"Gigantic Paradox, Too . . . Monstrous for Solution": Nightmarish Democracy and the Schoolhouse Gothic from "William Wilson" to The Secret History

Sherry R. Truffin

Nightmarish schools and dangerous teachers make frequent appearances in literature and film that is Gothic in mood, plot, or theme. To review the history of the Gothic as a "Counter-Enlightenment" discourse (Davenport-Hines 1998: 12), albeit an ambivalent one, is to see the suitability, if not the inevitability, of the Gothic treatment of education and educators. Schools and schoolteachers are keepers and transmitters of enlightenment; at the same time, they are figures of power who may appear to wield an inexhaustible and inscrutable authority. Previously, I have designated horrific representations of such figures and the institutions they represent as "Schoolhouse Gothic" and included under this rubric not only fictional works by Flannery O’Connor, Toni Morrison, David Mamet, Stephen King, and Joyce Carol Oates, but also academic and pedagogical discourse by figures such as Michel Foucault and Louis Althusser (Truffin 2008). Schoolhouse Gothic fiction takes place in primary schools, high schools, universities, and even non-academic settings controlled by teachers or academics, but is unified in portraying Western education, its guardians, and its subjects using explicitly Gothic tropes such as the curse, the trap, and the monster. The non-fiction variety describes the academy using themes that correspond to these tropes: the tyranny of history, the terrors of physical or mental confinement, reification, miscreation. Both fiction and non-fiction portray schools as haunted or cursed by persistent power inequities (of race, gender, class, and age) and, ironically, by the
Enlightenment itself, which was to rescue civilization from the darkness of the past but which had a dark side of its own. Traps take the form of school buildings, campuses, classrooms, and faculty offices, all Enlightenment spaces analogous to the claustrophobic family mansions, monasteries, and convents of old. According to Chris Baldick, the Gothic meeting of curse and trap produces paranoia and "disintegration" (1992: xix), to which can be added violence and new, monstrous creation. In the Schoolhouse Gothic, school is experienced as psychological and social trauma, and it transforms students into sociopaths, machines, or zombies. The pervasiveness of the Schoolhouse Gothic suggests, at the very least, that our educational institutions are sites of significant psychological, cultural, and political anxiety.

In the American context, much of this anxiety springs from contradictions in our academies. Presumably benign institutions, schools may nevertheless be experienced as everything from unfeeling bureaucracies to brainwashing factories to militaristic zones to lawless wastelands. Ostensibly democratizing, leveling meritocracies that prepare students for citizenship in an egalitarian nation, American schools remain at the same time resistant to democracy. They can create conditions for social mobility, but they reproduce the existing class structure more often than they challenge that structure (Herzberg 1991). As such, they may appear frustratingly classless to the elite and forbiddingly or tantalizingly aristocratic to the middle or working classes. Such contradictions and tensions animate two works of the Schoolhouse Gothic, Edgar Allan Poe's "William Wilson" (1839) and Donna Tartt's *The Secret History* (1991), texts whose protagonists emerge from school damaged and dangerous, texts in which the promise of democratizing education becomes a grimly parodic threat.

Separated by 150 years of American history but linked by the tropes of the Schoolhouse Gothic and by Tartt's references to Poe, "William Wilson" and *The Secret History* make a fitting pair in that they dramatize, from contrasting socioeconomic positions, the hidden but persistent terrors of an educational system that simultaneously promises equality and mobility. Like most Schoolhouse Gothic protagonists, the narrators of these works arrive at school "cursed" by nature and nurture alike: they are imaginative, morbid, neurotic, and self-conscious in temperament, thus deeply susceptible to school settings that are seductively ancient, enchanting, and unreal, yet prison-like, isolated, and claustrophobic. Further, the protagonists have been failed by inadequate parents and teachers who have either ceded power to them or arbitrarily, capriciously larded it over them, failing in either case to equip them for democratic citizenship and the sharing of power. As the curses of the past join forces with the isolated, incarcerating present, both characters become paranoid, suffer from hallucinations that may or may not be alcohol- or drug-induced, and experience psychic disintegration or detachment from self. Poe's Wilson, who is from an elite family, seeks in the school confirmation of his superiority but is instead confronted with his commonness and transformed into a "democratic" mob of one. Tartt's Richard, a middle-class suburbanite, seeks in the school social mobility and transformation but only finds it by losing himself in an elite "pack" of students (Tartt 1992: 443). Wilson's school produces a monstrous democratic self: split, multiplied, imperious, impulsive, immoral,
and mob-like, while Richard’s school creates a monstrous elitist self: also split, multiplied, and imperious, but amoral and coldly rational. In both texts, school breaks the protagonist down psychologically and duplicates or absorbs him socially, destroying his conscience and fashioning the fragments of his former self into a nightmarish caricature of democratic progress.

“William Wilson” is Edgar Allan Poe’s only story that prominently features a school, in this case, one modeled on an English academy that Poe attended from 1818 to 1820, Reverend Bransby’s Manor House Boarding School in the Stoke Newington area of suburban London (Meyers 2000: 10–13). Facing death, the story’s protagonist wishes to explain what led him to a life of “unspeakable misery” and “unpardonable crime” and, in so doing, to portray himself as “the slave of circumstances beyond human control” (Poe 2004: 217) and thus gain the “sympathy” of listeners. Wilson comes from a “rare” known for its “imaginative and easily excitable temperament” and spends his early childhood dominating his household (217). He is sent to a foreboding, incarcerating boarding school, where he dominates all of his peers save one, a double who shares his name, birthday, height, appearance, and matriculation date. According to the narrator, the two spend their school days battling for supremacy, during which time the double vexes the protagonist by imitating him and offering unsolicited advice that he acknowledges as good but finds infuriatingly patronizing (223). At one point, Wilson sneaks into his double’s bedchamber at night for a practical joke and comes away horrified, apparently as a result of seeing his own features staring back at him from the bed. After Wilson leaves his first school, his double mysteriously shows up to thwart him whenever he is about to do something wicked (offer a profane, drunken toast at Eton; financially ruin a peer by cheating at cards at Oxford; pursue an adulterous liaison in Italy). The narrator flees around the world, continually dogged by his double, until he resolves “to submit no longer to be enslaved” (230). He confronts and murders his double at a masquerade party, only to turn aside for a moment, then discover what appears to be a “material change” (231) in his surroundings (a change he soon disavows) by which he sees himself in a mirror, dying and claiming that he has destroyed himself.

Donna Tartt’s The Secret History, also narrated by its protagonist, explains how Richard Papen, a scholarship student from a California suburb attending a private liberal arts college in New England in the 1980s, came to conspire with his peers to murder a classmate. Richard, the only child of an unremarkable middle-class family, abandons a pre-med program in California and moves across the country to attend Hampden College in Vermont, modeled on Bennington College, the alma mater of both Tartt and fellow classmate and writer Bret Easton Ellis. For Richard, Hampden offers an escape from his “ugly” home, “mean” father, neglectful mother, and “tainted” life (Tartt 1992: 6). Having previously taken and enjoyed classes in Greek, he attempts to enroll in similar classes at Hampden but is initially rebuffed by the wealthy, charming, elusive classics professor Julian Morrow (referred to as Julian by his students). Julian, who refuses payment from the college, teaches a very small, select group of students that includes the brilliant, rich, and sometimes awkward leader, Henry; the rich, (“Bunny” of it Poe char that Ric control on mates ha and acci early ba the mur includin brought abuse at reveals abandor Richard in Calif “appeali cence de each is Richard

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the rich, flamboyantly gay Francis; the jovial but not particularly bright Edmund ("Bunny"), who has picked up his family's habit of living beyond his means; and a pair of incestuous twins, Charles and Camilla (who seem like modernized versions of Poe characters). Julian eventually accepts Richard into the classics program but insists that Richard drop all but one of his classes and allow Julian to assume complete control over his education. Meanwhile, inspired by Julian's lessons, Richard's classmates have been secretly attempting their own bacchanal, eventually achieving success and accidentally killing a local farmer in the ensuing frenzy. Bunny, who had hindered early bacchanal attempts and been excluded from the successful one, learns about the murder and becomes an increasingly unstable threat. To silence him, the group, including Richard, conspires to kill Bunny in a way that looks accidental. Stress brought on by a search for Bunny's body and an FBI investigation leads to substance abuse and group friction. Meanwhile, a temporarily misplaced letter from Bunny reveals the farmer's murder to Julian, who leaves the country to avoid scandal, an abandonment that is especially painful for Henry, who eventually commits suicide. Richard becomes the only one of the group to graduate and ends up reluctantly back in California for graduate school, where he studies Jacobean drama, which he finds "appealing" for its "candlelit and treacherous universe... of sin unpunished, of innocence destroyed" (492). The group disperses but stays in contact enough to know that each is living an isolated, restless, or melancholy existence, and the novel ends as Richard dreams of encountering Henry's ghost while wandering through a ruined city.

Like many Gothic protagonists before and after them, the narrators of "William Wilson" and The Secret History are sensitive, imaginative, and melancholic: predisposed to experience environment and atmosphere in especially intense ways and deeply affected by living among a small population of peers in isolated, timeworn places. Wilson acknowledges that his "constitutional infirmities" include being "addicted to the wildest caprices" and "prey to the most ungovernable passions" (Poe 2004: 217), while Richard reports having "a nervous and delicately calibrated mind" (Tartt 1992: 203) and even falling prey to "morbid, Poe-like fantasies" (108). These impressionable narrators find themselves in schools that are old and decaying, located in quaint, remote towns, one a "dream-like, a spirit-soothing, . . . venerable old town" (Poe 2004: 218) in England, and one a rural New England village with roads named Battinkill and Deepkill. Wilson portrays his school as a large, labyrinthine "place of enchantment" (219) while bemoaning his ability to escape its "prison-like rampart" (218) only three times a week: for a brief, supervised walk every Saturday and for two church services led by the schoolmaster/pastor each Sunday (218). Once Wilson's vexing double appears, the insularity of the school offers no relief or escape: the other Wilson is there in each class, at recess, in the dorm, and at church. The pattern that begins at school continues beyond it, as Wilson "fle(es) in vain" from his tormentor (229, author's emphasis). Richard, for his part, selects Hampden College because of its "storybook" (Tartt 1992: 9) brochure and wanders the campus like a "sleepwalker, stunned and drunk with beauty" (11). He finds the school socially as well as architecturally enchanting: the classics students seem to him an "arresting party" with "a
variety of picturesque and fictive qualities" (15). After Bunny's murder, Richard consoles himself that the crime had "bound" them together: "we were not ordinary friends, but friends til-death-do-us-part." Eventually, however, the thought of being "stuck with them, with all of them, for good" disgusts him (418). The school that initially enchanted each narrator traps him. The physical trap is temporary, but the social one is permanent.

The challenges of nature are joined by haunting deficiencies of nurture to render each protagonist unprepared to negotiate the challenges of life among peers. Wilson and Richard have weak or neglectful parents and lack siblings or close childhood friends, so they arrive at school having received neither instruction nor practice in living, working, and sharing power with others. Wilson is "self-willed," and his parents are "weak-minded" and unable to "check [his] evil propensities" (Poe 2004: 217). After a few "feeble and ill-directed" efforts to manage Wilson fail, his "voice" becomes "household law," and he is "left to the guidance of [his] own will" (217). Richard is similarly abandoned to his own devices, though for different reasons. His father, whom he regards as "deluded and ignorant, . . . incompetent in every way" (Tarret 1992: 474), abuses his mother, and these unhappy, unpleasant parents dislike and ignore him as a rule. "William Wilson" emphasizes the absence of parental control and *The Secret History* the lack of parental nurture. Authorities at school do no better, and power remains mystifying or vacant. Wilson's boarding school provides structure and discipline but no nurturing or guidance, while Richard's college lacks the headmaster of Wilson's school, Dr. Bransby, is both pastor and principal, a "gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution" in that he is simultaneously the "demurely benign" minister and the harsh schoolmaster who "administer[s], [rod] in hand, the Draconian laws of the academy" (Poe 2004: 218). His office, located "in a remote and terror-inspiring angle," has a "massy door" that Wilson and his classmates would sooner endure torture than open without an invitation from the schoolmaster (219).

Authorities at Richard's school are much less frightful but hardly supportive mentors. Most of the faculty at Hampden College appear too absorbed in petty squabbles, hedonistic pursuits, heady research, or everyday living to notice their students at all. Julian is the exception, but since he appears to Richard as "a gatekeeper in a fairy story" (Tarret 1992: 23) and to Henry as "a divinity in our midst" (287), his authority is clearly of the mystified and non-democratic variety. At home and in school, both narrators have been socialized under arbitrary or mysterious power — not shared power — and are, therefore, unprepared for democratic citizenship of any kind.

Life at school is presented as a contest for dominance undertaken by protagonists who regard power not only as mysterious but also as impossible to wield except at the expense of others. Wilson arrives at school looking to dominate his classmates and finds his goal nearly realizable, if not for the double who, alone of his peers, dares to "interfere with [his] arbitrary dictation in any respect whatsoever" and challenge his otherwise "supreme and unqualified despotism" (Poe 2004: 220). Wilson worries that his double's easy "equality" with him might really be evidence of "superiority" (220). He cannot tolerate, or perhaps even conceive of, equality and believes that one must ultimately rule *History*, Richardly. After all, Richard: "now, I something self control," at the very right" (Tarret 1992: detection are unexpected a

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ultimately rule the other, so he resolves not to be the one who is ruled. In *The Secret History*, Richard realizes his craving for a sense of control gradually and perhaps belatedly. After the murder, Henry describes to Richard the impact of the year’s events on him: “now, I know that I can do anything that I want . . . [Y]ou’ve experienced something similar yourself, . . . that surge of power and delight, of confidence, of control,” at which point Richard acknowledges, at least to himself, that Henry “was right” (Tartt 1992: 449). Richard has eliminated the threat to his group, evaded detection and capture, and become a law unto himself. School has empowered him in unexpected and disturbing ways.

The power struggle parallels the psychological deterioration that is central to the Gothic experience. Wilson’s story is a fantastic one in Todorov’s sense: it never completely resolves the ambiguity about the status of the double (Ware 1989), who seems mostly allegorical and psychological (the narrator’s projection, his detached conscience) but occasionally literal and material, apparently experienced as a separate entity by persons other than the narrator. The double does not appear to the narrator until his school days, a fact that Freudian critics attribute to the school’s function as representative of the superego (Bonaparte 1949: 543, 554), while Lacanian critics attribute it to the school’s connection with the Symbolic order (Jung 2001: 396). Regardless of the psychological rubric used to examine the relationship, it is clear that the double’s appearance engenders in Wilson both paranoia and panic. By “some unaccountable blindness” (Poe 2004: 221), no one else appears to notice the drama that unfolds between the two Wilsons, which suggests, at the very least, that the narrator’s nervous, self-conscious, imaginative nature has caused him to see an epic contest where there is only ordinary boyhood rivalry – if not that Wilson is downright psychotic or schizophrenic. Either way, his psychological disintegration is precipitated by his social duplication at school and the threat that it has posed to his sense of identity and supremacy.

Richard is empowered through absorption into an insular “pack” (Tartt 1992: 443) that causes him to become increasingly detached from reality and from himself throughout the novel. He explains that “sometimes, when . . . reality is too strange and sudden to comprehend, the surreal will take over” (89), and there are moments in his college life that seem “like a painting too vivid to be real” (89) or to have “the quality of a memory” (93) even as they are happening. This sense of disconnect increases throughout the novel in relationship to shifts in his sense of social identity. During Christmas break, Richard rents an apartment with no heat because he does not want to go home to California, cannot stay in his dormitory, and is too proud to admit to his rich friends that he cannot afford proper lodging. He continues working at the school for an oblivious psychology professor who fails to notice the physical and mental deterioration unfolding before his eyes, so Richard learns to make himself “invisible” in public places to avoid his freezing apartment. The cost of this invisibility, he reports, is a “kind of mental darkness” that becomes “something like mania” (107). The physical cause of this mania is revealed to be pneumonia, but his diagnosis of social invisibility is significant. When his peers are absent, he lacks a social safety
net and becomes faceless, indistinguishable from his environment. When school resumes, he becomes increasingly identified with the group, causing further loss of perspective and of self. By the time of Bunny's murder, he is completely detached, and he watches his friend Bunny fall to his death as though viewing a "documentary film" (250), feeling neither "pity" nor "regret" (209), acknowledging that he has fallen prey to "some primitive, numbing effect" (251). After the murder, he and his circle of elite classics students become increasingly dependent on alcohol, drugs, and sleeping pills so as to live in a "perpetual twilight" (446). He begins to experience "fragmented time" (346), worries that Henry may have tried to frame him for Bunny's murder (422), hallucinates "gallows" on the university commons as a Poe narrator would (446), and considers a passive form of suicide (444). Wilson and Richard may have arrived at school especially susceptible to the morbid power of Gothic spaces, but by the time they leave, they are more than vulnerable: they are scared and split, paranoid and psychotic.

The power struggles that precipitate and accompany their disintegration are simultaneously internal and external, psychological and social. The psychological dimension is revealed not only in a general detachment from self and reality but also in the self-destructive annihilation of an antagonist towards whom the protagonist feels deeply ambivalent, an antagonist associated to one degree or another with the conscience. The epigraph of "William Wilson" refers to "Conscience grim" as "a spectre in my path" (Poe 2004: 216), and the story has often been interpreted as a parable of the conscience that both attracts and repulses the narrator (Jung 2001: 385). The double, who seems to have "no heel of Achilles," both angers and fascinates Wilson (Poe 2004: 222). For most of their time at school, Wilson's feelings towards his rival "for[m] a motley and heterogeneous admixture," and he cannot "bring himself to hate" his antagonist (221). Nevertheless, he is exasperated by the condescending advice offered by his double, however good it may be, and he is enraged by the double's continual interference with his will. Eventually, he does grow to despise the other Wilson (223). Richard's antagonist is more a foil than a double. Like Richard, Bunny neither comes from "old money" nor has the funds to live as his peers do, and Richard doesn't even recognize Bunny as an antagonist until he discovers that Bunny envies him and resents his acceptance into the group (Tartt 1992: 179). When Bunny learns of the murder and becomes increasingly unstable, his gentle, genial teasing of his peers becomes increasingly pointed and brutal, as he torments Francis for his homosexuality, Charles and Camilla for their Catholicism, and Camilla for her gender. In Richard's case, Bunny makes inquiries into his fictitious prep school background and challenges his pedigree in front of the group, to Richard's terrible mortification (201–203). Richard admits that "by stages" he "began to abhor" his antagonist (200), though he feels ready to forgive him at times and continues to feel affection for him years later (204). While Bunny's cruelty, instability, and personal habits contrast sharply with the kindness, dignified composure, and moral uprightness of Wilson's double, Bunny is a kind of conscience for the group. He torments and threatens his peers in part because he has been excluded and insulted (175), but at the same time, he is deeply disturbed by the mun before Bunt young man as Sin and I author's em be more pr see their pr moral rules Each sile is, to one c (Peyser 201 confronts tl unifies all tl school, he is reminded tl to others an spectre of e by his imp wealthiest e he seeks up family has a social boun each antago "the ambiti [Wilson hit as he frustrs at best from these two leveli process cou opportunity! Wilson's threatening catic "mot new arena i him to sub while reves common n: time out of 220). As P world wht the schooln between th
by the murder itself, apparently more disturbed than the actual murderers. Shortly before Bunny’s own murder, the blithely unaware Julian becomes alarmed by the young man’s “sudden interest in ethics” and his “questions . . . about such hazy concerns as Sin and Forgiveness,” inquiries that fill the professor with a “pagan alarm” (221, author’s emphasis). The association between the tormentor and the conscience may be more pronounced in “William Wilson” than in The Secret History, but both texts see their protagonists permanently silencing adversaries who put them in mind of moral rules or limits. In so doing, they silence a part of their own psyches.

Each silenced antagonist resonates politically as well as psychologically because he is, to one degree or another, a specifically and frighteningly democratic conscience (Peyser 2010, regarding Poe) in at least two senses. The first is that each antagonist confronts the protagonist with his commonness, the commonness that supposedly unifies all American subjects and makes democracy possible. When Wilson goes to school, he seeks to confirm and extend his elite status but is instead continuously reminded that his lack of an aristocratic name is emblematic of a threatening likeness to others and equality with them. Thomas Peyser argues that Wilson “flees from the spectre of equality by indulging in an orgy of ostentation” (2010: 103), illustrated by his impulse to “vie in profuseness of expenditure with the haughtiest heirs of the wealthiest earldoms in Great Britain” (Poe 2004: 226). When Richard goes to school, he seeks upward mobility by joining an elite group and by murdering a peer whose family has made an incomplete class leap and who incessantly polices class and other social boundaries. The second, less pronounced, connection with democracy is that each antagonist represents to the narrator a kind of mediocrity. Wilson’s double lacks “the ambition which urged, and . . . the passionate energy of mind which enabled [Wilson himself] to excel” (Poe 2004: 221). He betrays no aspirations of his own even as he frustrates Wilson’s (Peyser 2010: 101). Meanwhile, Bunny is a mediocre student at best from a socially grasping family with questionable taste. Considered together, these two texts suggest that in a democracy, the function of the school is a nightmarishly leveling one, a distorted vision of democratic progress. While the leveling process could temper Wilson’s domineering tendencies and offer Richard a healthy opportunity for social mobility, it creates monsters of them both.

Wilson’s school initially appears to promise power and distinction but ends up threatening to dissolve his identity by absorbing him into an undifferentiated democratic “mob.” It seems to be a place where Wilson can “make a name for himself,” a new arena for self-definition and domination beyond the household. Instead, it forces him to submit to rules and live in uncomfortably small, close quarters with peers while revealing or instigating his duplication, obliging him to hear his shamefully common name, “one of those every-day appellations which seem . . . to have been, time out of mind, the common property of the mob,” endlessly repeated (Poe 2004: 220). As Peyser puts it, Wilson’s story offers a “bizarrely literal picture of life in a world where . . . people are created equal” (2010: 101). Even the physical objects in the schoolroom, as Theron Britt (1993) points out, suggest the blurring of boundaries between the self and other, as Wilson describes desks “so besmeared with initial letters,
names at full length, grotesque figures, and other multiplied efforts of the knife, as to have entirely lost what little of original form might have been their portion in days long departed” (Poe 2004: 219). It is no accident that the names, or identities, get “lost” through duplication, whether the duplication comes in the form of graffiti on desks or a mysterious alter ego.

For Britt, the tale offers a “psychological analogue to the contradictions within early American democracy” (1995: 204). Poe published “William Wilson” in 1839, when the Whigs and Democrats alike were gearing up for the 1840 presidential election by playing on the fear of “mob rule” in general and of immigrants in particular, arguing that the masses, especially new arrivals, could be easily manipulated by a strong will. Poe had well-known aristocratic leanings, was concerned about the loosening of family ties in democratic society and suspicious of the multitudes, and supported the Whigs (Meyers 2000: 242; Britt 1995: 199). Britt sees Wilson as “a Whig version of a Jacksonian Democrat who attempts to exert his will over the resistance of his double and everyone else and erase any differences between others and his will,” eventually “fail[ing] miserably” (1995: 204). In this reading, Wilson is ironically both aggressor and victim: simultaneously the man who manipulates the mob, the mob itself, and the mob’s victim. Such a paradox is made possible by the blurring of boundaries in democratic societies and the institutions that support them. Democracy, through school, has split and duplicated him.

While Wilson’s entrance into school marks his painful transition from household tyrant to ordinary student, from dictator to crowd-dweller, Richard’s takes him in the opposite direction: from provincial, middle-class suburbanite to exotic, aristocratic, or feudal elite. His childhood and early years are symbolized by a “drab” collection of common objects: “sneakers, . . . coloring books, . . . [a] squashed old football, . . . little of interest, less of beauty” (Taritt 1992: 5). He was a good, but not a great, student who spent his time reading and watching television (6). His memories are vague, undifferentiated, more a “melancholy feeling . . . associate[d] with watching ‘The Wonderful World of Disney’ on Sunday nights” than anything else (6). Everything in his past seems insipid and embarrassingly common to him. Upon arriving at the beautiful, intoxicating, selective Hampden College, he aspires to join the aesthetes and the elites. When he inquires about taking Greek classes, his first academic advisor reports, disapprovingly, that Julian Morrow selects pupils in a way that is not, in his view, “democratic” (12) because he “accepts only a . . . very limited number” of students and chooses them “on a personal rather than an academic basis” (11), the criteria being that the prospective student has “read the right things” and “hold[es] similar views” (12). It is said that Julian’s “sympath[ies] – on principle – [are] with royalists instead of revolutionaries” (318), and when he interviews Richard for admission into the classics program, he points out approvingly that his prospective student’s “wonderful” name evokes that of “kings of France” (23). Julian’s hierarchical sensibilities connect to his scholarly pursuits as well: he speaks approvingly of Plato’s definition of “justice,” by which “each level of hierarchy works within its place and is content with it” (192). Once admitted to the classics program, Richard finds that a
class with Julian is a “benevolent dictatorship” (294) to which his students, all of whom have aristocratic pedigrees or pretensions, eagerly submit. Julian’s power over his students comes in large part from charm, charisma, refinement, and ancient learning. He is “a marvelous talker, a magical talker” (32), and his teaching inspires his students, including the restless middle-class protagonist, with visions of ancient power. During Richard’s first class, which Ian Munday has characterized as a “fascistic” (2012: 49) lesson, Julian lectures on Plato’s four divine madnesses and the burden of the self. He rejects love as a means of escaping the self, comparing it to slavery, but speaks approvingly of losing oneself in battle and bemoans the paucity of “glorious causes” (33) in the modern world. He casually points out that his small cadre of students could invade and capture Hampden town by themselves, stirring Henry to outline a plan for doing so. Julian listens and remarks that they would be “heroes” to whom the natives would pay “tribute,” prompting Francis to imagine the group as “demigods” occupying “thrones on the town square” (33). Richard, who wishes very much “to be like” these peers (28), embraces their elitism even after one of them justifies evading responsibility for the farmer’s death with a scornful “it’s no: like we killed Voltaire” (280, author’s emphasis). In short, Richard transforms from faceless, disaffected suburbanite to would-be feudal lord or even demigod in less than one semester of college.

Richard and his peers are, of course, more monsters than demigods. Not surprisingly, however, the elitist fiend has a different character than the democratic version represented by Wilson. Recall that Wilson and Richard both arrived at school with similar temperaments: imaginative, nervous, excitable, self-conscious. When they leave school, however, they are different. Wilson had always been “prey to the most ungovernable passions” (Poe 2004: 217), but his self-control is not helped by any of the schools he attends. He spends “three years of folly” and overindulgence at Eton before attending Oxford, which he characterizes as “the most dissolute university in Europe” (226) and the place where he “out-Heroded Herod” (226). He flees Oxford when his double reveals that he has been cheating at cards, and after that, his character becomes increasingly paranoid, impulsive, and wild. In contrast, Richard’s monstrousity is a chilling thing. Though Hampden College as a whole is, like Wilson, “prope to hysteria” (Tartt 1992: 343), Richard emerges from it detached and cold. He reports that making plans with his peers to kill Bunny never seemed like “anything but a game” (250), and the mastermind of the group, Henry, regards the murder as a “chess problem” (228). If the murder is to the protagonist and company a puzzle, its aftermath is a pleasing spectacle. During the search for Bunny, Richard watches Julian observing “the grand cinematic expanse of men and wilderness” and notes that “the operatic sweep of the search . . . could not fail to appeal to him[,] . . . he was pleased, however obscurely, with the aesthetics of the thing” (309). What Richard says of his professor he says of himself: he couldn’t sense Julian’s unspoken satisfaction with that beauty without seeing that beauty on his own, and he has already admitted that his “fatal flaw” is a “longing for the picturesque at all costs” (5). Where the monstrous democratic self is prone to rage, the
elitist version tends towards intellectual and aesthetic detachment. Either way, the monster was created at school.

Monsters of all sources and stripes have their home in the Gothic, which provides an appropriate context in which to locate their meaning. Critics of the Gothic often speak of it in therapeutic terms: David Punter and Maggie Kilgour, for instance, call the Gothic a form of “cultural self-analysis” (Punter 1996: 205; Kilgour 1998: 50), and Punter sees the curative nature of the Gothic in its provision of an “image-language in which to examine . . . social fears” (1996: 117). Familiar components of this “image-language” are curses, traps, and monsters. A curse is a reminder that one is never as free from history, personal or corporate, as one might think or wish. A trap suggests limitations on one’s movement, physical and psychic. Monsters manifest evils of all kinds, internal and external. These and other Gothic tropes literalize common fears and present them in their most extreme, grotesque forms. They are psychological, social, and political caricatures, which is to say, exaggerated portraits from whose broad lines something of the “real” might nevertheless be inferred. Poe and Tarpe present readers with scenarios that could illustrate democratic progress but do not. The democratic aspects of Wilson’s schooling could have mitigated his aristocratic sensibilities and prepared him for citizenship in an egalitarian society, but instead they create in him a mob of one and an object lesson in the worst possibilities of democracy. At the same time, the elitist elements of Richard’s schooling could have afforded him an opportunity for the upward social mobility that defines the American Dream, but instead transform him into a cold, monstrous caricature of privilege. To the extent that schools serve a leveling function, they elevate some while downgrading others — and risk generating unexpected distortions either way.

Such distortions are both social and psychological, and the literature under consideration here portrays schooling first as psychological breakdown and then as monstrous social formation. Meanwhile, actual American schools seem in recent years to display little appetite for a downgrading function of any kind and instead emphasize psychological health; in fact, “the mission statements of many schools,” psychologist Jean Twenge reports, “announce that they aim to raise students’ self-esteem” (2006: 56) in conjunction with a “society-wide effort” (53) dating back to the early 1980s. This self-esteem movement appears to have achieved some success: “the average kid in the mid-1990s . . . had higher self-esteem than 73% of kids in 1979” (53). At the same time, according to Twenge, it has a dark side: it generates unrealistically “lofty ambitions” (78) in young people and “promote[s] feelings that are actually a lot closer to narcissism” (53) and “entitlement” (70) than to a healthy, reality-based sense of self-worth. As a consequence, these young people “can’t take criticism” (64) and experience “crippling anxiety and crushing depression” (109) when the world fails to deliver the expected levels of happiness and success. Among educators, stories of outrageously entitled students commonly circulate, and at the time of this writing, the YouTube video of a Boston-area high school commencement speech with the mantra “you are not special” has gone viral, suggesting a backlash to the excesses of the self-esteem movement. So, and the message. Th not serve hir
movement. Though the speech itself is nuanced, many responses to it have been less so, and there is reason to avoid uncritically embracing the "you are not special" message. That is, after all, the lesson that William Wilson learned at school. It did not serve him, or his world, well.

CROSS-REFERENCES

SEE CHAPTER 4 (AMERICAN MONSTERS), CHAPTER 12 (DESCENDENTALISM AND THE DARK ROMANTICS: POE, HAWTHORNE, MELVILLE, AND THE

SUBVERSION OF AMERICAN TRANSCENDENTALISM), CHAPTER 30 (TONI MORRISON’S GOTHIC: HEADLESS BRIDES AND HAUNTED COMMUNES).

NOTE

1 Ellis’s Lunar Park, whose protagonist teaches creative writing at Camden College, also modeled on Bennington College, is the subject of Chapter 5 in this volume.

REFERENCES


FURTHER READING


Poole, W.S. (2011). *Monsters in America: Our Historical Obsession with the Hideous and the Haunting*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press. Shows that the monstrous “other” throughout American history reveals cultural anxieties about religion, science, race, gender, class, and politics.