are referred to in language used for invasive insects or 'swarms', 'hordes', language which also reminds now of zombie apocalypse in popular film and text. Gaiman is comic, he uses British sitcom and

stand up, but he also engages with Lovecraft's racism and terror of the foreign other, offering an awareness of its subtext of terror, disgust and misreadings of the Other, seen in Gothic tourist horror, and in the contemporary press. The contemporary resonances of Lovecraft's terror at mixed race intrusion, repeated in comic horrors in Gaiman, make Gaiman's work a layered, rich read of comedy and Gothic horror, with pertinent connections not only to travel and tourism, and cultural confusion, but to political propaganda, and racism. The work is important and it connects with and causes discussion about serious issues.

Working with the digital

In the class, using digital opportunities offered by iPhones and iPads, students are invited to explore back, round or forward: back to the references to Lovecraft and find out about a great horror master, to the theorised references which horror uses, related to abjection, for example, Julia Kristeva's work (1982). Then they can explore out to other horror Gothic tourist work (Kate Mosse, Ian McEwan), to British sit-com and stand up, Peter Cook and Dudley Moore, to Gaiman's own, very accessible, comments about his inspiration and sources, and to contemporary comments about the Syrian refugee crisis, for example, which uses the language of apocalypse and horror to dehumanise refugees, a strategy familiar from Nazi representation of Jews in the Second World War.

I ask students to look where they are interested and set out the questions that they can explore individually, then in small groups. They look at what interests them in their brief research and they also talk about why and how they accessed the information they sought, how they determined which sources were helpful, what was poorly researched and ephemeral, what were total side-lines, and then, when comparing what they had each found, and bringing some theory to bear on it, how their work cast new light on that of Gaiman and Lovecraft through considering abjection and horror, Gothic tourism, comic horror, British comedy, contemporary news reporting, and so on.

Students carry out their research in the class using their devices which begins to interlock the world of Gothic horror with the digital, since each takes place in a liminal space; each troubles the familiar yet offers critical insights. The digital world is already uncanny – unheimlich – as is the Gothic. This defamiliarisation of familiar forms of engagement and expression naturally fit together our work with Gothic horror and Neil Gaiman's writing links these into a layered uncanny world. (Mills, 2010)

Digital connections inspire a new form of interaction with authors, their sources, influences and work. Interacting with Neil Gaiman's own website with his blog, and with the various references with which he is working or which connect us as readers to the work enables students to take their

own research paths and then contribute their own critically informed work to the group, and in their written assignments. On this course they are expected to produce three short pieces, two of which can be research based blogs, each uploaded online, which enables illustrations, sounds and weblinks, like Gaiman's own blog and more informative posts.

Skains suggests readers turn to online outlets to prolong the experience of reading novels and digital communities introduce 'the print-oriented reader to digital storytelling elements, such as online games, multimedia, and hypertext 'referencing the *NeilGaiman.com* community as of 'the expanded author-reader dynamic' with interactions introducing digital storytelling conventions. Hillesund (2007) also comments on the relationship between authors who have an online presence, as does Gaiman, to act as a bridge between digital and print storytelling conventions, and between author and reader.

When we undertake research with literary texts we probably usually focus on critical reading, bringing in the work of theorists and critics to bear on themes and issues which we find in the work we are reading. But with the advent of writers who use the postmodernist tendency to intermix their new work with referencing and reuse, re-understand and re-interpret the arguments and contributions of those earlier texts, it is vital to have access to some of the influences and sources of the intertextual references to begin to see this dialogue and their contribution, reinterpretation, contradiction. The seminar sessions working with Neil Gaiman deliberately engage students with the practice of 21st century research. When we read and explore literary texts today we follow the trail set by the writers and set our own trails. We engage with and explore their sources, intertext references and the hints and traces we see in the texts ourselves, which link for us out into other films, blogs, images, novels and the news. We make our own lines and spin our own interpretations, constructing new knowledge from literary texts, using the digital resources, links, dialogues and then in the case of work on a course, expression in assessed work. Students explore their own trails through their work and that of influences, then share responses. The assessments, the three pieces are part of our module but other assessment forms could be used as co-constructions of knowledge –in individual and group work assessments, including creative products such as individual and group blogs as discussions, diary type capture of developing ideas and reflections, researched, evidence-based explorations of the ways sources lead into new works, or works are constantly reconstructed and rewritten, re-represented in different times. Students could produce wikis, podcasts, video and fictional texts themselves.

Conclusions

Neil Gaiman's comic Gothic horror can be a rich source of learning and teaching to engage students with some of the serious issues about identity, body, gender, power, culture and with the role played by the imagination, the fantastic in engaging with such serious issues. Both Gaiman's engagement with the digital and social media, and Linda Friday's research into the context and history behind *Dracula*, for example, offer ways in which students can step into the uncanny world of the digital, engaging with serious issues dealt with through Gothic horror. In his controversial speech at the London Book Fair, Gaiman suggests:

'the whole point of a digital frontier right now is that it's a frontier, all the old rules are falling apart. Anyone who tells you they know what's coming, what things will be like in 10 years' time, is simply lying to you. None of the experts know – nobody knows, which is great... When the rules are gone you can make up your own rules. You can fail, you can fail more interestingly, you can try things, and you can succeed in ways nobody would have thought of, because you're pushing through a door marked no entrance, you're walking in through it. ' (Gaiman, 2013)

Neil Gaiman's comic Gothic horror engages us as students and readers with the darkness of horror, and its comic side, its history, and its legacy in popular culture and the contemporary representation of events which we can discover and research. It enacts for us how learning and teaching horror provides a vital engagement with psychological and social issues, in real time, and for the classroom, real or virtual. It offers the opportunity to make those immediate connections, building new knowledge and understanding to enable dialogue between the digital, the world, self and the text. Gaiman's own 'Dream Lord' comments on the importance of the imagination, the fantastic and I would argue, Gothic horror for opening up new versions and visions, which in the teaching and learning context can engage students in co constructing new responses, new knowledge. Dream Lord notes in *The Sandman* (Gaiman, 1989-96) 'Things need not have happened to be true. Tales and dreams are the shadow-truths that will endure when mere fact are dust and ashes, and forgot' (SNIP Gaiman, *The Sandman*, 1989-96).

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