“Can’t Keep My Mind off of You:” Haunting as an Establishing Factor for Female Identity and Agency in the American Gothic Tradition

(Under the direction of Professor Michael Grimwood)

The British Gothic and American Gothic literary modes are comparable in many ways; however, the American Gothic deviated from the British distinctly in its presentation of female protagonists’ response to oppressive situations. British Gothic protagonists are more likely to find a means of escape from a place of entrapment; American protagonists, by contrast, remain in and alter their environments to suit themselves through haunting. The haunting paradigm persists in American Gothic literature from the 1780s through the present. Manifestations of the haunting paradigm being used by female protagonists to gain autonomy appear in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Wieland*, Poe’s “Ligeia” and “The Fall of the House of Usher,” Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, Gilman’s *Herland* and “The Yellow Wallpaper,” Chopin’s “La Belle Zoraïde” and *The Awakening*, Jackson’s *The Haunting of Hill House* and *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*, and lastly in Michael McDowell’s *Gilded Needles* and *Katie*. Female protagonists in the American Gothic genre, when faced with oppression, “haunt” their oppressors—metaphorically or literally—in order to garner control over their environments. When an American Gothic woman “haunts” her oppressors, she preys on their fear or embeds an idea in their mind. She then uses the oppressor’s fear or altered perspective to modify her formally oppressive environment into a setting in which she flourishes.