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The Forest and the EcoGothic

The Deep Dark Woods
in the Popular Imagination

Elizabeth Parker

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*In loving memory of my beautiful mum,
Anne Parker,
who I like to think still holds my hand through the woods.*

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction: Into the Woods

When we imagine the forest, we tend towards extremes. The landscape is commonly read as a *binary* space—as either ‘good’ or ‘bad’. When it is ‘good’, it is a remedial setting of wonder and enchantment; when it is ‘bad’, it is a dangerous and terrifying wilderness. It is with the forest’s fearsome associations that this book is concerned.

The Gothic forest—that is, the frightening and foreboding forest—is an archetypal site of dread in the collective human imagination. It is, according to influential human geographer Yi-fu Tuan, one of our classic ‘landscapes of fear’ and it is undoubtedly a well-established and instantly recognisable trope across our various fictions.¹ The Deep Dark Woods are to be found throughout the centuries and in innumerable genres. This eerie landscape features, significantly, right from what is arguably the very first example of literature, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* (c.2100BC). It memorably opens *The Divine Comedy* (1320) and it dominates many of our most infamous fairy tales. We find it in J. R. R. Tolkien’s sinister manifestations of Mirkwood² and in the sublime forests of the Gothic canon, as seen in titles such as *The Mysteries of Udolpho*

¹Yi-fu Tuan, *Landscapes of Fear* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1979), 1.

²Tolkien’s writings are a fascinating subject (far beyond the reimits of this work) when it comes to his depictions of forests. He plays extensively with visions of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ forests. They feature in his works both as heroic adversaries of evil and as truly terrifying environments.

(1794) and *Dracula* (1897). More recently, we find the terrifying arboreal manifested in everything from *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) to the Forbidden Forest of the *Harry Potter* series (1997–2007). This setting resounds throughout our stories. Yet, *The Forest and the EcoGothic*—which examines the forest in the context of the ecocritical Gothic—will be the first work devoted entirely to our more ominous depictions of the forest as a site of trial, trepidation, and terror—despite this setting’s continual, if not increasing pervasion.

Nowadays, for the majority of humankind in the West, there is little practical reason to be afraid of the woods. For most of us, this environment does not feature in our everyday lives and it does not present a threat to our existence. Most of its predators that have been seen to endanger humans, such as wolves and bears, are now threatened with extinction—and it is much more common for humans to die in towns and in cities, than in the midst of the woods. In this light, then, the woodland setting is just not that dangerous. And yet, as Sara Maitland proclaims, ‘inside most of us post-enlightenment and would-be rational adults there is a child terrified by the wild wood’.³ Her wording here is interesting: the implication is that the modern adult who fears the forest does so *despite* the fact that he or she is ‘post-enlightenment’ and ‘would-be rational’. It is suggested, therefore, that such fears are today not only unfounded, but regressive and irrational. As Stephen Sondheim’s version of Little Red Riding Hood informs us in his wonderful musical *Into the Woods* (1986): ‘the woods are just trees’ and ‘the trees are just wood’ and no one ‘should’ have any cause for anxiety.⁴ Yet, we all know that Little Red, made up though she is, has every reason to fear the forest and though we may like to think ourselves beyond fairy tales, there is much evidence to suggest that we continue, indeed, to be ‘terrified by the wild wood’.

This raises the question not only of *why* we evidently still fear the forest, but of *what* exactly it is that we fear, when we fear this environment. The Deep Dark Forest is exactly that—deep and dark—and the exact source of its terrors is often mysterious, shadowy, and just out of sight.

³Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest: The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairy Tales* (London: Granta Books, 2012), 200.

⁴Stephen Sondheim, “Prologue,” *Into the Woods* (San Diego, 1986), Musical.

In Arthur Machen's words: the forest contains some 'awful secret'.⁵ It is fitting, then, that there is a common, if largely undiscussed tendency to talk about the Gothic forest in decidedly *vague* terms. Indeed, referring portentously to the so-called 'horror' of the woods, but without actually stating or defining what in fact this horror *is*, is standard practice in fiction that exploits our fears of the forest. We repeatedly find a sense of imprecision and secrecy in the descriptive language used. For example, in *Evil Dead* (1981) we are told 'there's *something* in the woods'; in *Hotel* (2004) it is said that '*something* terrible is happening out there'; in *Twin Peaks* (1990–1991) we are warned that 'there's a *sort of* evil in the woods'; and in Algernon Blackwood's 'The Man Whom the Trees Loved' (1912) it is aptly announced that 'this tree and forest business is so vague and horrible!' Time and again we are given stern warnings against entering this space—as with the sign to the Haunted Forest in *The Wizard of Oz* (1938), which reads 'I'd turn back if I were you' and in the unequivocal admonition '*don't ever, ever go into the woods*' in the horror film *The Woods* (2006)—but these are usually accompanied with very little, if any explanation. As summarised by one character in the 2013 film *Jug Face*: 'there's some weird shit going on in the woods', which—if we know what's good for us—'we don't want anything to do with'. There is the presiding sense that the forest's 'awful secret', whatever it may be, is something that we should not learn.⁶

This book sets out deliberately to shed some light on the Deep Dark Woods. It seeks to interrogate the so-called 'awful secret' of this setting and to understand the patterns and ways in which the trope of the Gothic forest works in its manipulations of our fears. This book is important—and important now—for a number of reasons. In a broader sense, *The Forest and the EcoGothic* significantly examines our representations of and relationship to nonhuman Nature. It does so in a time when understanding—and questioning—this relationship is more vital than ever before. We now live in an age that has been dubbed by many 'the Anthropocene': a time when the effects of humankind on the Earth are recognised as so

⁵Arthur Machen, "The Great God Pan," in *Tales of Horror and the Supernatural* (Leyburn: Tartarus Press, 2006), 106.

⁶The eeriness of the vagueness of such fears is capitalised on in horror titles such as *The Woods* and *The Forest* (there are several works with these names), which exploit our uncertain connotations, and perhaps most explicitly in Lorcan Finnegan's *Without Name* (2016).

wide-reaching and extreme as to have geological impact.⁷ Though it is not officially recognised as our new geological age, the term ‘Anthropocene’, or at least the essential idea behind it, is increasingly common knowledge. As Matthew Hall writes: ‘Most people are aware that human beings are harming nature’.⁸ In this context, it is unsurprising that recent years have seen a flourishing of interest, evident in fictional and critical texts alike, in the more problematic and *darke*r elements of our relationship with the natural world. This book serves as both a commentary on and an example of this interest. It holds that there is an extremely important, but often underestimated relationship between fiction and environmentalism: in line with Greg Garrard it contends that ‘environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms’⁹ and echoes the sentiments of Jonathan Bate, who highlights the ‘vital’ connections between contemporary green politics and the ‘language’ and ‘symbolism’ used in our fictional portrayals of Nature.¹⁰ It sees our *stories* about the environment—our ‘public dreams’, if you will—as ways of collectively working through what we think and feel about the nonhuman environment.¹¹ Consequently, this book prioritises the considered analysis of the stories we tell about Nature—and specifically the stories we tell about the woods. One of the frequently cited effects of modern, enlightened civilisation is our alienation from the material natural world.¹² This

⁷ ‘Anthropocene’ translates roughly to mean ‘the human age’ and is intended as an appropriate title for the age subsequent to the Holocene. Though first proposed in 2000, there is some disagreement as to when the Anthropocene itself started: many argue that it originated with nuclear impact in the 1950s, though others contend that this stance mistakenly overlooks at least two centuries of industrial pollution.

⁸ Matthew Hall, *Plants as Persons: A Philosophical Botany* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2011), 1.

⁹ Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Oxon: Routledge, 2004), 14.

¹⁰ Jonathan Bate, “Preface,” in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (Oxon: Routledge, 2000), 6.

¹¹ This is much in line with Cheryll Glotfelty’s main defence of ecocriticism as ‘a worthy enterprise primarily because it directs our attention to matters about which we need to be thinking. Consciousness raising is its most important task. For how can we solve environmental problems unless we start thinking about them?’ Cheryll Glotfelty, “Introduction: Literary Studies in an Age of Environmental Crisis,” in *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology*, eds. Cheryll Glotfelty and Harold Fromm (Athens, GA: University of Georgia Press, 1996), xxiv.

¹² See, for example, Terry Gifford’s “The Social Construction of Nature,” *ISLE* 3 no. 2 (Fall 1996): 27–35, <https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/3.2.27>.

includes our disconnection from the forest specifically. Robert Pogue Harrison, in his seminal work *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation* (1992), mourns the widespread loss of our connection to the woods, arguing that we now see them as mere setting and resource. We have largely lost the ability, it seems, to see them as truly strange, monstrous, and enchanting. Yet, it is possible that our stories—and particularly, as this book will argue, our more frightening stories—serve some role in reconnecting us to the myth and majesty of our natural spaces. This falls in line with Alister McGrath’s contention that we need to be ‘overwhelmed’¹³ by Nature and with Timothy Morton’s demand that it is our task to become ‘haunted beings’ once again, with a ‘spectral sense of our connectedness to everything on the planet’.¹⁴

The Forest and the EcoGothic focuses on twentieth- and twenty-first-century Anglophone representations of the Gothic forest in popular culture, examining a cross-section of key titles in literature and film, in order to explore the significance and resonance of this enduringly ubiquitous Gothic landscape. The expected, or ‘classic’ texts of woodland horror (such as *The Willows*, *The Blair Witch Project*, and the Grimm brothers’ fairy tales) are of course examined, but so too are some lesser known texts in order to illustrate the breadth and scale of the dark woods archetype. In terms of theory, this work relies on—and contributes to—the newly emerging field of ecoGothic studies. The ‘ecoGothic’ is a term that has inspired considerable excitement, but due to its nascency is still haunted by some uncertainty as to its precise definition and delineations. This work, therefore, not only draws on existing research in this area, using the ecoGothic as an analytical lens and tool, but devotes considerable attention to exploring and solidifying what exactly we mean when we talk about the ‘ecoGothic’—and why this is important. With its focus on the Deep Dark Woods, an indisputably archetypal example of what Tom J. Hillard has termed ‘Gothic Nature’, it provides us with what we might call an ecoGothic ‘case study’, and overall, it serves as an example of some

¹³ Alister McGrath, *The Reenchantment of Nature: The Denial of Religion and the Ecological Crisis* (New York: Doubleday, 2002), ix.

¹⁴ Stuart Jeffries, “Humankind by Timothy Morton Review—No More Leftist Defeatism, Everything Is Connected,” *The Guardian*, August 23, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/23/humankind-solidarity-with-nonhuman-people-by-timothy-morton-review>.

of the ways in which ecocriticism and the Gothic might be productively combined.¹⁵

The rationale behind the choice to focus predominantly on recent and contemporary texts is twofold. Firstly, this is due to the fact that the existing work on both the forest and on the ecoGothic is devoted almost exclusively to much older texts—so this book seeks to avoid revisiting ground that has been well covered by others. Few works focus in detail on the cultural significance of the forest in the human imagination and notable exceptions—such as Harrison’s aforementioned *Forests*, Alexander Porteous’ *The Forest in Folklore and Mythology* (2012), and Sara Maitland’s *Gossip from the Forest: The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairy Tales* (2012)—tend either to veer away from closely analysing the role of the forest (and particularly the Gothicised forest) specifically in fiction, or to look only to our older examples, focusing often on medieval or canonically Gothic works from earlier centuries. Similarly, much of the existing scholarship on ecocritical readings of Gothic texts focuses on older, more ‘classic’ works (see, for example: Lisa Kröger, Kevin Corstorphine, and David Punter’s essays on ecocriticism and eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novels in Andrew Smith and William Hughes’ 2013 seminal collection *Ecogothic*; the 2014 special issue of *Gothic Studies*, edited by David Del Principe and entitled *The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century*; Dewey W. Hall’s 2017 *Victorian Ecocriticism*; and Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils’ 2017 *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*). Secondly, by focusing on more recent and contemporary texts, *The Forest and the EcoGothic* sets out to directly engage with the fact that cultural explorations through fiction of various facets of ‘ecophobia’¹⁶ (our fears of Nature) are currently flourishing: as these debates are brought increasingly into the mainstream, this work seeks to capitalise on the sense of the immediacy and relevance of these themes.

It is important to emphasise, from the outset, that the structuring focus in this book is thematic rather than chronological. This is not a comprehensive or encyclopaedic history of the Gothic forest in our fictions; instead, it is an illustrative work on the ways in which we construe the forest as a Gothic locale in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The texts

¹⁵Tom J. Hillard, “‘Deep into That Darkness Peering’: An Essay on Gothic Nature,” *ISLE* 16 no. 4 (Autumn 2009): 685–95.

¹⁶Simon C. Estok, “Theorising in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia,” *ISLE* 16 no. 4 (Spring 2009): 203.

examined are exclusively Western: the majority are North American, but several are European. Though there are some considerable and nuanced differences in the associations between American and European forests, which are explored, I generally discuss the two collectively in terms of their symbolism. This is in line with the thinking of such critics as Carol Clover, who asserts that the ‘American woods’, when threatening, are akin to ‘the deep forests of central Europe’: ‘the point’, she urges, is that here ‘the rules of civilisation do not obtain’.¹⁷ James Bell, writing on ‘haunted landscapes’ in the Gothic, continues: ‘geographical accuracy is of little significance to the Gothic; what is important is the landscape’s expressive and symbolic potential’.¹⁸ Moreover, it is worth noting that many of the American fears of the woods are historically inherited from European anxieties. Much of the American fixation on the fearsome forest is tied to memories of the overwhelming forests of the New World. Its colonialists, as James H. Merrell argues, brought with them ‘the European deep-seated fears of the wilderness’ into America.¹⁹ It is key to emphasise, too, that when I discuss ‘*the forest*’, I am discussing this environment as a collective and symbolic construct. Due to the fact that this study focuses on fiction, the forests I discuss are literally imagined: my interest is in *figurative* representations of this setting. Such representations, I argue, are all the more pertinent in an age where ‘for the first time in human history, no true wilderness any longer exists’ (a subject examined in more detail in the final chapter).²⁰ Just as I discuss ‘*the forest*’, I also discuss ‘Nature’ in terms of a collective construct. I capitalise ‘Nature’ throughout this work for two reasons. Firstly, this is to emphasise my treatment of Nature as more entity than setting, and secondly, this is to distinguish clearly between the nonhuman natural world, as assumed in ‘Nature’ as a symbolic whole, and human ‘*nature*’.

It is worthy of note that the very discussion of Nature and such movements as ecocriticism are, in one sense, inherently paradoxical. This is

¹⁷ Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women and Chainsaws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 124.

¹⁸ James Bell, “Haunted Landscapes,” in *Gothic: The Dark Heart of Film* (London: BFI, 2013), 116.

¹⁹ James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York and London: W. W. Norton, 1999), 23.

²⁰ Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 257.

because there is an implication that we—humanity—are somehow objective and distinct from the natural world. We must, therefore, as Garrard contends, not lose sight of the fact that ‘nature exists as both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse’.²¹ Furthermore, it should be highlighted that in my discussion of the forest, there are some words I use to describe this setting that are treated synonymously. I alternate between the terms ‘the forest’ and ‘the woods’, as whilst technically speaking they denote different dimensions, and originally distinguished between public and private land, they are now frequently seen as interchangeable.²² In addition, I use the word ‘wilderness’ to describe the forest environment. This word in fact describes any ‘wild or uncultivated land’, but I note that in the Western world it is widely synonymous with forested landscapes. Moreover, it is an especially suitable word because of its emotional as well as geographical resonances. In addition to its denotation of topographical wildness, it implies ‘any region [...] in which one wanders or loses one’s way’.²³ Each of these terms—‘the woods’, ‘the forest’, and ‘the wilderness’—are to be understood as in symbolic contrast to human civilisation.

In order to interrogate the forest’s ‘awful secret’ and to better understand the workings of the trope of the Deep Dark Woods, this book is divided into four main chapters (Chapters 2–5), each of which approach the questions of why and how the forest is frightening from a different angle. Chapter 2 provides a theoretical foundation and methodological context for the study. Here, I explore some of the connections that can be made between ecocriticism and the Gothic. I provide a précis of much of the work done in the ecoGothic so far, contextualise it within wider theory, and formulate my own definitions and parameters of the term. The question of *why* the forest is frightening runs throughout the book, but is most explicitly addressed in Chapter 2, in which several theories that will prove recurrent are posited, whilst Chapters 3–5 are more concerned with *how* the forest frightens. Whilst Chapter 2 is wholly theoretical and

²¹ Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, 10.

²² The woods, technically, are categorised as a ‘collection of trees’ that is ‘smaller than a forest’. The forest, in turn, is ‘an *extensive* tract of land covered with trees’ and moreover is traditionally distinguished from the woods by the fact that it is owned by the monarchy. “woods, n,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2015). Web. July 10, 2015; and “forest, n,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, June 2015). Web. July 10, 2015.

²³ “wilderness, n.,” *OED Online*. Web. July 10, 2015.

examines some of the *reasons why* we fear the forest, Chapters 3–5 are devoted to literary and filmic analysis and are grouped according to the three *ways* in which the forest commonly *manifests* as a Gothic locale. Chapter 3 explores those texts in which the forest itself seems to come to life and is physically animate; Chapter 4 looks at texts in which the forest is home and habitat to our monsters, and Chapter 5 examines texts where the forest is ‘Gothicised’ because of an infecting human presence. A vital line of enquiry that resounds throughout when analysing why and how the Gothic forest functions is the interrogation of the degree to which this foreboding landscape (and, indeed, Nature itself for that matter) *can* ever exist ‘distinctly’ from humankind, or whether such distinction is always an illusion.²⁴ With this in mind, these four main chapters are structured to reflect the progression of this question. Following the theoretical introduction of the ecoGothic and some potential reasons why we fear the woods, Chapter 2 firmly sets up the question of if it is *ever*—as one character in *Evil Dead* so aptly puts it—‘*the woods themselves*’ that terrify us. Chapter 3 then focuses exclusively on fearsome depictions of ‘the woods themselves’ in our fictions, examining a breadth of texts from Algernon Blackwood’s *The Willows* (1907) to M. Night Shyamalan’s *The Happening* (2008). It explores texts in which actual, literal trees and forests collectively defy notions of ‘passive’ Nature and are presented as animate, ecocentric, alien threats. This chapter highlights, from the outset, the surprising rarity with which we see examples in our fiction of animate woods that are not somehow animated by some other external force (usually in some way monstrous or human: therein setting up the subjects of the subsequent chapters). The degree to which the Gothic forest can ever be truly distinct from human influence continues thematically through Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 4, which examines various strange and monstrous woodland denizens across a number of texts, from *Mythago Wood* (1984) to *The Witch* (2015), emphasises not only the fact that our forest monsters are often disturbing human/Nature hybrids, but the recurrent and sometimes inevitable sense that our monsters, secretly, are none other than *us*. This idea then comes into full focus in Chapter 5, which centres on such

²⁴This idea is examined most directly in Chapter 2, in my discussion of ecocriticism. Here I explore the fact that on the one hand ecocriticism is comparatively unusual as a theory in that it is one of the few that does *not* deem Nature mere social construction, but on the other hand provides us with fascinating deconstructions of the ways we as humans *do* endlessly imagine and invent ‘Nature’.

texts as *The Village* (2004) and *The Cabin in the Woods* (2012), in which it is humans that contaminate and *make* the forest a sinister location.

The chapters are divided as they are—starting with theory, before organising my textual analyses under three main headings in accordance with the three main ways in which the Gothic forest manifests (as animate, as monster-filled, as infected by the human)—in order to best scrutinise the forest’s ‘awful secret’ and to make more manageable what is ultimately an enormous subject. In imposing this structural rationale, however, we risk encountering what Jacques Derrida has called ‘the problem of policing boundaries’, which is essentially the danger of limiting our readings of certain texts by categorising them too strictly.²⁵ Indeed, it should be noted from the start that these divisions are but *one way* of approaching and organising this subject—and that several of the texts, as we will see, inevitably bleed a little between the categories. As Harrison correctly noted almost thirty years ago, we can only give ‘*a* history, not *the* history’ of the forest’s place in the cultural imagination.²⁶ ‘The forest’, he continues, ‘is a place where the logic of distinction goes astray’, where ‘perceptions become promiscuous with one another’, and ‘the straight line forms the circle’.²⁷ Nonetheless, at a time when the relationship between humans and the nonhuman world is at crisis point—and we are more ‘in the woods’ than ever before—it is imperative that we seek to understand the labyrinthine complexities of the Deep Dark Forest.

* * *

²⁵ Jacques Derrida and Avital, Ronell, “The Law of Genre,” *Critical Enquiry* 7 no. 1 (Autumn 1980): 65. Retrieved from: www.jstor.org/stable/1343176. Accessed February 19, 2016.

²⁶ Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), ix.

²⁷ *Ibid.*



Theorising the Forest: Approaching a Dark Ecology

2.1 THE ECHOING GREEN

The majority of existing writings on the forest tend to open with grand claims about how once upon a time *everything* was a forest. Alexander Porteous in *The Lore of the Forest: Myths and Legends* (1996) claims that forests were once inconceivably enormous, covering all of the earth¹; Robert Pogue Harrison insists in *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation* (1992) that ‘most of the places of human habitation in the West were at some time in the past more or less densely forested’²; and Jay Appleton in *The Experience of Landscape* (1996) argues that humans, collectively, have evolved from ‘forest-dwellers’ to ‘apartment-house-dwellers’.³ The idea that long ago we all lived amidst dense forests which covered the land is one that holds considerable traction in the popular imagination. It is not, however, strictly true. Renowned landscape historicist Oliver Rackham, who has written extensively on woods and forests, has highlighted what he calls our ‘pseudo-history’ of the forest.⁴ He contends that we are

¹Alexander Porteous, *The Lore of the Forest: Myths and Legends* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1996), 9.

²Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilisation* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), ix.

³Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (Chichester: Wiley, 1996), 29.

⁴Oliver Rackham, *Trees and Woodland in the British Landscape: The Complete History of Britain’s Trees, Woods, and Hedgerows* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1990), xviii.

less interested in actual facts about where exactly forests took hold and more interested in a romanticised notion that they were once absolutely everywhere. As Maitland argues, we *want* to believe in this alternative history.⁵ The fact that this alternative history is somewhat imagined should not detract from its importance when seeking to understand our relationship to the forest. As Rackham attests, it is an important and fascinating subject because most people believe it.⁶ Its popularity significantly reflects an awareness that we have lost something, something which is somehow connected to the forest, as we have become increasingly more urbanised. Despite—and perhaps in part because of—this sense of loss, we have what Richard Hayman has called ‘an echoing green that resounds within and around us’.⁷

Though our forests may be increasingly out of sight, they are not out of mind. Far from it. As Harrison attests, they are ‘everywhere in the fossil record of cultural memory’.⁸ Indeed, forests loom all the larger in the popular imagination *because* they are increasingly destroyed. The woods—symbolically—are all around us. In our everyday language, they continue to feature as customary analogies for a wide range of situations and emotions. When we struggle to see a situation in its entirety, we say ‘we can’t see the wood for the trees’. When we say someone is ‘in a wood’, we mean they are ‘in a difficulty, trouble, or perplexity’.⁹ If someone is temporarily endangered, and then moves into recovery, we will readily say ‘they are out of the woods’. And when we describe ourselves as ‘bewildered’, we are actually describing the uneasy sensations that can stem from being amidst the wilderness (the etymology of ‘bewildered’ deriving from ‘wild-dē-or-ness’).¹⁰ Broadly speaking, trees and forests continue to

⁵Sara Maitland, *Gossip from the Forest: The Tangled Roots of Our Forests and Fairy Tales* (London: Granta Books, 2012), 37.

⁶Rackham, *Trees and Woodland*, xviii.

⁷Richard Hayman, *Trees, Woodland and Civilisation* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 1. Hayman, here, draws on Romanticist associations, lifting the line ‘the echoing green’ from William Blake’s famous poem of the same name (1789).

⁸Harrison, *Forests*, x.

⁹“In a wood. Phrases and proverbs”. Oxford University Press, June 2015. Web. July 10, 2015.

¹⁰Roderick Frazier Nash, *Wilderness and the American Mind* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001), 5th edition, 1.

be of extreme importance in our symbolic and allegorical frames of reference. ‘Trees’, writes Mircea Eliade, ‘conjure a full range [...] of symbolism’: celestial and diabolical in equal measure.¹¹ In appearance, they may seem thoroughly beautiful or deeply disturbing. With their vertical cores, which split into limb-like appendages and their various markings, it is little wonder that they are common stimulants of pareidolia.¹² Moreover, with their seasonal transformations and humble origins in a single seed, they endlessly invite metaphorical comparison. It is fitting, therefore, that we have countless myths and legends about the forest. If one looks, for instance, to James Frazier’s *The Golden Bough* (1890) or to Porteous’ various collections on the forest and folklore, hundreds of narrative examples abound. Though many are enchanting, just as many are horrific. From legends that tell of human hands and feet becoming terribly deformed after certain trees are harmed, to cadavers that come to life when buried in the woods, to trees that bleed in ominous portent, our imaginations through the centuries provide us with an extensive history of tales to tell us to fear the woods.

As our darker tales of the forest are repeated, recycled, and newly created, we become quickly accustomed to and well-schooled in recognising the forest as a dangerous landscape. Indeed, the idea of ‘horror-in-the-woods’, as Rick McDonald asserts, is now so familiar it has become a cliché.¹³ Therefore, we may assume that there is a symbiotic connection between our ‘natural’ fears of the woods and our fictional creations about them. In other words: we present the forest as Gothic in our stories because we think it is Gothic, because it frightens us, but it also frightens us *because* of the fearsome ways we have portrayed it in these stories. As J. W. Williamson argues about our literary and filmic examples of actively

¹¹ Quoted in Jean Chevalier and Alain Gheerbrant, *A Dictionary of Symbols* (London: Penguin Books, 1969), 1026.

¹² Pareidolia is a type of apophenia, and is the psychological phenomenon of the human tendency to see patterns or meaning where it does not exist (for example, seeing animals or faces when looking at clouds and figments of the imagination such as ‘the man in the moon’).

¹³ Rick McDonald, “Sacred Violence and *The Cabin in the Woods*,” *Slayage: The Journal of the Joss Whedon Studies Association* 10 no. 2 (Fall 2013): 4, http://www.whedonstudies.tv/uploads/2/6/2/8/26288593/mcdonald_slayage_10.2-11.1.pdf. Accessed March 1, 2014.

monstrous Nature, these images ‘don’t just reflect our fear of nature, they actively *teach* it’.¹⁴

Before we delve into examining many of the stories we have told in recent years about the forest and what these reveal, it is necessary first to provide a theoretical and methodological context for the book as a whole. This chapter seeks to do exactly that: it introduces the ecoGothic, contextualising it within such broader topics and fields as ecocriticism, human geography, trans-corporeality, and ecophobia. It argues for the value of our fictional texts that centre on Gothic Nature as modern-day mythologies and introduces several opening hypotheses about why we fear the woods. Romanticist poet William Wordsworth, who coined this phrase ‘echoing green’, has famously espoused the importance of the forest. In his popular poem ‘The Tables Turned’ (1798), he insists that ‘One impulse from a vernal wood / May teach you more of man, / Of moral evil and of good / Than all the sages can’.¹⁵ He invites us, as Laurence Coupe summarises, ‘to learn from nature’—which means, according to Wordsworth’s own words in his poem, that we must ‘come forth into the light of things’.¹⁶ It is my contention, however, that in times of environmental crisis it is just as valuable to seek out *Gothic* Nature, as it is to seek out Romantic Nature, as our teacher...and to deliberately come into the *darkness* of things instead.

2.2 THE ECOGOTHIC

Our fears of the forest environment inevitably fall within the wider category of our fears of the natural world: what Simon C. Estok has termed our widespread ecophobia.¹⁷ Critics such as Tom J. Hillard and Stacy

¹⁴J. W. Williamson, *Hillbillyland* (Chapel Hill and London: The University of North Carolina Press, 1995), 151.

¹⁵William Wordsworth, “The Tables Turned,” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/45557/the-tables-turned>. Accessed July 26, 2017.

¹⁶Laurence Coupe, “Introduction: Nature/Culture/Gender,” in *The Green Studies Reader: From Romanticism to Ecocriticism*, ed. Laurence Coupe (Oxon: Routledge, 2000), 1.

¹⁷*Ibid.* In this essay, Estok originally defines ‘ecophobia’ predominantly as our ‘*hatred*’ of the natural world, but the term has since been developed by Estok and others to more clearly refer to our *fear* of the natural world. See in particular: Simon C. Estok, *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (New York: Routledge, 2018).

Alaimo have noted that such fears have been widely ignored in our critical discussions of the natural world in literature and film,¹⁸ which have tended instead to focus on its more ‘favourable’¹⁹ depictions. As Richard J. Schneider attests in *Dark Nature* (2016), despite the fact that an eco-centric approach has the potential to illuminate nearly any text you can imagine, writings on Nature in fiction have been largely dominated by pastoral and conservationist sensibilities.²⁰ Consequently, Estok insists that our more negative relations to the natural world—the ‘contempt and fear’ we feel towards it—desperately ‘need theorising’ and in a similar vein, Timothy Morton calls for a shift within our discussions towards what he calls a ‘dark ecology’, which is essentially a negative perspective on the human/Nature relationship.²¹ He contends that this darker approach ‘puts hesitation, irony, and thoughtfulness back into ecological thinking’ and emphasises the importance of specifically seeking out the ‘ugliness and horror’ in conceptions of the human-Nature dualism.²² The ecoGothic—which consciously brings together ecocriticism with our nastier ideas about the natural world—exists in answer to Estok’s and Morton’s calls to theorise and deconstruct our more sinister visions of the environment. Indeed it is the Gothic, as Andrew Smith and William Hughes reason in *Ecogothic* (2013), which is best situated to capture and express our eco-anxieties.²³

It is important firstly, in our discussion of the ecoGothic, to note that its ideas in themselves—in short, that Nature scares us—are certainly not new. What is new is the terminology and theoretical context with which

¹⁸Tom J. Hillard, “‘Deep into the Darkness Peering’: An Essay on Gothic Nature,” *ISLE* 16 no. 4 (Autumn 2009): 685–95; Stacy Alaimo, “Discomforting Creatures: Monstrous Natures in Recent Films,” in *Beyond Nature Writing Expanding the Boundaries of Ecocriticism*, eds. Karla Armbruster and Kathleen R. Wallace (Charlottesville, VA: The University Press of Virginia, 2001), 279.

¹⁹Alaimo, “Discomforting Creatures,” 279.

²⁰Richard J. Schneider, “Introduction,” in *Dark Nature: Anti-pastoral Essays in American Literature and Culture*, ed. Richard J. Schneider (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2018), vii.

²¹Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2010), 16.

²²Ibid.

²³Andrew Smith and William Hughes, “Introduction: Defining the EcoGothic,” in *Ecogothic*, eds. Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), 5.

the ecoGothic provides us. The ecoGothic, as mentioned, is still emerging and evolving and as such there is still considerable uncertainty as to precisely what it is. In its simplest sense, we can see that the word itself, comprised of ‘eco’ and ‘Gothic’, is of course an amalgamation of ‘ecology’ and ‘Gothic’. We are faced immediately then in this juxtaposition with the idea that Nature is in *itself* Gothic. Emily Dickinson once declared that ‘Nature is a haunted house’—and certainly Nature is every bit as pregnant with Gothic possibilities as any human-made construction. The ecoGothic has grown from numerous roots and has in turn sparked numerous ideas and new directions of thought. These origins and progressions are explored in this section: I begin with an overview of much of the existing work on the ecoGothic, then explore several other theories with which the ecoGothic interestingly intersects, before offering my own definitions and parameters for this new and exciting term.

The term ‘ecoGothic’, though increasingly popular, is inconsistently used. Varyingly and conflictingly described as a ‘genre’, ‘set of texts’, ‘mode’, ‘theory’, and ‘approach’—or simply used as a slightly vague, if evocative adjective—it is quickly apparent that this fledgling term is in the process of definition.²⁴ It has now appeared in a small multitude of works and been the subject of numerous panels at academic conferences,²⁵ but interestingly its origins are widely agreed to predate the explicit use of the term itself. Two essays that are almost unanimously cited in any discussion of the ecoGothic, by two critics I have already drawn upon, are Estok’s ‘Theorising in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia’ and Hillard’s “‘Deep into that Darkness Peering’”: An Essay on Gothic Nature’, each published in subsequent editions of the journal *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and the Environment* in 2009. Neither uses the term ‘ecoGothic’, but both lay the groundwork for

²⁴The new open access online journal *Gothic Nature: New Directions in Ecohorror and the EcoGothic*, features numerous ‘takes’ on the terms ‘ecohorror’ and ‘ecoGothic’, contributing to the evolutions of these terms. See <https://gothicnaturejournal.com/>.

²⁵If, for example, one studies the programmes of the *International Gothic Association* and the *ASLE* conferences in the last few years, it is clear that there has been a tangible increase in interest in this subject.

its emergence in critical discourse. Estok's essay has been cited on several occasions as the 'starting point' of the ecoGothic—provoking, firstly, Hillard's valuable and equally provocative response, as well as a steady stream of publications ever since. Estok's essential argument is that ecocriticism, as a body of research and inquiry, has too narrowly focused on our more positive constructions and understandings of Nature, at the expense of exploring our more frightening associations with the nonhuman world. He asserts that ecocriticism requires much more 'ambivalence' and that this can be primarily achieved through directly exploring and interrogating what he terms '*ecophobia*': the 'contempt' and 'fear' we have for Nature.²⁶ He claims that ecophobia, which he also describes as 'an irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world', is rampant in Western culture and so desperately requires our better understanding, a 'viable terminology', and, most significantly, '*theorising*'.²⁷ In his recent book *The Ecophobia Hypothesis* (2018), discussed below, he provides some of this theorisation. Hillard, in his essay, interrogates further and elaborates on Estok's assertions. He muses on our 'nearly ubiquitous cult fascination with the hostile and deadly aspects' of Nature and consequently deems the fact that ecocriticism has 'widely ignored' the deluge of dark and disturbing representations of the environment simply 'astounding'.²⁸ He suggests that Estok's conception of ecophobia as our 'contempt' and 'hatred' of Nature might be more accurately and productively conceived as our '*fear*' of Nature and—most significantly—he brings the word *Gothic* into the discussion.²⁹ Introducing the term 'Gothic Nature', he asks 'what happens when we bring the critical tools associated with Gothic fiction to bear on writing about nature?' and goes on to posit the Gothic mode as a 'useful lens' through which to deconstruct our depictions of Nature.³⁰ This deployment of the Gothic—this choice to directly confront what he calls the 'shadow' of place—offers us an implicit definition of the ecoGothic.

²⁶ Simon C. Estok, "Theorising in a Space of Ambivalent Openness: Ecocriticism and Ecophobia," *ISLE* 16 no. 4 (Spring 2009): 207.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 204–208.

²⁸ Hillard, "Deep into That Darkness Peering," 688.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 686.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 688.

The landmark text to explicitly use, define, and deliberately incite a debate on the term ‘ecoGothic’ was of course the already mentioned 2013 edited collection *Ecogothic* by Smith and Hughes. The editors’ co-written introduction importantly sets the scene for the ecoGothic, offering several valuable contexts and definitions, whilst firmly underlining the field’s significance. Early on they draw attention to the centrality of Nature in what we might think of as ‘classic’ Gothic texts, a motif that echoes throughout the collection as we explore the icescapes of *Frankenstein*, the forests of *Dracula*, and the various sublime landscapes of Ann Radcliffe. They also highlight from the outset the deceptive simplicity of the very word ‘Nature’ to systematically, if naïvely signify something imagined as separate, estranged, or distinct from us: they deem it a ‘semiotic problem’.³¹ In line with this idea that ecocritical writing is rich with examples and analyses of the pastoral and idyllic, but comparatively lacking in its interrogations into Nature’s darker counterparts, they suggest that one of the ecoGothic’s main purposes lies in ‘repositioning the ecological beyond the Wordsworthian tradition’.³² As the focus shifts from the bright and Romantic to the dark and unsettling elements of Nature, the ecological and the Gothic are directly brought into dialogue each other and it is at this ‘point of contact’ between the two—as the Gothic becomes ‘ecologically aware’ and ‘theories of ecocriticism’ are used to read the Gothic—that we find the ecoGothic.³³ Ecology and the Gothic, thus, are here seen to richly inform one another. In defining the ecoGothic as a means of ‘exploring the Gothic *through* theories of ecocriticism’ [my emphasis], Smith and Hughes are unambiguous about the fact it is intended as a theoretical framework, as opposed to a classificatory label for our fictions. Yet, the collected essays that follow the introduction—a stimulating collection that deal with everything from *Dracula* and Algernon Blackwood to *The Wicker Man* and post-apocalyptic fiction—are not unified in this regard. Some describe the fictions they address as in themselves ‘ecoGothic’, therein treating the term as a genre title, whilst others are more in sync with the editors’ introduction, defining the ecoGothic as a critical means through which to examine Nature in our Gothic fictions. In

³¹ Andrew Smith and William Hughes, “Introduction: Defining the EcoGothic,” in *Ecogothic*, eds. Andrew Smith and William Hughes (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2013), 3.

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 1.

terms of using ‘theories of ecocriticism’, this is interpreted by the majority of contributors in line with its broadest definitions, as an examination of the relationship between human and nonhuman Nature—and few, in fact, engage directly with some of the more detailed or intricate theories of ecocriticism. Nonetheless, Smith and Hughes make clear from the outset the importance of all explorations into Gothic Nature: in times of ever-escalating anthropogenic ecological crisis, a significant portion of our cultural fears pertain—or *should* pertain—to our relationship with the nonhuman world.

Following the publication of *Ecogothic*, David Del Principe guest-edited a special issue of *Gothic Studies* in 2014 entitled *The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century*. In his introduction, he defines the ‘emerging field of critical inquiry’ that is the ecoGothic as ‘a theoretical lens’ and ‘a literary and cultural mode’.³⁴ Usefully, he clearly encourages several of the contributors to weigh in on defining the term. Derek Gladwin’s succinct overview, in his essay on ‘The Bog Gothic’, is particularly valuable in this regard: he claims that the ecoGothic is a term used to denote ‘ecological approaches to Gothic literature and culture where nature and the environment can be investigated through fear and anxiety, as well as the sublime and the natural’.³⁵ Del Principe reiterates Hillard’s ideas on ‘Gothic Nature’ by claiming from the outset that ‘Nature’ itself is a ‘Gothic subject’.³⁶ He adds a slightly new and political slant in suggesting that the purpose of the ecoGothic is to allow us to consider the engagement of the Gothic with ‘environment- and species-related issues’.³⁷ Building on this, he brings into play the hotly debated subject in ecocritical circles of ‘ecocentrism’ vs. ‘anthropocentrism’, arguing that the ‘EcoGothic approach’ must question and oppose all affirmations of human dominion over Nature and instate ‘an ecocritical awareness to challenge [...] and expose the monstrous anthropocentric gaze’.³⁸ It must, he continues, take ‘a nonanthropocentric position to reconsider the

³⁴David Del Principe, “Introduction: The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century,” *Gothic Studies* 16 no. 1 (May 2014): 1.

³⁵Derek Gladwin, “The Bog Gothic: Bram Stoker’s ‘Carpet of Death’ and Ireland’s Horrible Beauty,” *The EcoGothic in the Long Nineteenth Century*, *Gothic Studies* 16 no. 1 (May 2014): 39.

³⁶Del Principe, “Introduction,” 1.

³⁷*Ibid.*

³⁸*Ibid.*, 2.

role that the environment, species, and nonhumans play in the construction of monstrosity and fear'.³⁹ Tying in not only with one of the Gothic's most noted obsessions, but with Alaimo's ideas on 'trans-corporeality', which we will come to shortly, Del Principe also argues for the centrality of the *body* to ecoGothic discussions. 'The ecoGothic', he asserts, 'examines the construction of the Gothic body—unhuman, nonhuman, transhuman, posthuman, or hybrid—through a more inclusive lens, asking how it can be more meaningfully understood as a site of articulation for environmental and species identity'.⁴⁰ Some of these ideas are taken up in the subsequent eight essays in the special issue, which each assume somewhat ecocentric perspectives in their discussions of such subjects as fungus, the animality of monsters, and vegetarianism in the Gothic.

Importantly, 2017 saw the publication of Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils' edited collection *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*. This work features a substantial introduction from the editors and thirteen essays on various elements of the ecoGothic in nineteenth-century American fiction. In the first sentence of the introduction, 'Approaches to the Ecogothic', Keetley and Sivils neatly proclaim that the ecoGothic 'in its broadest sense' is 'a literary mode at the intersection of environmental writing and the gothic', which 'typically presupposes some kind of ecocritical lens'.⁴¹ They elaborate on this latter part, emphasising the importance of 'a specifically *gothic* ecocritical lens' to illuminate the 'fear, anxiety, and dread' that haunt our relationships to the non-human world.⁴² Significantly, they emphasise the importance of 'greater flexibility' when it comes to cultural and literary modes, moving beyond any strict notions of genre in order to allow for the analysis of 'gothic tropes' in 'works not usually labelled as gothic' as well as in more obvious instances—which is much in line with my chosen analysis of Gothic forests in fiction, wherever they might appear.⁴³ The editors argue that the ecoGothic might most valuably be used as a tool to read culture by

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, "Approaches to the Ecogothic," in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth Century American Literature*, eds. Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (New York: Routledge, 2018), 1.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 2.

focusing in particular on the themes of time, space, race, and the non-human turn. The subsequent essays in the collection are quite diverse in subject matter—ranging from slave narratives and monstrous vegetation to hyperobjects and haunted animal skins—but nearly all seek to interrogate and define the term ‘ecoGothic’. The collection provides us with several thought-provoking, if sometimes contradictory definitions. Hillard, who fittingly opens the collection, firmly defines the ecoGothic as a ‘praxis’, as a ‘way of examining a text’ rather than as a strictly defined genre, and emphasises the need to examine what he terms ‘Gothic effects’ with ‘an eye toward understanding how they register concerns related to environment or ecology in the broadest senses’.⁴⁴ Jimmy L. Bryan Jr. argues that authors and artists can ‘summon the gothic’ in order to appal and manipulate audiences’ sensibilities about Nature and to ‘rouse their sympathies’ through ‘ecogothic stories’ and ‘ecogothic warning’.⁴⁵ Lesley Ginsberg deems the ecoGothic ‘a genre’ that emerged ‘in response to Transcendental conceptions of the relationship between humans and nature’.⁴⁶ Jericho Williams says the ecoGothic is something that ‘intertwines with other narrative modes’,⁴⁷ and Cari M. Carpenter emphasises the ‘beautiful terror’ and ‘interpenetration of the material world and the human’ that she sees as central to ‘the ecogothic genre’, whilst insisting that the ecoGothic is perfectly placed to ‘give us a way to think about the origins of the horrors that surround us’ and even inspire ‘healthier selves and [...] a healthier world’.⁴⁸ Jennifer Schell argues that anything that employs some of the familiar tropes of Gothic writing, such as ‘its preoccupation with death, fear, excess, and monstrosity’, in order

⁴⁴Tom J. Hillard, “‘Perverse Nature’: Anxieties of Animality and Environment in Charles Brockden Brown’s *Edgar Huntley*,” in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, eds. Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils, *Ecogothic*, 22–23.

⁴⁵Jimmy L. Bryan Jr., “‘Give Me My Skin’: William J. Snelling’s ‘A Night in the Woods’ (1836) and the Gothic Accusation Against Buffalo Extinction,” in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, eds. Keetley and Sivils, 77.

⁴⁶Lesley Ginsberg, “‘The Birth-Mark,’ ‘Rappaccini’s Daughter,’ and the Ecogothic,” in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, eds. Keetley and Sivils, 129.

⁴⁷Jericho Williams, “Ghoulis Hinterlands: Ecogothic Confrontations in American Slave Narrative,” in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, eds. Keetley and Sivils, 135.

⁴⁸Cari M. Carpenter, “Bleeding Feet and Failing Knees: The Ecogothic in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* and *Chasing Ice*,” in *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, eds. Keetley and Sivils, 147–49.