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Reimagining the Gothic: Ecological Horror and Climate Change in Contemporary Literature

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Abstract

The Gothic genre, historically centered on themes of horror, death, and the supernatural, is undergoing a significant transformation in the age of climate crisis. This paper examines how the Gothic has been reimagined to articulate the anxieties of environmental degradation and ecological collapse. Termed the "eco-Gothic," this subgenre blends traditional Gothic motifs with contemporary ecological concerns to create a literature of dread rooted in the Anthropocene. Drawing on examples from contemporary fiction, film, and critical theory—including works by Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Susan Howe, and Amitav Ghosh—this paper argues that the eco-Gothic provides a potent aesthetic and philosophical framework for understanding the uncanny, monstrous aspects of climate change as reflections of modern anxieties about the future.

I. INTRODUCTION: THE GOTHIC AND THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS

From haunted castles and spectral figures to decaying landscapes and existential dread, the Gothic has long served as a literary mode for articulating social anxieties. In its classical form, the genre dramatized tensions around inheritance, gender, and rationality. However, in the twenty-first century, these fears are increasingly ecological. As the climate crisis accelerates, contemporary writers are adapting Gothic conventions to confront rising sea levels, environmental degradation, and the destabilisation of human-nature boundaries.

This transformation marks the emergence of the eco-Gothic—a critical framework that merges environmental literature with Gothic aesthetics. Scholars such as Dawn Keetley, Andrew Smith,

and William Hughes argue that the eco-Gothic uncovers the haunted, uncanny aspects of the Anthropocene. Timothy Morton's concept of "dark ecology" further contributes to this conversation by asserting that environmental thought must embrace the weird, monstrous, and spectral to confront the ecological real. Similarly, Rob Nixon's notion of "slow violence" provides a lens through which to understand the Gothic as a response to delayed and dispersed environmental trauma.

Eco-Gothic narratives frequently deploy settings of decay and catastrophe, whether through post-apocalyptic landscapes, toxic cities, or unpredictable wildernesses. This paper explores how four contemporary writers—Margaret Atwood, Jeanette Winterson, Susan Howe, and Amitav Ghosh—engage with these themes to

render climate change not merely as a scientific or political crisis, but as a deep psychological and philosophical rupture. Through close readings and theoretical engagement, I argue that the eco-Gothic functions as a literary reflection of modern environmental anxieties.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW: MAPPING THE ECO-GOTHIC

Margaret Atwood's speculative fiction, particularly *The Handmaid's Tale* and the *MaddAddam* trilogy, has been central to discussions of the eco-Gothic. Her dystopias often unfold in environmentally devastated landscapes, where the breakdown of ecological systems results in authoritarian responses and bodily horror. Scholars such as Coral Ann Howells and Shannon Hengen have noted Atwood's persistent concern with biopolitics, gender, and ecological precarity. The *MaddAddam* trilogy expands these concerns into full eco-apocalyptic territory, blending genetic engineering, species extinction, and contaminated ecosystems with Gothic tropes of monstrosity and abjection.

Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time*, a modern retelling of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*, reimagines temporal and ecological dislocation. The novel features floods, corporate exploitation, and fractured narratives, embodying a contemporary ecological Gothic. Winterson's broader oeuvre, including *The Stone Gods*, confronts planetary collapse, artificial intelligence, and temporal loops, frequently staging environmental crises as both literal and metaphorical hauntings.

Susan Howe's poetic and essayistic texts—especially *The Midnight*—offer a different approach to the eco-Gothic. Howe engages with spectral landscapes, fragmented memories, and decaying archives to explore how history and nature become haunted. Critics like Elizabeth Willis and Susan Schultz have emphasised Howe's connection to American Romanticism and Gothic aesthetics, positioning her work as an intersection of ecological thought and linguistic experimentation.

Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* and his nonfiction treatise *The Great Derangement* offer both narrative and critical frameworks for

understanding climate change as a literary and cultural blind spot. Ghosh critiques the “realist” novel's inability to represent climate catastrophe and instead turns to myth, folklore, and Gothic tropes. In *The Hungry Tide*, the Sundarbans become a site of ecological monstrosity and sublime terror, echoing colonial hauntings and environmental unpredictability.

Close Reading: Amitav Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide*

Ghosh's *The Hungry Tide* offers a powerful articulation of the eco-Gothic, particularly through its depiction of the Sundarbans as both sublime and terrifying. The novel opens with a disorienting blend of scientific detail and folklore, immediately unsettling the boundary between empirical and mythical knowledge. The shifting tides, man-eating tigers, and sudden storms present the environment not as passive scenery but as a dynamic, often hostile force. The uncanny arises in the repetition of past tragedies—shipwrecks, massacres, and floods—that echo into the present, haunting the characters both literally and metaphorically.

Ghosh's use of spatial disorientation reflects the Gothic tradition of labyrinthine castles and decaying estates. In *The Hungry Tide*, the tide country itself becomes a maze—beautiful, dangerous, and unknowable. Piya's experience of the mangroves, initially grounded in scientific objectivity, shifts as she begins to sense the animacy and unpredictability of the landscape. The disappearance of characters into the forest evokes the Gothic trope of the ‘lost soul,’ but here the monster is environmental—a convergence of myth, colonial history, and ecological volatility. Ghosh thus blends Gothic tropes with environmental realism, producing a narrative that situates climate anxiety within deeply rooted cultural trauma.

Close Reading: Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*

Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* offers a feminist eco-Gothic vision wherein toxic environmental conditions intersect with biopolitical control over reproduction. The novel's setting is marked by infertility, radioactive zones, and tainted water—elements that elicit both dread and disgust. Atwood's use of color, particularly red and white, evokes Gothic contrasts of purity and blood,

innocence and violence. Offred's inner monologue is filled with anxieties about bodily invasion and surveillance, echoing classic Gothic concerns with violated boundaries and entrapment.

The dystopia of Gilead arises from a breakdown of ecological systems, linking environmental disaster with authoritarian governance. The environment becomes a spectral presence in the novel—absent, mourned, and haunting. Children's absence functions as a Gothic void, a terrifying silence that underscores the stakes of ecological and reproductive collapse. In this way, Atwood presents an eco-Gothic landscape where the horror lies in what is no longer visible: extinct species, poisoned rivers, and vanishing futures.

Close Reading: Jeanette Winterson's *The Gap of Time*

Winterson's *The Gap of Time* transforms Shakespeare's tale of jealousy and redemption into a fragmented, postmodern eco-Gothic narrative. The novel opens with a violent storm and a flood in the fictional American town of New Bohemia, an event that echoes both Shakespearean tempest and climate-induced catastrophe. Nature's violence here is not random but symptomatic of a deeper ecological imbalance—a world out of joint.

The novel frequently returns to motifs of collapse and disorientation: foreclosed houses, broken families, and temporal disjunction. The eerie recurrence of trauma—both personal and planetary—imbues the novel with a spectral quality. Characters are haunted by guilt, loss, and a dislocated sense of time, echoing what scholars such as Jeffrey Jerome Cohen identify as hallmarks of the Gothic. Moreover, the ecological backdrop of melting ice caps and financial ruin situates the narrative within broader fears about environmental and economic instability. Winterson thus blends domestic and planetary Gothic to articulate a world teetering on the brink.

Close Reading: Susan Howe's *The Midnight*

Susan Howe's *The Midnight* represents the eco-Gothic through fragmented poetics, spectral voices, and decaying textual forms. The work is structured as a collage of prose, poetry, and archival excerpts, which together evoke a haunted archive. Nature in *The Midnight* is not

pristine or pastoral but uncanny and mournful—a forest of lost voices and vanishing forms. This haunting is both ecological and linguistic: the degradation of language mirrors environmental loss.

Howe's meditations on her mother's death and the decaying spaces of memory invoke a personal eco-Gothic. The natural world—snowstorms, twilight, shadows—becomes a metaphysical space where mourning intersects with environmental awareness. Drawing on Emerson, Dickinson, and other Romantic predecessors, Howe reclaims the Gothic not as a genre of sensational horror but as a mode of elegy and ecological attunement. As environmental critic Serenella Iovino notes, such works offer a "material ecocriticism" that treats texts and landscapes alike as palimpsests of human and nonhuman histories.

III. THEORETICAL EXPANSION: ECO-GOTHIC AND MODERN ANXIETIES

The eco-Gothic is not merely a subgenre or aesthetic choice; it reflects a fundamental shift in how we perceive the future. Traditional Gothic narratives often fixate on past traumas or ancestral curses, but the eco-Gothic reorients this gaze toward future catastrophes. It is an anticipatory Gothic, haunted not by what has been lost but by what looms ahead. Climate models, extinction events, and irreversible tipping points act as contemporary Gothic devices—calculable, yet incomprehensibly vast and frightening.

Drawing on Morton's "dark ecology" and Nixon's "slow violence," this paper emphasizes that the eco-Gothic provides a compelling way to represent the immense, intangible scale of ecological crises. In its focus on slow-moving, invisible, and often ignored environmental degradation, the eco-Gothic helps us grasp the scale of climate change as something both present and future, seen and unseen. It challenges us to confront the grotesque consequences of human action, even as we remain unwilling or unable to fully comprehend them.

IV. CONCLUSION: SPECTRAL FUTURES AND THE ENDURING POWER OF THE GOTHIC

The eco-Gothic, as explored through the works of Atwood, Winterson, Howe, and Ghosh, offers a literary framework for confronting the terrifying, intangible, and often delayed violence of climate change. The genre's ability to blend horror with ecology reveals how the Gothic, once focused on spectral ancestors and haunted spaces, now provides a means for reckoning with the ghostly presence of ecological collapse. Through the works of contemporary authors, the eco-Gothic emerges as a key tool for articulating environmental anxieties in the Anthropocene.

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