Chasing the Social Gothic in Antebellum Fiction

The Social in the Gothic Short Fiction of Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne

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1. Foreword

This dissertation marks the conclusion of a four year education literature and linguistics at the University of Ghent. I am indebted to my mother and grandmother for inspiring me to choosing this education. Before I start off my discussion I want to also briefly thank certain people who have been instrumental in the completion of this project.

I thank my family and my parents for their continued support over the course of my university education. They have been a great source of inspiration and motivation for me, and I am very grateful that they have been with me all this time.

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2. The Antebellum Period and American Gothic Literature

This first chapter will sketch the socio-economic changes occurring during the Antebellum Period. Afterwards it will discuss the literary marketplace that emerged during the first part of the nineteenth century, after which I will sketch an overview of Gothic literature from its origins until modern Gothic. This chapter will then be concluded by conceptualising the social Gothic.

2.1 America’s Antebellum Surge

The literature of Edgar Allan Poe, Washington Irving and Nathaniel Hawthorne is to be situated in the Antebellum Period. Historically this period ranges from 1814, with the end of The War of 1812, to 1860 (Castillo XV-XVI). Even though historically the period can be characterised as relatively short, American society would undergo deeply felt changes, laying the foundations for modernisation after the Civil War.

The early United States became an industrialised nation in which cities would be “linked by road, rail and navigable lakes and rivers” (Castillo 98), an example of this is the completion of the Erie Canal in 1825. Such improvements in infrastructure, also referred to as “internal improvements” (Lepler 10), went hand in glove with an initial urbanisation in the United States, mainly led by New York. Seeing its population increase from 60,000 to 800,000 inhabitants from 1800 to 1860, the East Coast city was the prime example for other cities like Pittsburgh, Detroit and Cleveland that would become the industrial centres of the country after the Civil War (Lehan 182-3). As a new nineteenth-century phenomenon the city would gradually spread over the continent from the east towards the west, a phenomenon which Lehan dubbed “the Urban Frontier” (182). This would result in a dichotomy between the rural population and the

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1 Castillo also describes an exponential demographic growth: from 1760 to 1820 the population of the colonies would increase from 1,500,000 to 9,500,000 (98), serving as a further illustration of the rapid development of the early United States.
urban population, exemplified by Jefferson’s refusal of urban life: “he feared that the powers set in motion by the Revolution could be misapplied, turning democracy into a new authoritarianism brought about by capitalistic competition, urban development, and the birth and growth of an urban proletariat.” (Lehan 168). What Jefferson’s exclamation shows is that traditional rural America of the eighteenth century experienced difficulties with the transition towards an urban society. John Gast also voiced this wave of urbanisation in *American Progress* by depicting a city in the right side of the painting that would, guided by Columbia, gradually spreading westward, urbanising the American mainland.

The industrialisation and initial urbanisation were not the sole changes American society underwent during the first part of the nineteenth century. The economy expanded rapidly and became dominated by commerce and finance capitalism, which would in turn crystallise in the formation of a literary marketplace. This marketplace constituted the crux of the period’s literary vocation and experience, exemplified by the surge of literary magazines and the vogue of the short story (cf. infra). Nevertheless, the Antebellum socio-economic transformation did not spark a wave of optimism with the Americans. To the contrary, the first part of the nineteenth century was characterised by uncertainty and instability. To illustrate, a first case that caused major social unrest was Andrew Jackson’s plan to aid the settlers by establishing the Indian Removal Act in 1830, as the native Americans barred the settlers from fulfilling their Manifest Destiny. This resulted in the massive deportation of the Cherokees in 1838, which would later be called the Trail of Tears. Ultimately, Indian removal sparked heavy debate amongst writers. An example of this is William Apess’ essay “A Looking-Glass for the White Man” of 1833, in which he exposed the hypocrisy of Christian Americans who denied fundamental rights to the natives (Castillo 104-106).

Furthermore, financial panics sparked by economic bubbles plagued the first part of the nineteenth century, adding to the period’s uncertainty and instability. There was the Panic of
1825, caused by British banks investing in rotten South American bonds, the Great Panic of 1837, due to an American banking crisis, the Panic of 1847, again caused by a British banking crisis and the Panic of 1857 (Schelstraete). In *The Many Panics of 1837* Jessica Lepler investigates the economic situation of 1837 and offers an explanation for the frailty of the American economy during the first part of the nineteenth century. In her first chapter dubbed “A Very ‘Gamblous’ Affair” she showed that the economic growth which I described earlier was propelled by individual investors (8), who were in a state of “continual anxiety” driven by financial gains (9). However, this anxiety consequently meant that even the smallest rumour could result in prices plummeting and bubbles bursting, as investments depended mostly on investor confidence which “had the power to transform economic backwaters into bustling cities because it generated credit—the ability to use money before earning it” (Lepler 9). In short, speculation rendered the economic environment of the first half of the century highly unstable, resulting in those many panics I listed above.

The problematic status of money is a third illustration that indicates the unstability of the period. Due to the expansion of the market economy money became an exchange medium representing value, whilst it also possessed a commodity value in itself (Cutler 32). A debate would grow between bullionists, who advocated for a specie-based monetary system in which the value of money would be based on gold or silver, and legal money or legal tender advocates, who pled for a wider circulation of paper money, not necessarily based on precious metals (Cutler 33-37). The issue would prove a hard one to settle, as both approaches to the monetary conundrum had certain disadvantages. An economy based on paper notes as the legal tender proponents envisioned would make it difficult to fix any substance of value, as there are no underlying valuable species like gold or silver. For bullionists this approach to the monetary issue was the principal cause for the period’s crises. However, the bullionist solution of the specie-based monetary system did not satisfy either, because in their approach “money is not
only a medium representing commodity values but also a commodity in its own right” (Cutler 33). Hence, money would become subject to market fluctuations, so the bullionist system did not guarantee economic stability either. Ultimately the debate “settled here, between the conservative argument for specie-backed paper currency and the progressive argument for a legal tender administered by the nation and on behalf of the nation” (Cutler 36).

Having covered three specific cases which illustrated the instability during the Antebellum Period, the next paragraphs will deal with the economic institutionalisation of the period’s literature in a bustling literary marketplace. The surge of the American short story can be conjoined with the emergence of this marketplace, a genre piloted by Irving, Poe and Hawthorne.

2.2 The Literary Marketplace of the Antebellum Period

Initially, the literary market in the United States was in a premature state. At the beginning of the century there hardly were any publishers due to two reasons. The first involves copyright legislation. In 1790 the first copyright law passed which made literature intellectual property and turned authorship into a valid profession. However, because international copyright legislation only passed in 1891 American writers had a difficult time in establishing their careers internationally (Bell 13-14). Due to this lack of international copyright legislation, American authors received next to no income for their work outside of the United States making it unable for them to live off their pen. At the same time these authors had to compete with cheaper reprints of renowned British work of Scott, Byron and Thackeray in America, adding to their difficulties to make a living out of writing (Bell 14). Nevertheless, the work of these British authors did help establish readership in the United States. This would prove a fruitful ground for American authors for creating and selling their own work (Bell 14).

The second reason for the primitive state of American book publishing at the beginning of the nineteenth century was the local distribution of books. Bell wrote that “local printers,
who also functioned as booksellers, produced copies sufficient to meet the demands of the local audience, and authors often simply published where they lived” (14). Publishing started as a regional and decentralised business, which would gradually change as the socio-economic environment would improve and cities would become connected with each other as I have described earlier. This resulted in the rise of urban literary centres like New York and Philadelphia that would take over the role of the local publishers printing and distributing books (Bell 14-16). To illustrate the rise of the book market Bell described the rise in value of manufacturing and selling books which increased from $2.5 million in 1820 to $12.5 in 1850 (16), showing that the literary market during the Antebellum Period became one of the more important markets of the time.

The capitalisation of the antebellum book market also resulted in publishers gaining control over what writers could and could not write, depending on the public’s taste. As I have mentioned earlier the economy of the nineteenth century was largely based on (individual) speculation and this extended to publishers who had to predict what narratives would sell. Hence, publishing firms pressed authors to conform to the audience’s needs and wishes, as those firms were taking the financial risk of publishing a book. This shift from the author to the publisher taking the financial risk resulted in the authors experiencing a decline in their royalties, but also a reduction of the price of books: “thus by the 1840s successful professional authors like Irving and Cooper had to generate far more sales just to produce earnings equal to those they had received in the 1820s.” (Bell 16). The crux of the nineteenth century literary marketplace was exactly that symbiotic connection between publishers and writers: publishers largely decided about literary vogue and writers conformed to that vogue in order generate larger revenues. This will also become significant when I discuss the genesis of the short story form in the Antebellum Period later on.
Terrence Whalen’s conception of three types of readers can serve as an illustration for the pressure exerted by publishers on authors to conform their writing to market demands, illustrating this symbiotic connection between publishers and authors. In “The philosophy of Composition” Poe refers to “[…] the necessity […] of composing a poem that should suit at once the popular and the critical taste” (552) which inspired Terrence Whalen to conceptualise three types of readers during the Antebellum Period. Firstly, there is the Ideal Reader, a reader with taste with whom a writer could establish a bond of sympathy. Secondly, there is the Feared Reader, the anonymous collective reader generally referred to as the mob or rabble. The third type of reader functions as the mediator between the author and the other two types: the Capital Reader who acts as the “embodiment of capital itself” (Whalen 9-10). This reader was the entity between author and audience, a critic supporting publishers in the decision whether or not a specific piece of writing could generate enough profit and was therefore worth publishing. Whalen referred to this mediating entity as a “deep connection between gross economic forces and the creative activity of literary producers” (10). The existence of such a capital reader shows the firm ties between publishers and authors in the Antebellum Period, emphasising the symbiotic connection mentioned in previous paragraph.

However, emergent literary magazines would exert considerable pressure on this lien between author and publisher. In accordance with this emerging book market, magazine publishing would also experience a dramatic rise during the first part of the nineteenth century:

Between 1825 and 1850, […], the number of magazines published in the United States rose from less than one hundred to something like six hundred; and although failure remained the norm, a growing number of those ventures achieved enduring commercial success and circulations unheard of earlier. (Bell 53)
This enabled the American literature aficionado to consume literary magazines like the *American Quarterly Review* (1827-1837), the *New York Review* (1837-42), or even *Graham’s Magazine* founded by George Graham in 1839. In Graham’s magazine Poe published his renowned review of Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, illustrating the increasing importance of literary magazines (Bell 53-54). It is not coincidental that Edgar Allan Poe was one of the first American writers to realise that the magazine was the ideal medium for publishing literature, and a means of competing with book publishers. The rise of magazines meant that publishers had to share their influence on literary vogues with the editors of those magazines rendering the literary landscape of the Antebellum Period more complex than just the relation between an author and his publisher.

On top of that, during the economic depression of 1837 (which devastated the book trade, reducing the price of a book down from $2.00 during the 1820s to fifty cents from 1837 until 1847 [Whalen 24]), Poe realised that “the magazine, rather than the book, [was] the appropriate expression of American Culture”, writing to a sponsor that “the whole energetic, busy spirit of the age tended wholly to the Magazine literature – […]” (Scofield 6-7). According to Andrew Levy, Poe desired to found a “ground-breaking literary journal that would free him from economic necessity, as well as assure him a position of privilege within the mercantile culture that he openly repudiated” (11). Poe can thus be connected with the financial concerns of the antebellum writing practice, consciously writing according to his audience’s demands in order to generate a larger income. This coincides with Terrence Whalen’s conception of Poe when he assessed that literary commentary has had a long tradition of focusing on Poe’s supposedly decadent biography, attributing to the antebellum writer an aura of the independent aesthete, whereas in truth Poe cared about his income to a larger extent than was conventionally assumed (4).
By “frequently [referring] to ‘literary commodities,’ ‘literary enterprises,’ ‘the general market for literary wares,’ and to the ‘saleableness of literature’” Poe showed that he was an “exceedingly perceptive witness to the new conditions of literary production” (Whalen 7). In doing so, Poe’s poetics diverged largely from what Emerson established in his 1844 essay “The Poet”: “thou shalt lie close hid with nature, and canst not be afforded to the Capitol or the Exchange. The world is full of renunciations and apprenticeships, and this is thine: thou must pass for a fool and a churl for a long season” (309). By ignoring the Exchange and other financial, non-literary affairs the poet would become the true land-lord Emerson envisaged (310). The discord between the perception of Poe as a market-conscious writer and Emerson’s transcendent account of writing is clarified in Poe’s “The Philosophy of Composition” of 1846: “most writers—poets in especial—prefer having it understood that they compose by a species of fine frenzy—an ecstatic intuition—*and would positively shudder at letting the public take a peep behind the scenes, […]*” (551; my italics). Even though Poe mainly referred to the act of composing a poem, it is not unimaginable that ‘a peep behind the scenes’ can refer to the institutionalisation of literature during the Antebellum Period. Thus, to refer back to “The Poet”, Emerson describes what is on the scene: American literature taking up the shroud of a purely aesthetic art. But examining Poe reveals what was going on behind that scene: the pragmatic, financial identity of antebellum writing.

This serves as a first indication that antebellum writing cannot be separated from its socio-economic context, an idea which I will explore further towards the end of this part. Considering the presence of a literary market, a genre had to be devised to fill the pages of antebellum literary magazines which had to conform to the taste of the reader. The answer was found in the short story, which would gradually be known as the American genre.
2.3 The Creation of the American Short Story

“Each age, it is found, must write its own books; or rather, each generation for the next succeeding. The books of an older period will not fit this” (246) Emerson wrote in his 1837 essay “The American Scholar”. The Antebellum Period did create its own books, or rather its own stories, as it was the period in which the short story genre rose to prominence as the ideal answer to the demands of both readers, publishers and editors.

In his overview of the development of the American short story Fred Lewis Pattee started his survey with Washington Irving, claiming that the short story began with Irving in 1819 when he published *The Sketch Book of Geoffrey Crayon*, a collection of short stories and essays (1). Born in New York and being of British descent, Irving’s religious background tolerated writing fiction, because he remained untouched by New England and its puritanism, a “religious atmosphere which in New England killed all early attempts at fiction […]” (Pattee 1-2). However, Irving’s writing was still partially reliant on previous-century writing. He “prolonged the eighteenth century” by writing in the observant style of Addison (Pattee 2), not wholly honouring Emerson’s call to write for the next generation. Irving thus introduced the short story, but it would not rise to popularity until the literary marketplace fully adopted the genre.

The short story fitted the nineteenth-century literary market perfectly, because it met the demands set by the “managerial capitalism” of the time (Urgo 339). The genre was short, efficient, and could be read within the timespan of one to two hours:

The short story is a capitalist art form of a particular sort: it is managerial. A short story must be complete within certain spatial confines, or else it doesn’t count as a short story—it may drift into a novella if it is too long, or a sketch if it is incomplete. When a short story is successful, when it is a masterpiece of the genre, critics tend to admire the management of materials within the confines of
the form. The development of the short story parallels the rise of managerial capitalism in the United States. As an art form, its structure mirrors an imperative of its cultural context. (Urgo 346)

By referring to ‘structure’, ‘management of materials’, and ‘an imperative of its cultural context’ Urgo emphasised the financial context that was influencing literature during the nineteenth century: like the economy, literature had to be efficient, quick, and had to “function ‘like clockwork’” (Urgo 346). Thus, the short story became the ideal answer to the appeal for an efficient literature: it had “an aesthetic appeal because its form was the content of the era: proficient and productive, but displaying a keenly managed efficiency” (Urgo 348). Accordingly, Scofield attributed to the short story the qualities of “lightness and mobility” that suited “the preoccupations of a fast developing rural and urban culture, characterized by the diversity of its traditions and the mixed nature of its population” (8).

Antebellum authors also envisaged the short story as the ideal genre with which they should work. This is exemplified in Poe’s review of Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales in 1842 in which he comments extensively on the short story form. In his review Poe mentions the aim of a writer to construct a single effect in his work, and this effect is not allowed to be rendered stale by using a longer genre. Ideally, an author constructs narratives “in the brief tale [where] the author is enabled to carry out his full design without interruption. During the hour of perusal, the soul of the reader is at the writer’s control” (566, Review as reprinted in The Portable Poe ed. Philip van Doren Stern). The same idea was also voiced in “The Philosophy of Composition”: “the initial consideration was that of extent. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, […]–for, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere, and every thing like totality is at once destroyed” (552). According to Poe, not only was the short story efficient according to market standards, but authors also appeared to prefer the genre as the best way to convey effect and emotion and to keep the reader captivated. The genre thus
became the ideal cultural and financial outlet, a common ground of the Antebellum Period on which authors, publishers and editors could work together. This also emphasises the connection between authors on the one hand and publishers and editors on the other hand which highlights that during the Antebellum Period writers no longer were independent aesthetes.

Nevertheless, not only the publishers and writers of literature of the nineteenth century benefited from the genre, but the readers did as well. In his article Joseph Urgo quoted Bryllion Fagin’s 1936 *America Through the Short Story*:

We have been a busy people, busy principally in evolving a production system supremely efficient. […] Leisurely reading has been, for most Americans, impossible. As with our meals, we have grabbed bits of reading standing up, cafeteria style, and gulped down cups of sentiment on the run. (Fagin 6, as cited in Urgo 347; my omission)

The short story form suited antebellum readers ideally, as it was short and fast, like the socio-economic environment in which they had to work. The pace with which these tales could be read was the main attraction for readers toward the genre. On top of that, the genre appealed because of its democracy, as it was closely associated with the man in the street and for example the precursor of one-hour television plays or films. Moreover, short stories were also the best form to treat the life of isolated individuals in dealing with episodes typical of common life, adding to the genre’s attraction upon nineteenth-century readers (Scofield 8). Joseph Urgo went even further by establishing the short genre as a nationalist art form: “the marketplace determined the form of the American short story, but that is only half the equation. From its beginning in the United States, the short story was as well a source of national definition” (349). Readers wished to learn about the “expanse of their own nation state”, being intrigued by stories of what was happening at the margins of their society (Urgo 349). An antebellum reader thus
not only enjoyed short stories because they were short, but he or she also found a corresponding voice in short stories, a kind of familiarity which attracted the reader towards the genre.

To sum up, the short story became the prime genre of the Antebellum Period due to its core qualities: short, fast, American and profitable. It therefore became a distinctly American genre to which commentators generally referred as “our genre” or the “national art form” (Levy 27). The short story became even more profitable and attractive when the Gothic tampered with the genre.

2.4 From European Gothic to Modern Gothic

Gothic fiction dates back to the second half of the eighteenth century in England. The post-Enlightenment novel tradition was piloted by four writers whose work was the cradle of Gothic fiction: Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), William Beckford’s *Vathek* (1786), Ann Radcliffe’s novel *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) and Mathew Lewis’ *The Monk* (1796). The *Norton Anthology for English Literature* described the essence of these early Gothic novels as

accounts of terrifying experiences in ancient castles and ruined abbeys—experiences connected with subterranean dungeons, secret passageways, flickering lamps, screams, moans, ghosts, and graveyards. In the long run Gothic became a label for the macabre, mysterious, supernatural, and terrifying, especially the *pleasurably* terrifying, in literature generally; [...] (584)

Medieval settings, damsels in distress chased by villains and macabre creatures characterised those Gothic novels, whilst the mode also preferred to push and investigate boundaries, engaging in exploiting taboos (Lloyd-Smith 5). Correspondingly, Anne Williams defined the first wave of Gothic writing as “[...] a matter of decor and mood–of haunted castle, and brooding, mysterious hero/villain, of beleaguered heroines, of ghosts [...]”, of an ambiguously
pleasurable terror, of the nostalgic melancholy of ruins and of remote times and places” (14). Remarkably, the Norton Anthology also mentioned a connection with a flourishing book market. Its introduction to the chapter on Gothic fiction is titled “The Gothic and the Development of a Mass Readership”, referring back to the connection between finance and literature covered in previous chapter. This is further emphasised when the Norton anthology assesses that “by the 1790s trading on horror, mystery, and faraway settings flooded the book market; [...]” (584; my italics).

To return to my discussion of the Gothic, the citation of the preceding paragraph concerning the essence of the Gothic novel mentioned a ‘pleasurably terrifying’ experience. This appears contradictory until the concept of the Sublime is introduced. During Antiquity Longinus coined the term in his *An Essay upon Sublime*, but in his writings the concept was still preoccupied with rhetoric: “as that *Sublime* is the Excellence and sovereign Beauty of a Discourse, and that it rais’d the greatest Poets and Orators of Antiquity to that pitch and fame, which they have maintain’d against all” (3). Longinus’ description of the emotion associated with a sublime style of writing can be closely related to what Poe wrote in his Composition-essay concerning a single effect. Comparable to this effect the sublime has to be “like a Tempest, [carrying] all before it, and [shewing] all the strength of an Orator combin’d into one stroke” (Longinus 3). Comparably, Poe also valued the idea of ‘one stroke’: the quality of a tale is determined by brevity, as brevity contributes to the general effect upon the reader, a writer’s key concern (*The Portable Poe*, 565-566).

However, the better-known conceptualisation of the Sublime was made by Edmund Burke in his *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*. Characteristically for the eighteenth-century Gothic, Burke’s oft cited definition of the sublime still grounds the concept outside of the subject: it is an exterior object impressing the
experiencer. This then results in a sublime sensation, but the sublime itself is an inherent quality of that object:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling. I say the strongest emotion, because I am satisfied the ideas of pain are much more powerful than those which enter on the part of pleasure. (39)

Hence, ‘pleasurably terrifying’ becomes clearer, as the pleasurable experience derived from the sublime results from terrifying pain in Burke’s definition.

In comparison, in his book The Gothic Sublime Vijay Mishra referred to an ‘object-based sublime’, a natural sublime in which the “hyperreality of the Gothic dreamscape” was seen as significant about the Gothic mode, also generally excluding an affective subject and rhetorical tropes (22). He continued with a description of the Gothic sublime which “tropes the sublime as the unthinkable, the unnameable, and the unspeakable, always making it, the incommensurable with each other and in excess of language. […] It is not what the Gothic sublime is that is crucial, it is what it effects that is its essence.” (Mishra 23). Mishra thus separated the Gothic sublime from Burke’s overarching Sublime and conceptualised it as the unsayable, rendering it mysterious and therefore intriguing for readers. Gothic novels were then mainly read for the emotion, the fear they conveyed, in turn becoming a new aesthetics for writers. (Mishra 24). The focus in Gothic writing would switch from this insistence upon the sublime towards the psychological, the inner life of characters in which Freud’s theory of the uncanny plays a major role.
“From Gothic fiction onwards, there is a gradual transition from the marvellous to the uncanny—the history of the survival of Gothic horror is one of progressive internalisation and recognition of fears as generated by the self” Rosemary Jackson wrote in her *Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion* (24). She signalled a development from the exterior based Gothic of the late eighteenth century to the interior Gothic of the twentieth century. The case of Freud’s ‘uncanny’ illustrates this transition.

In 1919 Sigmund Freud designed his concept the uncanny as a new psychoanalytical take on the Gothic. In German he refers to it as ‘das Unheimliche’ which comprises das Heimliche, the homely, or that what is familiar. The uncanny runs parallel with the unfamiliar, and Freud conceptualises it by drawing on Shelling’s *Philosophie der Mythologie*: “Unheimlich is the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light” (4; Freud’s citation of Schelling). The uncanny does not originate from macabre, fantastical beings or objects like the sublime did, but the uncanny exists by grace of the writer “[pretending] to move in the world of common reality” (18). In Lloyd-Smith’s words in *Uncanny American Fiction* the uncanny can only exist when “the literary text escapes the determinants of reality, while pretending subjugation to these laws.” (10). Hence the uncanny text seems to draw upon the real, the familiar for the reader which ultimately becomes fantastical, unfamiliar. The essential quality of the uncanny is to frighten “precisely because it is not known and familiar” (Freud 2), yet at the same time the unfamiliar is grounded in the subject as well: the unfamiliar is grounded in the familiar. However, this unfamiliar part of the subject is repressed by the subject (cf. the idea of Freud’s Id) and the uncanny sensation results when this repressed element comes to light (Freud 13). Hence the uncanny comes down to the familiar, the consciousness of the subject, being comprised by the unfamiliar, the subconscious or the Id of the subject. Consequently, this reveals a shift in Gothic writing, no longer drawing on the exterior notion of the sublime, but now drawing on the inner world of characters, their
psychological being. An illustration of the uncanny in Gothic writing is exemplified in Poe’s “The Black Cat”² where he writes about the spirit of perverseness: “who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a wile or stupid action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not” (225). Perverseness forces man to do what he knows is unacceptable, thus being repressed and the experience of this perverseness is the uncanny. The perverse deed can be characterised as the familiar unfamiliar: it is part of us, yet at the same time we cannot acknowledge it, because it is perverse, resulting in the uncanny sensation.

Having presented a brief overview of Gothic fiction from its origins to its modern state, the next issue to be covered is the American Gothic and what separates it from its European counterpart.

2.5 The American Gothic

The Gothic in American literature commenced with Charles Brockden Brown as “[…] leading exponent of Gothic fiction, a literary mode which was singularly appropriate to evoke the suppressed fears of a nation which itself had emerged as the result of a revolution, and in which social structures and gender roles were experiencing far-reaching changes” (Castillo 96-97). Brown’s novel Wieland in 1798 was also one of the first American novels to be labelled Gothic. However, the novel was still largely part of the British Gothic tradition, but it initiated the evolution away from the European Gothic. That Brown’s work was influenced by British writing should not come as a shock, because American writers at the time were still largely part of British culture, “working in an English language domain and exposed, both intellectually and in terms of their market place, to British models” (Lloyd-Smith 3). The same applied to the Gothic: writers were influenced by the English Gothic, but would ultimately develop in other

² In this research I draw on the short stories as published in the Penguin complete edition (see bibliography).
directions: less towards Walpole or Radcliffe and more towards writers like William Godwin and James Hogg (Lloyd-Smith 4).

To start off with, the American Gothic entertains an intricate relation with its European predecessor. Anne William noted that “the Gothic flourished from 1765 until about 1820 and then died” and soon after she mentioned the “mass-market revival of the 1960s” (14) revealing a gap between the traditional Gothic and the modern Gothic. However, it could be argued that on the continuum between the Gothic of Walpole, Lewis, Radcliffe and Beckford and the Gothic infused with modern psychological insights like the uncanny, American Gothic fulfils a place somewhere in the middle as the transition between both traditions. On the one hand, American tales of terror still draw on fantastical elements. For example, in “The Fall of the House of Usher” a revenant haunts Roderick Usher like Lewis’ monk chasing his victims. Another example is Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow” drawing on the notion of a headless horseman, showing American Gothic’s tendency to use the supernatural. On the other hand, some tales like “The Tell-Tale Heart” or “The Black Cat” draw their suspense from the turbulent inner world of their protagonists. American Gothic literature could thus be seen as the intermediate phase in the development of the Gothic. This argument finds confirmation in Fantasy: the Literature of Subversion. According to Rosemary Jackson the notion of realism emerging in the nineteenth century was a vital source for the new strain in Gothic writing, as it would become subjected to scrutiny and interrogation (25). Fantastical or Gothic writing had to draw upon the visible: “during the nineteenth century, then, the fantastic began to hollow out the ‘real’ world, making it strange, without providing any explanation for the strangeness” (Jackson 25). Fantastic literature cannot be separated from its mimetic quality, because its foundations rest upon the real outside the narrative. Jackson’s idea can also be related to Freud’s the uncanny: a writer has to draw upon the laws of the real world to create an uncanny
experience. This can thus be connected with the surge in realist writing during the nineteenth century in America with Howells, Twain, James and Warton (Buelens).

As the American culture of the nineteenth century was driven by commercialisation, urbanisation and industrialisation, it became centred around the real world. Exemplary was Poe’s insistence on the “Common Sense” school of philosophy, which “insisted on a simple material world, fully understood by the senses and the judgment, and based securely on experience [...]” (Lloyd-Smith 68). His contemporary culture influenced his thinking in advocating this common sense philosophy. However, this common sense philosophy was an easy target for the Gothic to pervert:

> In a culture which equates the ‘real’ with the ‘visible’ and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs, the un-real is that which is in-visible. That which is not seen, or which threatens to be un-seeable, can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes ‘I see’ synonymous with ‘I understand’. (Jackson 45)

In other words, the American Gothic cannot only be described as an intermediate phase between traditional and modern Gothic, but it was also a necessary phase for the Gothic to develop into its twentieth century form.

Even though the American Gothic can be seen as an essential phase in the Gothic’s development, there were significant diversions in the American Gothic resulting from different cultural pressures. Unlike British writers, American writers had a strong sense of the frontier experience and of their Puritan inheritance. They also feared European subversions concerning their popular democracy, racial issues like slavery (cf. the polemic around Poe’s racial subtext in “The Black Cat”) and the Native Americans. This background resulted, according to Allan Lloyd-Smith, in the emergence of the Gothic mode, because “texts are not so much working to
adapt the Gothic mode; instead the Gothic emerges from the conditions they seek to describe” (4). In his “Theory of American Gothic” Eric Savoy stressed the same idea: according to him the American Gothic cannot be separated from its “specific regional manifestations” (6). In other words, Lloyd-Smith and Savoy expressed the idea that the Gothic should be connected with its social and cultural environment which will become more significant in the following chapters concerned with the analysis of the social Gothic in Irving’s, Poe’s and Hawthorne’s short stories.

Drawing on different themes further separates the American Gothic from its European counterpart. Firstly, American Gothic dabbled in rationalism and perversity, particularly due to its European heritage. Brockden Brown initiated the theme with *Ormond* in 1799, but Poe’s detective stories became more renowned in dealing with the theme. In those stories Auguste Dupin represents the rationalist tendency by solving the enigmatic murders using his ‘ratiocination’ juxtaposed with the irrational narrators of tales like “The Tell-Tale Heart” (Lloyd-Smith 65-68). A second major theme is puritanism, closely connected with the Frontier Gothic. Nathaniel Hawthorne can be considered a writer who was obsessed by these themes, as in stories like “The Minister’s Black Veil’ the reader is confronted with “the nightmares of the Puritan imagination” (Lloyd-Smith 71), whereas in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount” we get a sense of the frontier, where “the incidents of Indian hostility do play a significant role […] and the perils of the wilderness” (Lloyd-Smith 79).

Turning to the core of American Gothic writing, its main preoccupation was the expression of nostalgia to the harmonious situation before the commercialisation and industrialisation of the Antebellum Period. The Gothic has a natural interest in extreme states, which in the American context mainly had to do with fears concerning suppressions of past traumas and guilt or anxieties about class and gender, and “an element no doubt was also distaste for the changes brought by increasing commerce and industrialism that inspired
nostalgia for the supposedly simply and more pleasing structures of the past.” (Lloyd-Smith 6-7). This conflict between past and present gradually became the focal point in American Gothic writing, to which Harry Levin would refer in his “union of opposites” as the very basis of the American outlook: “the old and the new worlds, the past and present, the self and society, the supernatural and nature.” (15). American Gothic became principally concerned with the conflict of present versus past, in which the past was deemed the ideal and the present corrupted.

According to Eric Savoy the Gothic in American literature was primarily concerned with language. Savoy wrote about a Gothic turn in writing in which the main “tendency in American culture [was] organized around the imperative to repetition, the return of what is unsuccessfully repressed, and, moreover, that this return is realized in a syntax, a grammar, a tropic field” (3-4). As a case, Savoy discussed the use of allegorical translucency3 as emblematic for American Gothic, a form of allegory which “registers a trauma in the strategies of representation as it brings forward traumatic history toward which it [the Gothic] gestures but can never finally refer” (6-11). The idea of allegorical translucency is illustrated by a Gothic short story pur sang: “The Fall of the House of Usher”. Savoy wrote about two allegorical currents he finds in Poe’s tale, namely “the volition towards repression” concerning the interment of Madeline and “the return of the repressed secret” in Madeline’s revival as a ghost (12). These currents then generate tension which refers to the “absent explanatory core of the story” (Savoy 12). Savoy saw this tension as the central experience of the reader: a “suspension between the immediacy of terrible affect and its linguistic and epistemological unaccountability” (14). This illustrates that the American Gothic can also be studied linguistically, highlighting its complex and diverse nature.

3 The OED explains translucency as the quality or condition of being translucent; partial transparency.
To conclude, this chapter described the American Gothic and how it can and should be distinguished from its British counterpart. To transition into the literary analysis of my dissertation, following chapter will conceptualise social Gothic.

**2.6 The Social Gothic: Contextualisation of the American Gothic**

In his canonical work, Fredric Jameson opened with the slogan “always historicize!” (IX), but when referring to American literature of the Antebellum Period this has hardly been done. Yet, as preceding paragraphs have shown a connection between American Gothic literature and its socio-economic context can be made.

William Veeder notices a comparable tendency in Gothic criticism: “critics frequently create a binary opposition between inside and outside, between gothic as an exploration of the unconscious and gothic as an exploration of the unconscious and gothic as a concern for and even an intervention in social reality” (20, my italics). Veeder claims that the Gothic is a main instrument in healing the psyche and society: “[…] self-healing through terror–[…] [as] in reading, we avoid that denial of the terrible which repressive culture enacts” (34). Thus, the social impact of the Gothic already becomes clear: it becomes an instrument for readers to deal with the turbulent antebellum changes of their socio-economic situation.

Considering the background of American writing in the first part of the nineteenth century, it is likely that this should have its effect on writers and thus leave traces in the short stories of Poe, Irving and Hawthorne. In his essay “Resonance and Wonder” Stephen Greenblatt emphasised the essential connection between a work of art and its context, as according to him “cultural artifacts do not stay still, they exist in time, and they are bound up with personal and institutional conflict, negotiations and appropriations” (161). He wrote about his belief “[…]–in the embeddedness of cultural objects in the contingencies of history–[…]” (164) leads him to coin the concept of resonance. This refers to the “intimation of a larger community of voices and skills, an imagined ethnographic thickness” of the work of art (Greenblatt 176). Conjointly,
on the same page Greenblatt defined his concept of wonder as an “intense, indeed enchanting looking” (Greenblatt 176), the sensation experienced by a subject engaging with art comparable to a sublime experience. Both concepts can be used to describe the dynamics of the American Gothic. Short stories resonate with the unstable, quickly changing nature of antebellum society, whilst the concept of wonder explains the attraction of the Gothic short stories for readers.

The necessity of investigating the context of cultural objects is also stressed in Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*. Unlike Greenblatt, Fredric Jameson was not a New Historicist critic, but a Marxist literary critic, yet both share a vision of literature as embedded in a cultural or social context. In the full title of his book Jameson referred to *Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*, already signalling the predominance of literature’s background in interpretation. Jameson designs a system of the four levels, a schema meant to distinguish four types of interpretation: anagogical or political reading, moral or psychological reading, allegorical reading and literal reading focusing on historical or textual referents (16). Furthermore, in designing his three levels of analysis (the individual text, the social and the mode of production) Jameson refers to the presence of the external reality in literature:

> The type of interpretation here proposed is more satisfactorily grasped as the rewriting of the literary text in such a way that the latter may itself be seen as the rewriting or restructuration of a prior historical or ideological *subtext*, it being always understood that that ‘subtext’ is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of historical manuals, but rather must itself always be (re)constructed after the fact. The literary or aesthetic act therefore always entertains some active relationship with the Real; […] (Jameson 81)

Like Rosemary Jackson, Jameson acknowledges the reciprocal relation between the literary text and its context, and refers to external reality in the narrative as a subtext. Hence the text’s
context is rarely overtly present and requires a closer reading, but can lead to more significant insights about a work of literature.

It is precisely this uncovering of the social in the antebellum writings of Irving, Poe and Hawthorne that is the object of my dissertation. For this reason I have chosen to employ the term social Gothic. Other critics have resorted to using the same term in their research of Gothic novels and short stories, but have not yet used the term to study the literature of the Antebellum Period, providing room for this dissertation. It is appropriate to first look at how other critics conceptualised the social Gothic before presenting my own definition.

In his *The Gothic-fantastic in Nineteenth-century Russian Literature* Neil Cornwell referred to the social or society Gothic as a “Greater concentration on setting” (8) setting it apart from “horror or criminal Gothic” (9). For Cornwell an analysis of the social Gothic should be mainly concerned with studying the setting of a work of literature. In her study of Victorian fiction Elanor Salotto also employs the social Gothic: “[…], my study is concerned with social gothic; that is, in the repressive social practices that engender the return of the repressed in Victorian Fiction.” (7). According to Salotto, “Victorian authors created a narrative mode to present repressive social practices and the effects that repression whether in the form of live burials or spectral returns from the dead” (2). She connects the social Gothic more with the expression of repression in Victorian novels. Eugenia DeLamotte’s essay in the *The Gothic Other: Racial and Social Constructions in the Literary Imagination* does not mention the social Gothic, but instead chooses the term Anglo-Gothic (17). However, DeLamotte’s term can be paralleled with the social Gothic: “[…] the rise and flowering of the Gothic novel in Britain and the U.S. between 1765 and 1850 coincides with the emergence and codification of modern conceptions of ‘race’ as a biological division of humans into separate groups characterized by distinctive, non-overlapping physical, moral, intellectual, and emotional attributes” (18). Her conception reveals a connection between the Gothic and social concerns. In *Gothic: Critical
The social Gothic I will employ in following chapters should be understood in more general terms. In this dissertation the concept stands for the combination of a Gothic mode of writing with an insistence upon social issues pertaining to the Antebellum Period. The possibility of such an investigation is confirmed by Leonardo Buonomo who wrote that “[…] antebellum American texts contain significant traces of the demographic, cultural, and social changes that American society underwent as a result of massive immigration” (2). Even though Buonomo specifically examined traces of immigration in antebellum texts, he mainly emphasised that antebellum texts contain traces of antebellum social issues. It can be said that the Antebellum Period is perfectly fit for an inquiry into the social Gothic, because the beginning of the nineteenth century in America encompasses turbulent socio-economic changes, but it was also the period in which American Gothic was at its peak. In short, the goal of this dissertation to discover social traces in the Gothic short stories of Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. The next chapter marks the beginning of the literary analysis of this dissertation, starting with Washington Irving.
3. Washington Irving

Washington Irving was born in 1783 to the family of a New York merchant. Whilst some of his brothers continued the family business, Irving was not cut out for a career in commerce. Instead, he received an education in the law, passing his bar exam in 1806, but he never actively practiced this profession. He rather wanted to focus on literature and pursued a career in writing (Davitt Bell 18). Irving’s education in law and his mercantile family background is relevant to the commercial emphasis on literature at the time:

Literature for these young men, all of whom were engaged in business or professional activities, was primarily a social affair, a diversion, a provincial imitation or invention of British gentility. It might promise a release from the boredom of commercial responsibilities and access, in a bourgeois democracy, to something like aristocratic style, but it could hardly offer a living. (Davit Bell 18)

Irving himself commented on this specific situation, writing that he was

Unqualified for business, in a nation where every one [sic] is busy; devoted to literature, where literary leisure is confounded with idleness; the man of letters is almost an insulated being, with few to understand, less [sic] to value, and scarcely any to encourage his pursuits. (Hedges quoting the review of The Works of Robert Treat Paine, AN, I, 252; 14)

Literature was thus secondary to commercial affairs and only served as a diversion. On top of that writers were ‘insulated beings’, socially isolated from their peers. Nevertheless, the start of Irving’s career as a writer initiated an attitudinal change towards literature. Irving did not perceive literature as a means to simply treat boredom. Instead, he “engaged in the activities of this world [the literary world] with unusual energy, perhaps out of frustration with his destined
social role or out of guilt concerning his apparent inaptitude for this social role” (Davit Bell 19). In 1812 Irving published his *Knickerbocker’s History*, which became his first major success netting him an income of $3,000. This amount proved that business and literature were not necessarily opposites and that writers could effectively live off their pens. However, after having published his *Knickerbocker’s* Irving experienced a financially rough time as he could not immediately find a lucrative successor for his *Knickerbocker’s*. Because “like vast numbers of his contemporaries, the Washington Irving of *The Sketch Book* era (1817-1819) was haunted by the twin spectres of credit and debt” (Anthony 111) Irving was ultimately forced to travel to England. There he hoped to recover from his losses by publishing a new lucrative piece of writing. In England in 1817 he met Sir Walter Scott whose advice helped him create *The Sketch Book Of Geoffrey Crayon*, that was published in 1819 (Davitt Bell 19).

*The Sketch Book* quickly became popular, acclaimed by readers and critics on both sides of the Atlantic:

John Murray, who had first declined the work, published five British editions between 1820 and 1823. In the United States, Van Winkle produced the same number of editions between 1819 and 1826. In the next sixteen years there were nine more American reprints, and since he was living in England, Irving was able to reap returns from both American and British sales. (Davitt Bell 21)

Furthermore, in reference to the novel’s protagonist George Crayon, Sir Walter Scott commented that “Crayon is very good” adding only more fame to the novel’s status (Davit Bell 11). *The Sketch Book* was the lucrative successor Irving had sought for his *Knickerbocker’s*, but the citation also shows Irving’s awareness of the copyright laws of the beginning of the century, because he was able to generate revenue from both American and British sales. This implies that Irving indeed had knowledge of the new copyright legislation that originated during the Antebellum Period. This also emphasises that American writers had to be aware of the
commercial aspects of book publishing to establish a lucrative career. Returning to the literary importance of Washington Irving, Michael Davitt Bell stressed that the impact of Irving’s *Sketch Book* cannot be underestimated, because “it would testify to a major change in the meaning of both literature and literary vocation in America—a change that affected almost all of their literary contemporaries” (11). Hence, if Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne were writers embedded in the commercial literary market of the Antebellum Period, it can be said that Washington Irving was the one who opened the doors of commerce to literature. He, together with a writer like James Fenimore Cooper, professionalised writing and made it possible for writers to live off their pens (Davitt Bell 11).

If the Antebellum Period had a financial impact on Irving, it also influenced him ideologically:

Born into an immigrant family that was rapidly moving up the social scale through business, law, medicine, and journalism, he found nowhere in his youth a set of beliefs or attitudes to which he could wholeheartedly commit himself. There is much in him which suggests a sense of the world as ungraspable.

(Hedges 3)

The last years of the eighteenth century and the emerging nineteenth century filled Irving with doubt. He became a wandering Jew searching for new values in a new world dominated by technology and commerce. The goal of Irving’s search was to find a synthesis between social, economic and political affairs of the nineteenth century and his artistic ambitions. This synthesis would not be found until the 1830s with the American Renaissance when American literature was undergoing a change toward a “full-fledged romantic subjectivism” (Hedges 15). In Irving’s writing this change was mainly characterised by his use of sentimental plots, gothic trappings and an increased interest in folklore (Hedges 15). However, before Irving found this synthesis, he mainly expressed the “negativism of his early phase” (Hedges 15) by writing short
stories and novels comparable to Poe’s and Hawthorne’s. Like Hawthorne’s “The Celestial Railroad” and Poe’s “Mellonta Tauta”, Irving initially focused on satiric or seriocomic stories and novels which “deflate the American dream by presenting “progress” as illusion, zealous humanitarianism as self-deception or hypocrisy” (Hedges 88). And like Poe and Hawthorne, Washington Irving found a fruitful ground in Gothic literature to comment on nineteenth-century changes, pointing to Irving’s use of social Gothic.

According to William Hedges, American literature of the early nineteenth century was obsessed with Gothic imagery:

Nothing is at first sight more anomalous in American literature of the early national period than its obsession with ruin and decay. A plethora of graveyard imagery, broken columns, and moss-grown towers undermines assumptions as to what one should encounter in a new country. (91)

According to Hedges, antebellum writers were mainly occupied with escaping their contemporary environment by drawing heavily on those Gothic representations of the past. In Hedges’ own words it was “an instinct of American literature […] to deny the newness of the New World” (93). An example of this escapist tendency can be found in Irving’s “The Author’s Account of Himself” in his Sketch Book. Irving mentions about Europe that “her very ruins told the history of times gone by, and every mouldering stone was a chronicle” (Irving 2). This made him realise that

I longed to wander over the scenes of renowned achievement-to tread, as it were, in the footsteps of antiquity–to loiter about the ruined castle–to meditate on the falling tower–to escape, in short, from the commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past. (Irving 2)
The citation contains signs of escapism into the past, especially in the final line where Irving admits he wants to lose himself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past. Gothic tropes like ruins and castles were for Irving then a means of escaping to the past because the present was insufficient to him. This again points to the possible use of the social Gothic in his writings, because it shows that nineteenth-century America influences his writing.

To continue, Irving exhibited Gothic escapism by using Gothic imagery, but there is more to Irving’s Gothic writing than just his use of ruins and other relics of the past. Donald Ringe wrote an article on Irving’s use of the Gothic in which he investigated the “intellectual basis” (51) of Irving’s tales. One fundamental strain in Irving’s writing was the Scottish “common sense” philosophy that rose to prominence during the eighteenth century. This philosophy “accepted the physical world as objectively real and ultimately knowable by human beings, who could perceive the world as it is—the objects themselves—through impressions and sensations” (Ringe 51). A consequence of this philosophy was that imagination and the supernatural were referred to the background as the materialistic world of the sober truth dominated nineteenth-century metaphysics. Irving’s writing underlined this philosophy by accepting “the modern, rational view of reality and [attributing] to the minds of the ignorant and superstitious such beings as the ghosts, goblins, and fairies that make up the stock in trade of the Gothic writer” (Ringe 53). Thus, according to Ringe, the Gothic supernatural was rejected by Irving in favour of a rationalist mind—set. Those affected by supernatural beings generally belong, according to George Crayon, among the “common folk in isolated rural areas”, because rational, enlightened thought has not yet spread to those regions (Ringe 54). This highlights for example the role of a character like Ichabod Crane as a teacher in Sleepy Hollow. The narrator informs the reader that Sleepy Hollow “abounds with local tales, haunted spots, and twilight superstitions; […]” (Norton Anthology 42) which creates a dichotomy between Crane and the village. As a proponent of the rationalist philosophy Ichabod has to teach in Sleepy Hollow, a
place infested by superstitious beliefs in the supernatural. However, Crane like the inhabitants of Sleepy Hollow ultimately succumbs to the Headless Horseman which represents a symbolical victory of the Gothic supernatural over the rationalist philosophy of Scottish common sense. Ringe built on this interpretation by underlining that not only common folk were affected by superstition, but also “the more educated act at times in similar ways and for the same reasons” (55). Irving’s use of the Gothic mode thus became a means of dispelling superstition. In consequence, the Gothic mode became “a vehicle for humor, the Gothic terrors turned against the credulous characters and converted into material for comedy” (Ringe 57). This leads Ringe to conclude that Irving’s tales were “fundamentally concerned with a problem of human perceptions, the reasons why people sometimes fail to perceive the world as it is, but see instead a world of Gothic terror” (65). Hence, the Gothic mode used by Irving can be said to be primarily concerned with the dichotomy between a rationalist worldview and the imagination.

Following quotation made by Lloyd Daigrepont sums up the dynamic between Irving and antebellum America and its assessment by literary critics:

The past quarter century [Daigrepont’s article was published in 1984] has seen the publication of a number of provocative studies of Washington Irving’s “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” Generally, critics have probed the tale’s portrayal of the conflict between civilization (or progress) and the idyllic dream of a new Eden in the American Landscape. Most interpret this conflict in terms of the special concerns of the man of letters versus those of a practical-minded, progressive society. (68)

The conflict between progress and the dream of a new Eden mentioned by Daigrepont can serve as a point of departure for a discussion of the social Gothic in Irving’s writing. In the next part I will look at some of Irving’s short stories and explore the social side of Irving’s Gothic mode.
3.1 The Social Gothic in Washington Irving’s Short Stories

“Sleepy Hollow” seems a good starting point to discuss Irving’s use of the social Gothic, because it is more distinctively Gothic than the other stories covered here and combines this with mentions of the antebellum socio-economic situation. The short story opens suggestively with an excerpt from James Thomson’s Castle of Indolence:

A pleasing land of drowsy head it was,
Of dreams that wave before the half-shut eye;
And of gay castles in the clouds that pass,
Forever flushing round a summer sky.
(Norton Anthology 41)\(^4\)

These four lines add a Romantic motif to the story. This motif not only highlights the importance of the imagination, but it also contains nineteenth-century social traces. The past tense in ‘was’ in combination with ‘a pleasing land of drowsy head’ signals a conflict with the land that ‘is’. This land of the present is juxtaposed to this pleasing land of the past. This juxtaposition refers back to the conflict mentioned by Daigrepont between progress and the dream of Eden in a new America. The opening of “Sleepy Hollow” already implies that there are no longer dreams, gay castles, or a summer sky. Instead, there is only finance and commerce. Therefore, it can be said that the opening of the short story already reveals a tendency to draw upon the social.

In the short story itself, the aspect of wealth and money is mainly mentioned in relation to Katrina Van Tassel who was “the daughter and only child of a substantial Dutch farmer” (46). Ichabod embraces a nineteenth-century attitude towards marriage in which financial gain is the dominant motive for marrying rather than expressing a profound love. Tiffany Wayne

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\(^4\) The Norton Anthology was used as a source for both “Sleepy Hollow” and “Rip van Winkle”. 
wrote that “in reality, marriage remained an economic arrangement with clearly defined roles for both men and women” (1), confirming the commercial nature of antebellum marriages. This also makes Ichabod Crane an exponent of this marriage ideology, which is shown in following citation. In it the narrator mentions Ichabod’s plans regarding Katrina:

As the enraptured Ichabod fancied all this, and as he rolled his great green eyes over the fat meadow lands, the rich fields of wheat, of rye, of buckwheat, and Indian corn, and the orchards burthened with ruddy fruit, which surrounded the warm tenement of Van Tassel, his heart yearned after the damsel who was to inherit these domains, and his imagination expanded with the idea, how they might be readily turned into cash, and the money invested in immense tracts of wild land, and shingle palaces in the wilderness. (48)

The love Ichabod feels for Katrina Van Tassel is more associated with her inheritance than with her actual being, resembling the nineteenth-century attitude towards marriage. For Ichabod Crane Katrina is primarily “the key to economic advancement, […]” (Anthony 128). The gorgeous domain surrounding the Van Tassel land makes his heart yearn for Van Tassel’s daughter, not because of its beauty or because of her beauty, but because she would inherit those domains. Moreover, he desperately wants to turn it into cash or ready money which can then be invested in even bigger tracts of land. It is here that Ichabod displays a mercantile spirit which is highly reminiscent of the increasing commercialisation during the Antebellum Period. David Anthongy even writes that “Ichabod, […], represents the mindset of commerce.” (Anthony 113). Furthermore, according to Anthony, Ichabod should be regarded as the “embodiment of a ‘gothic’ form of selfhood emerging in relation to the new economy” (115). This embodiment was initially constructed in eighteenth-century Gothic fiction, which reflected a “market-based model of identity” (115; Anthony quoting Andrea Henderson’s *Romantic
Identities: Varieties of Subjectivity). The new gothic form of selfhood represented by Crane is defined as

Built up on the radical contingencies of modern social and market relations rather than the stable foundations of rank or property, this gothic selfhood embodies not only the breakdown in distinctions between an interior, feeling subject and a superficial social self but also like the commodity form itself, the increasingly attenuated distinction between use value and exchange value in a commercial economy (Anthony 115)

In short, due to the increasing abstraction caused by commercialisation, Crane is forced to fashion himself out of virtually nothing instead of being able to construct an identity based on social properties like rank. and thus Crane is nothing more than an empty apparition of commerce (Anthony 115). On top of that, making Ichabod Crane represent the mind-set of commerce also juxtaposes Crane with Hawthorne’s Peter Goldthwaite who fails to notice the value of his family estate and thus fails to turn it into ready money to be reinvested. Therefore, if Crane is the archetype of a mercantile spirit, then Goldthwaite is its exact opposite, but I will return to Peter Goldthwaite later on. To further explore the social traces within “Sleepy Hollow”, an excerpt in the story refers to the increasing urbanisation during the nineteenth century. When attending Van Tassel’s feast Crane notices the “buxom lasses, almost as antiquated as their mothers, excepting where a straw hat, a fine ribband, or perhaps a white frock, gave symptoms of city innovations” (53; my italics). The narrator commenting on women resembling symptoms of city innovations seems like a significant referral to the wave of urbanisation during the first part of the nineteenth century. It reveals a connection with the conflict between urban and rural Americans I discussed in the introductory chapter. By specifically mentioning symptoms it appears as if the narrator understands the city as a disease,
implicitly revealing this conflict. In turn, this also highlights the symbiosis between a Gothic mode of writing and social traces in Irving’s writing.

David Anthony has also investigated the connection between the short story and its socio-economic context more extensively in his article “‘Gone Distracted’: ‘Sleepy Hollow,’ Gothic Masculinity, and the Panic of 1819”. Anthony’s main argument posits that “we might read The Sketch Book as reflecting a nostalgic longing for a period predating the modern period of commerce and credit, one which found an anxious Irving financially embarrassed and decidedly out of place” (112) and he attempts to prove this by looking for textual evidence in “Sleepy Hollow”. The story is a fruitful ground for Anthony, because it “depicts a new form of masculinity” that was the “direct manifestation of the perceived trauma brought about by the shift from a standard of monetary valuation based on gold or silver specie—[...]—to an economy resting on the unstable and often illusory foundations of credit, speculation, and paper money” (112). Here, Anthony refers to the same monetary debate I discussed in the previous chapter. There is then a connection made in Anthony’s article between this monetary debate and a new form of Gothic masculinity arising with the character of Ichabod Crane, who “in his various states of panic and hysteria [is] a figure for whom postures of terror and humiliation are becoming the norm” (Anthony 116). Crane’s panic arose because he was financially disempowered due to the emergent paper economy which is why he feared humiliation on the levels of gender (Anthony 116). An example of this could be found in the struggle between Brom Bones and Crane for the hand of Katrina Van Tassel, where Brom Bones represents economic empowerment. As opposed to Bones, Ichabod crane is powerless both physically and financially. These disadvantages in turn humiliate Crane, because in comparison to Brom Bones he is not a man. This is the reason why Ichabod likely feels humiliated on the level of gender regarding Katrina Van Tassel. To successfully wo her, he has to be a real man, but his conflict with Bones reveals him to be exactly the opposite.
Moreover, David Anthony finds a trace of the Panic of 1819 in “Sleepy Hollow”. The Panic of 1819 caused “devastation on a widespread scale” and “almost overnight, businesses failed, property prices plummeted, and paper notes became devalued to the point of worthlessness; simultaneously, unemployment soared, and homelessness became acute” (Anthony 125). An example where Knickerbocker hints at a rapidly changing and turbulent economic situation is his description of Sleepy Hollow as one of those “retired Dutch valleys, found here and there embosomed in the great state of New-York, that populations, manners, and customs, remain fixed, while the great torrent of emigration and improvement, which is making such incessant changes in other parts of this restless country, sweeps by them unobserved” (Norton Anthology 43). This excerpt again highlights Irving’s consciousness of the ongoing socio-economic changes during the Antebellum Period. The dichotomy raised by Knickerbocker reiterates the conflict between rural and urban America, further emphasising the social layer of Irving’s Gothic story. It juxtaposes the incessant changes happening in other parts of the restless country, whilst Sleepy Hollow remains unaffected by them. The great torrent of emigration and improvement that Knickerbocker refers to likely pertains to the socio-economic evolutions during the nineteenth century (Anthony 125). David Anthony also seems to build on this argument when he examines the Van Tassel estate. He conceptualises the latter as a “least wished-for Federalist retreat from the forces of economic change and turmoil lurking just miles away at the port city of Tarry Town” (Anthony 126). Significantly, Anthony writes about the forces of economic change present in Sleepy Hollow, confirming that the short story does indeed contain specifically antebellum social traces. This citation also adds another layer to Crane’s motives for wooing Katrina Van Tassel: not only is he interested in the ready money that can be gained from the estate, but it also serves as a means to escape the unstable economic environment.
“Rip van Winkle” is the second short story that draws on the social Gothic. The short story opens by indicating that the Kaatskill mountains are the perfect barometers to record change in the weather: “every change of season, every change of weather, indeed, every hour of the day, produces some change in the magical hues and shapes of these mountains, and they are regarded by all the good wives, far and near, as perfect barometers” (Norton Anthology 30). The region close to the Kaatskill mountains is perfect to judge the weather, but this could be extended to imply that the area is also well suited to signal any kind of change. It seems a prefiguration of the changes that will affect Rip’s village during the Revolutionary War, hinting at social dimension of the short story.

Even though the short story’s Gothic qualities are not as overtly present as in “Sleepy Hollow”, the fantastical elements in “Rip van Winkle” do relate it to the Gothic mode. The main fantastical element in the story occurs when Rip encounters a dwarf-like figure who was a “short square built old fellow, with thick bushy hair, and a grizzly beard.” (34). The small Dutchman then leads Rip away to a fantastical setting:

On entering the amphitheatre, new objects of wonder presented themselves. On a level spot in the centre was a company of odd-looking personages playing at nine-pins. They were dressed in quaint, outlandish fashion: some wore short doublets, others jerkins, with long knives in their belts, and most had enormous breeches, of similar style with that of the guide’s. (34)

The new area Rip encounters appears outlandish to him and together with the singular encounter with the dwarfish figure this supplies one part of the tale’s Gothic strain. Arguably, the new environment Rip is led to can be understood as an exponent of frontier Gothic I mentioned in previous chapter. Through the fantastical, dwarf-like figure Rip discovers a new area which relates this discovery to a frontier experience that can be associated with frontier Gothic. Another fantastical element is provided by the magical contents of the keg:
He [Rip] was naturally a thirsty soul, and was soon tempted to repeat the draught. One taste provoked another and he reiterated his visits to the flagon so often, that at length his senses were overpowered, his eyes swam in his head, his head gradually declined and he fell into a deep sleep. (35)

The reader learns that the contents were indeed magical when reading that the sleep induced by the beverage kept Rip asleep for years until after the Revolutionary War was won. These magical elements mainly constitute the Gothic strain in the short story.

However, the short story is more known for its social dimensions: the shift Rip’s village underwent due to the Revolutionary War. In “Cultural Fate and Social Freedom in Three American Short Stories” Walter Shear investigates the central characters of Henry James’s “The Jolly Corner”, Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown” and Washington Irving’s “Rip Van Winkle” and their role in the narrative’s dynamic. He comes to a general finding:

At its beginning each story places the central character in a domestic cultural environment, but with a treatment that emphasizes his detachment from that setting. The second section of the narrative transports the character to an outré environment where he encounters fabulous characters whose bizarre features are, nevertheless, haunted by what is familiar to the protagonist. Finally, the story returns the main character, in a rather dazed condition, to his society, in a manner that calls attention to his altered relationship to the others in his society, endowing him with such a perspective that he seems to transcend their social concerns. (543)

Shear describes three distinct parts in the narrative of the short stories. In the beginning there is relative harmony. Rip van Winkle for example was “one of those happy mortals, of foolish, well-oiled dispositions, who take the world easy, eat white bread or brown, which ever [sic]
can be got with least thought or trouble” (32), domesticated by a “termagant wife” (31). However, this does not prohibit him from “strolling away into the woods” (33). This strolling serves as a last escape from his wife as he was “at last reduced almost to despair” (33). This will lead to the second part of Shear’s pattern. The strolling away causes Rip van Winkle to encounter the dwarfish figure, which eventually leads him to the outré environment where he encounters fabulous characters. These characters, according to Shear, then evoke an uncanny experience within Rip as he is haunted by what is familiar to the protagonist. The narrative also emphasises this by mentioning that the curious figures remind him of “figures in an old Flemish painting, in the parlour of Dominie van Schaick, […]” (Norton Anthology 34). Rip’s new companions are initially unfamiliar, but later on they become familiar. The painting makes Rip realise he has known these outré figures all along, seemingly constituting an uncanny experience in the short story. The third phase of Shear’s pattern is then accomplished through the draught Rip drinks, that will lead him back to his village. However, the village has already changed, and thus it calls Rip’s attention to his altered relationship to the others in his society. However, the story of Van Winkle fulfils this pattern slightly differently as the story does not just call attention to his altered relationship to the others, but calls attention to an altered society in general. Nevertheless, this nuance does not imply that Shear’s pattern cannot be applied to Irving’s short story.

Shear’s pattern is also relevant for explaining the social shift dynamic in other short stories. If the first part and the third part on the one hand resemble the initial state of society in harmony, and on the other hand the new order associated with disharmony, then the middle part of the pattern can be seen as the catalyst that drives social change. “The middle sections in each story involve social fantasies” (Shear 545) and these social fantasies are the foundation of the societal change occurring in the third part of the story. Furthermore, “in all the stories the fantasy dimension in the middle section tends to take the form of culture comporting itself on
the dynamics of an individual psychology” (Shear 546), adding importance to the role of Rip van Winkle in the narrative. The social shift and the social in general in the story is thus driven by the character of Rip of which the reader finds a prime example towards the end of the story:

Rip, in fact, was no politician; the changes of states and empires made but little impression on him. But there was one species of despotism under which he had long groaned, and that was–petticoat government. Happily, that was at an end; he had got his neck out of the yoke of matrimony, and could go in and out whenever he pleased, without dreading the tyranny of Dame van Winkle. (40)

The quotation shows that Rip’s sole wish was to get out of the yoke of matrimony. Thus, wandering off into the woods was indeed a symbolic act signalling Rip’s prime social fantasy: getting rid of Dame van Winkle’s tyranny. This wish then arguably becomes a social fantasy which is paralleled with the wish of the American people to get rid of Britain’s petticoat government, ultimately fulfilled by the Revolutionary War. It can then be said that it is indeed Rip van Winkle’s individual psychology that functions as the catalyst for the social shift taking place in the short story, emphasising the role of Rip’s character in the narrative.

Having discussed the importance of Rip Van Winkle as a social dynamic, the last element of the narrative that has to be covered here is the social shift itself. The term social shift I employ here should be distinguished from a political shift. The latter would discuss “the political change from the colonial English past to the post-revolutionary American present” (Blakemore 192). However, I chose to use the term social instead of political, because it is the broader notion. I do not want to limit my discussion to a discussion of the political shift in the short story. Instead, this analysis aims to take up a broader perspective by employing the term social shift. Using the term social shift also makes a stronger connection with the social Gothic which I attempt to investigate here. The narrative opens with a description of the village before the radical shift after the war:
At the foot of these fairy mountains, the voyager may have descried the light smoke curling up from a village, whose shingle roofs gleam among the trees, just where the blue tints of the upland melt away into the fresh green of the nearer landscape. It is a little village of great antiquity, having been founded by some of the Dutch colonists, in the early times of the province, just about the beginning of the government of the good Peter Stuyvesant, [...] (30)

The reader is confronted with a pastoral scene: a peaceful village situated in a valley, smoke curling up from the chimneys, roofs gleaming and the landscapes surrounding it are of a fresh green. However, this pastoral scene will fade away when Rip is led away from his village. The social change of Shear’s middle section occurs, confronting Rip with a village transformed by the Revolutionary Wars. The old Dutch village that represented harmony throughout history was no longer there: “instead of the great tree that used to shelter the quiet little Dutch inn of yore, there now was reared a tall naked pole, with something on top that looked like a red night cap, and from it was fluttering a flag, on which was a singular assemblage of stars and stripes—all this was strange and incomprehensible” (37). Incomprehensible because he was confronted with new concepts and historical events like “rights of citizens—election—members of congress—liberty—Bunker’s Hill—heroes of seventy-six—and other words, [...]” which to him were “a perfect Babylonish jargon” (37). Furthermore, Rip notices that “the very character of the people seemed changed. There was a busy, bustling, disputatious tone about it, instead of the accustomed phlegm and drowsy tranquillity” (37). Ultimately, “Rip awakens and walks into a recognizably Jeffersonian America, with a divisive two-party system, obtrusive democratic politics, and aggressive anglophobia” (Blakemore 199). However, not only the village has changed, but the people have been altered as well. The Revolutionary Wars liberated the Americans from the British coloniser, but also opened the door for antebellum innovation. As an independent state The United States could develop itself which resulted in the major changes
occurring during the nineteenth century (I refer to the first chapter of this dissertation for a more elaborate discussion). Rip seemingly refers to this emerging period of innovation by noticing that now the people were busy, bustling and disputatious instead of showing the tranquillity associated with the pre-revolution village. Rip Van Winkle is a stranger in these new days and seemingly the only thing he effectively enjoys, is the loss of Dame van Winkle. Because of this specific relation to the present, Rip indicates that the new age of technological and financial innovation is troubling and estranges Americans. It is in this respect that the “Rip Van Winkle” story makes mention of antebellum social traces. This is also confirmed by Steven Blakemore who asserts that “Irving, as we have seen, ideologically conflates a variety of times in which the present can be read back into the past and vice versa, times that thematically resemble each other” (199). This highlights that a connection can be made between the short story and the socio-economic situation of nineteenth-century America, providing room for the social Gothic in “Rip van Winkle”. Furthermore, this discussion of the social shift in “Rip van Winkle” in combination with a discussion of its Gothic qualities in previous paragraph indicate that the social Gothic is indeed present in Irving’s short story.

Irving also wrote two other stories that illustrate that Irving’s writing can be assessed by examining the social Gothic. The first story that draws on the social Gothic is “The Adventure of The German Student”. According to Irving “the American Revolution had produced French revolutionary terror” (Blakemore 195), likely being the motive for writing a short story set during the French Revolution. The story also strongly embraces the social Gothic in its combining the French Revolution (a social, historical and political event) with his Gothic mode of writing. The protagonist Gottfried Wolfgang is a German student who resides in Paris during the “tempestuous times of the French Revolution, […]” (Irving).\(^5\) Gottfried was also largely impacted by the “notion, […] that there was an evil influence hanging over him; an evil genius

\(^5\) The source of Irving’s short story cited here is provided online by Project Gutenberg Australia.
or spirit seeking to ensnare him and ensure his perdition” (Irving). It is not unlikely that the radical shift caused by the French Revolution made Gottfried feel this evil presence. The narrator remarks that Wolfgang initially sympathised with the revolutionists, but “the scenes of blood which followed shocked his sensitive nature, disgusted him with society and the world, and made him more than ever a recluse” (Irving). Gottfried realises that the revolution is taking a bloody turn, and thus he is forced to seek protection, which forces him to become a recluse. On top of that, Gottfried’s sensitive temperament can be seen as representative of pre-revolutionary society which is then violently shocked by the violence associated with this socio-historical change, which is in this case represented by the French Revolution. As a result, Gottfried attempts to escape the turbulence in his “favorite speculations” (Irving): he is obsessed with reading literature. Ultimately, like Madame Bovary, Gottfried becomes unable to separate the real world from the world of romance, because of the profound effect of his escapism into the world of literature. Later on in the narrative, he is visited by a mysterious woman who corresponds with his dreams “of a female face of transcendent beauty” (Irving). The following day he is perplexed when he finds the woman dead in his bed and the police knocking at his door: “Great heaven! cried he, how did this woman come here?/ Do you know anything about her? said Wolfgang eagerly./ Do I? exclaimed the officer: she was guillotined yesterday” (Irving). The shock overwhelms the student and ultimately he ends up “distracted, and [he] died in a mad-house” (Irving). The narrative of the German student again shows the prevalence of the social Gothic in Irving’s oeuvre. The combination of a turbulent socio-historical event with the macabre encounter with the girl and the ensuing madness is the perfect exponent of the social Gothic.

Irving’s “Roscoe” is not a Gothic short story, but it illustrates that Irving was indeed closely connected with the social, making it relevant to my discussion here. On his trip to an Athenaeum in Liverpool Geoffrey Crayon encounters a peculiar man: “there was something in
his whole appearance that indicated a being of a different order from the bustling race around him” (Irving 11). This person appears to be Roscoe, “an author of celebrity; […]” (Irving 11), but Crayon finds him “mingling among the busy sons of traffic” which “shocked [his] poetical ideas; […]” (Irving 12). Roscoe has had a prosperous career as a writer, and even though he was “born in a place apparently ungenial to the growth of literary talent; in the very marketplace of trade; without fortune, family connection, or patronage; self-prompted, self-sustained, and almost self-taught, […]” (Irving 12) he still managed to “advance and embellish his native town” (Irving 12). However, Roscoe’s career plummeted due to economic instability: his affairs crashed, comparable to what happened to a lot of Americans during the Panic of 1819. The reader also learns about Roscoe’s misfortune when Crayon is “told of his having been unfortunate in business” (Irving 14), which had serious consequences for Roscoe’s library: it was “passed under the hammer of the auctioneer, and was dispersed about the country” (Irving 15). Roscoe’s bankruptcy resulted in him being forced to sell most of his valuables. The selling of the library discontented Crayon: “[…], if the people of Liverpool had been properly sensible of what was due to Mr. Roscoe and themselves, his library never would have been sold” (Irving 16). Crayon here seems to critique market capitalism by recounting the story of Roscoe. Firstly, he laments the sad fate of the writer who was brought down by financial misfortune, and secondly he attacks the urge of the market to sell everything that can be sold in order to gain a capital. Furthermore, the fate of Roscoe’s library provides irony in the short story. The library represented an immense wealth of knowledge in its large collection of historical books, but those priceless books have to be sold for a small price so that Roscoe can recover from his losses. Nevertheless, the downfall of Roscoe can be seen as an illustration of Irving’s insistence upon the social in his writing. By implicitly referring to the antebellum panics and by explicitly lamenting Roscoe’s downfall as a talented writer Irving appears to take up social themes. The story of Roscoe shows that an analysis of the social is indeed possible for Irving’s oeuvre.
To sum up, this chapter covered the discussion of the social Gothic in four of Washington Irving’s short stories: “Rip van Winkle”, “Sleepy Hollow”, “The Adventure of the German Student”, and “Roscoe”. All stories were shown to combine an insistence upon social themes with a Gothic mode of Writing. Roscoe being exceptional in that it lacked the Gothic mode of writing, but it instead emphasised that Irving does draw upon the social in his short stories. Next chapter discusses the work of Edgar Allan Poe and its insistence upon the social Gothic.
4. Edgar Allan Poe

[...]–It is really a very fine amusement to ascend the rope-ladder leading to the summit of the balloon-bag, and thence survey the surrounding world. From the car below you know the prospect is not so comprehensive–you can see little vertically. But seated here (where I write this) in the luxuriously-cushioned open piazza of the summit, one can see every thing that is going on in all directions.

(“Melonta Tauta”, 386; my italics)

This is what Pundita (the protagonist of the “Melonta Tauta” short story) writes in her diary on April 3. It is largely indicative for Poe’s position in antebellum society as a writer: above everything and everyone, enabled to survey the world. The balloon also serves as a symbol for the technological innovations in transportation during the nineteenth century, as listed in the first part of this dissertation. Harry Levin also stresses this dimension of Poe: “if Hawthorne is the man to whom nothing whatsoever has happened, Poe is the man to whom nearly everything happens, and who manages to tell us all about it, down to the instant of final catastrophe” (85) he writes in the fourth chapter of his The Power of Blackness. Pundita’s diary entry and Levin’s statement strongly imply the social engagement of Poe, in turn implying such traces could be found in his tales.

Nevertheless, a social reading of Poe’s terror tales is not self-evident. In his introduction to New Essays on Poe’s Major Tales Kenneth Silverman even denies the possibility of a social reading of Poe:

In choosing subjects and themes for his tales, Poe therefore rarely wrote about the contemporary scene. His fiction offers no glimpse of the whirlwind social changes wrought in nineteenth-century America by the development of steamboats and railroads, inventions like the daguerreotype and telegraph, and
hot debates over women’s rights, the ending of capital punishment, and the abolition of slavery. His very few tales that comment on contemporary life, such as “Mellonta Tauta” and “Some words with a Mummy,” disdainfully satirize it.

Silverman is partially right in asserting that Poe thematically rarely engaged with the social turbulence of his time, but this should not lead to denying that social glimmers of the ante-bellum changes exist within Poe’s short stories. A counterargument to Silverman’s statement can be found in the same edition in which Silverman asserted Poe’s authorial independence: David Reynolds’s “Poe’s Art of Transformation: ‘The Cask of Amontillado’ in Its Cultural Context”. In it, Reynolds mentions three socio-cultural influences he found in the “Cask” short story: the temperance movement, which wanted to show the disastrous effects of alcohol upon the human subject (96-97), the anti-Masonry mania “that had swept America during Poe’s apprentice period” (99) and the historical conflict between American Protestant Authors and Catholic immigrants, resulting in works of literature attempting to expose criminality in those Catholic groups (100). Comparing Silverman’s opinion with Reynolds’s insistence upon those three socio-cultural forces however establishes the essence of the social in Poe’s writing: thematic focus of the short stories rarely lies on social commentary, yet the ante-bellum changes and encompassing turbulence each shimmer through in Poe’s writing.

There are other accounts that confirms the possibility of a social reading of Poe’s work. Jonathan Elmer’s Reading at the Social Limit: Affect, Mass Culture & Edgar Allan Poe for example performs a social reading of Poe’s tales. Elmer posits that “Poe’s ostensibly psychological tales and poems, in their very focus on representational and psychic division attending the individual—and despite their frequent lack of reference to contemporary conditions— are in fact profoundly responsive to social reality” (20). Another account can be found in Cutler’s book, which underlines the influence of ante-bellum social change on the work
of Poe. Examining Poe’s urban fiction, Cutler discovers a “generalizing experience of the modern, the uncanny experience of a particular that is no longer particular, a reflection of the object world succumbing to the deepening abstraction of type and price” (99). According to Cutler, Poe’s writing interacts with the new socio-economic environment of the Antebellum Period dominated by finance capitalism and speculation, in which every human value has become a commodity. Moreover, Cutler confirms that Poe’s insistence upon the social environment can be described as ‘inscribing’: “[…]; his writing does not merely respond to urban conditions but radically inscribes those conditions, allegorizing the disintegrating experience of commodification within its very forms” (99; my italics). The social strand in Poe can thus be described as glimmers, it is not the writer’s main concern, but the context of the text is revealed in certain places, highlighted by a word like ‘inscribe’. Lastly, the narrator of “Some Words with a Mummy” remark about the nineteenth century is a strong indication of the social layer of Poe’s tales:

The truth is, I am heartily sick of this life and of the nineteenth century in general. I am convinced that every thing is going wrong. Besides, I am anxious to know who will be President in 2045. As soon, therefore, as I shave and swallow a cup of coffee, I shall just step over to Ponnonner’s and get embalmed for a couple of hundred years. (547-548)

This dissertation will not go so far as to propose that Poe’s writing is a direct critique of nineteenth-century America, but the excerpt shows that his short stories contain social layers. As opposed to what Silverman argued, a social reading of Poe’s tales is not limited to “Melonta Tauta” and “Some Words with a Mummy”, as following paragraphs should illustrate.

But before I turn to Poe’s tales of terror I present an example that illustrates how these social glimmers work in Poe’s “Hans Pfaall” short story. As mentioned, the balloon is indicative for a couple of Poe’s short stories like “Hans Pfaall” or “The Balloon-Hoax”. However, “The
Unparalleled Adventure of One Hans Pfaal” reveals glimmers of the turbulent changes during the first half of the nineteenth century. The short story itself consists mainly out of a letter from Hans Pfaall who according to himself managed to reach and reside on the moon by using a balloon. Pfaall is a citizen of Rotterdam who experienced great financial insecurity due to a changing world:

My ancestors have also resided therein time out of mind—they, as well as myself, steadily following the respectable and indeed lucrative profession of mending of bellows: for, to speak the truth, until of late years, that the heads of all the people have been set agog with politics, no better business than my own could an honest citizen of Rotterdam either desire or deserve. Credit was good, employment was never wanting, and there was no lack of either money or good-will. But, as I was saying, we soon began to feel the effects of liberty and long speeches, and radicalism, and all that sort of thing. People who were formerly the best customers in the world, had now not a moment of time to think of us at all. They had as much as they could do to read about the revolutions, and keep up with the march of intellect and the spirit of the age. If a fire wanted fanning, it could readily be fanned with a newspaper; and as the government grew weaker, I have no doubt that leather and iron acquired durability in proportion—for, in a very short time, there was not a pair of bellows in all of Rotterdam that ever stood in need of a stitch or required the assistance of a hammer. (6-7; my italics)

This long excerpt reveals a dichotomy between Pfaall’s lucrative past and the complex new age. The past is associated with prosperity, whereas the present has brought ruin to Pfaall’s business. The reader is presented with an image of Hans Pfaall as a final practitioner of the traditional crafts, because he was presumably the last of a family of bellow menders. Due to the developments of the economy the traditional crafts are less required, resulting in a loss of
customers. The main reason given for this loss is that all his possible customers lack time because of this new age characterised by revolutions, a march of intellect and the rise of newspapers (which will become more significant later on in this chapter). Pfaall mentioning ‘liberty and long speeches, and radicalism, and all that sort of things’ can even refer to Andrew Jackson’s election in 1828 (Castillo 98), a president who would for example improve liberty for the settlers (cf. chapter 1: Jackson’s policy regarding Native Americans), showing a strong connection with social issues. Also, the economic changes that Pfaall notices seem reminiscent of the changes occurring during the Antebellum Period. The transition away from traditional crafts suggests that a new economy is arising in which craftsmen were no longer required. In short, in this new day and age Pfaall “grew as poor as a rat, and having a wife and children to provide for, my burden at length became intolerable, […]” (7). Because of this, it can be said that his story contains social layers in representing Hans Pfaall as an individual rendered poor due to a changing society. The suggestion of the word ‘glimmers’ is then that those social issues and themes are presented rather subtly and are rarely the main goal of Poe’s writing, as was also mentioned earlier. “Hans Pfaall” illustrates this, as the excerpt I have covered is one of the few, if not the sole part in which socio-economic remarks are made. Because of this, my dissertation will employ the word glimmers to analyse Poe’s short stories.

This initial overview should indicate the possibility of a social reading of Poe’s work. In the following part, I will examine Poe’s Gothic tales and how they also work with those glimmers.
Poe’s “The Black Cat” has often been associated with its social context. According to Lesley Ginsberg the story “cries out for contextualization”, because it “reflects contemporary sensationalist fictions, parodies the temperance confessional, and critiques the growing acceptance of the insanity defense in antebellum courtrooms […]” (99). Furthermore, the story deals with the issues of pet abuse, the dichotomy between black and white and animal versus human, within the context of debates concerning chattel slavery and social reform (Ginsberg 99-100). However, the central issue of the “Black Cat” short story is its racial implications: the black cat, described as a ‘brute beast’ (Poe 227), has in critical literature been largely assessed as a symbol for black slaves. In this respect, there has been a lot of focus on the dependent relation between the domesticated cat and its deranged owner as a metaphor for the relation between slave owners and their slaves: “the typical gothic conflict between defenseless victims and abusive tyrants within a racialized framework” (Edwards 3). Nevertheless, the short story itself presents a more nuanced vision on slavery than is assumed. By contrast, Edwards mentions that “racism haunts much of Poe’s work” (4). For example, in Poe’s first published story “Metzengerstein” his “basic position seems anti-abolitionist” (Lee 21) and “its political structure is sustained, revealing subtle though recognizable patterns of anti-abolitionism and registering, not only racial horror, but a possible position on civic events [referring to the Nat Turner Rebellion]” (Lee 23-24).

Noticeably, the narrator and his cat initially lived on peaceful terms, until the protagonist grew intemperate:

Our friendship lasted, in this manner, for several years, during which my general temperament and character-through the instrumentality of the Fiend Intemperance–had (I blush to confess it) experienced a radical alteration for the
worse. I grew, day by day, more moody, more irritable, more regardless of the feelings of others. (Poe 224)

It was only when alcohol affected him that the narrator started to abandon his friendship with Pluto. This was also mentioned before when I referred to Reynold’s essay on the temperance movement’s influence on Poe’s “The Cask of Amontillado”. Not only does this reveal one particular glimmer in Poe’s “The Black Cat”, but it also points to another regarding the slavery debate in antebellum America. The initial friendship between the black cat and the narrator has already been linked to slavery, but it could also suggest a more nuanced take on the slavery debate, because the narrator initially treats him and the cat (the symbol for black slaves) as equals. Before the narrator is struck by alcohol, he still talks about friendship between him and Pluto, implying he considered both him and his cat as companions. This also explains the ‘I blush to confess it’ between parentheses, pointing to shame regarding his comportment towards Pluto, revealing their bond is more intricate than a straightforward master-pet relation.

Further on in the tale remorse plays an even bigger role, when after Pluto a new black cat appears: “I avoided the creature; a certain sense of shame, and the remembrance of my former deed of cruelty, preventing me from physically abusing it” (Poe 227). Even towards this second cat the narrator feels remorse and cannot hurt it, but he does feel “unutterable loathing”, wanting “to flee silently from its odious presence, as from the breath of a silence” (Poe 227). The narrator experiences remorse which results in aversion from his new cat. Hence, taking into account the subtext of slavery, the story’s narrator appears to express guilt towards the black cat (the visage of the new cat functions like Mr. Hooper’s black veil which I discuss later on in this dissertation), which functions as a symbol referring to slaves. In this way, Poe can be said to refer to the emancipatory debates that started in the Antebellum Period. This can thus be seen as another glimmer of the nineteenth century, because the emancipation of slaves is one of the major social changes during the Antebellum Period. An exponent of this social change was
David Walker’s Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World in 1829 that marked the start of the abolitionist movement in America. Walker’s work sparked a wave of abolitionism culminating in 1831 with the foundation of The Liberator newspaper and the Nat Turner rebellion (Castillo 148). These are indications that during the nineteenth century there was an ongoing debate in American society regarding the emancipation of slaves, increasing the possibility of a glimmer in Poe’s work. This emphasizes the social Gothic within “The Black Cat”, because the story combines its Gothic mode with this social subtext of slavery. This and Poe’s more nuanced stance on slavery is also emphasised in a moment of emancipation in the story. Towards the end of “The Black Cat” the cat reveals the murder committed by the narrator on his wife. It is significant that an animal so closely associated with racial discourse is the only factor contributing to the denouement of the story. Arguably then, the cat can be seen as an emancipated slave, who escapes the master-pet binary by getting his master convicted. In this way, “The Black Cat” appears to contain glimmers of antebellum social issues, not only in its connection with the temperance movement, but also by revealing a nuanced stance on slavery. To recap, this nuanced stance is reflected in the ambivalent stance of the narrative towards the cat that symbolises slaves: on the one hand there is the hate of the narrator for his pet, but on the other hand the cat is empowered to get his master convicted.

Poe’s detective tales “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” and “The Mystery of Marie Roget” also reveal a nineteenth-century influence. Allan Lloyd Smith in his American Gothic Fiction: An Introduction does consider Poe’s detective tales as being Gothic, explaining their relevance to my dissertation (65-68). Furthermore, the mysterious and vicious nature of the murder committed in the stories adds to their status of Gothic texts. In both stories the daily public press plays an important role in solving both of the cases, also pointing to an influence from the stories’ socio-cultural context. “The mass-circulation daily newspaper may well be the most distinctively modern textual form to have emerged in the nineteenth century”, writes
Cutler (65). An exponent of this was the penny daily of New York City, which was a “parallel phenomenon to the transforming urban readership in the United States”, illustrating the rise of a mass urban readership in America” (Cutler 65). These penny papers were the “outcome of broader economic and cultural shifts that produced a new readership in the United States” during the Antebellum Period that would ultimately result in American mass culture (Cutler 72). Furthermore, the penny papers and nineteenth-century newspapers were tasked by narrowing the time gap between the occurrence of an event and the reporting of this event (Cutler 77). Hence, the immediate reporting of events often resulted in correction afterwards, as some facts appeared to be distorted or conclusion too hastily drawn (Cutler 78-79). A parallel can be drawn between this emergence of the public press and newspapers and both detective tales, because Dupin largely interacts with the public opinion.

“The Murders in the Rue Morgue” is set in nineteenth-century Paris, in which the Gazette des Tribunaux reports on the “EXTRAORDINARY MURDERS” (Poe 147) committed on Madame L’Espanaye and her daughter Camille. Dupin and the narrator draw the witness report from the Gazette and later on Dupin comments that “the Gazette, he replied, has not entered, I fear, into the unusual horror of the thing. But dismiss the idle opinions of this print. […]” (Poe 154). This is the first indication that the “Rue Morgue” short story refers to the emergence of daily press and newspapers. However, Dupin dismisses them: they refrain from listing all the details and they are nothing but idle opinions. Further on in the story, Le Monde comments on the capture of the orangutan and advertises for its retrieval by its owner, leading to the story’s denouement, as apparently this was the last piece of evidence Dupin required to tie all the ends together. Therefore, it can be said that the daily press controls a large part of the story’s dynamic: one paper initiates the narrative, whereas another one seemingly leads to the solution of the enigma. This is a first indication of the socio-cultural layer in Poe’s mystery tale.
Next to its references to the press, the “Rue Morgue” story also comments on the urbanisation of America. Even though Poe never travelled to Paris, he managed to create a virtual construction of the city by drawing on Parisian periodicals. In relation to Poe’s virtual Paris, Cutler also establishes that Poe, like Baudelaire, presented an “allegorization of urban modernity” (98) in his urban fiction. Abrams defined Allegory as “a narrative, […] in which the agents and actions, and sometimes the setting as well, are contrived by the author to make coherent sense on the ‘literal,’ or primary, level of signification, and at the same time to signify a second, correlated order of signification” (5). Relating Abrams’ allegory to “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” should lead to uncovering this allegory of urban modernity. The orangutan can be seen as the allegorisation of urban modernity: it is an agent in Poe’s short story, employed by the author to make sense not only of the enigmatic murder, but also of Paris. Dupin comments on the murder’s circumstances as follows:

[…]–let us glance at the butchery itself. Here is a woman strangled to death by manual strength, and thrust up a chimney head downward. Ordinary assassins employ no such mode of murder as this. […]. In the manner of thrusting the corpse up the chimney, you will admit that there was something excessively outré-something altogether irreconcilable with our common notions of human action, even when we suppose the actors the most depraved of men. […] , we have gone so far as to combine the ideas of an agility astounding, a strength superhuman, a ferocity brutal, a butchery without motive, a grotesquerie in horror absolutely alien from humanity, […] . (Poe 160)

The orangutan, unknown at the time of the preceding excerpt, thus becomes the allegory for urbanised man, who is described by butchery, excessively outré, irreconcilable with human action, brutal ferocity and as a grotesquerie. Richard Lehan confirms that Poe’s view of the urban environment was largely pessimistic (cfr. “The Man Of the Crowd” later on): “the city is
thus that strange home, beyond the wilderness, to which we are ultimately called. Built into such a vision was Poe’s distrust of the gospel of progress, a distrust that played into his doctrine of ruin and decay” (173). Poe distrusted the antebellum gospel of progress that would result in the creation of these urban orangutans. The orangutan figure is not only relatable to urbane though. In his articles Jones refers to Joan Dayan’s work which has illustrated that “pseudo-scientific studies of race in the period [Antebellum Period] had long made the connection between primates, especially orangutans, and the African race” (252). This adds to the importance of the orangutan figure in the short story and is also an indication of the tale’s social layer.

“The Mystery of Marie Roget” contains a corresponding tendency to engage with newspapers, but it also refers to the phenomenon of the city. On the opening page Poe comments on how he modelled the story after the murder of Mary Cecilia Rogers in New York City, largely based on “no other means of investigation than the newspapers afforded” (Poe 169). In the story Dupin once again draws heavily upon newspapers to provide information regarding the Roget case: “in the morning I procured, [...], at the various newspaper offices, a copy of every paper in which, from first to last, had been published any decisive information in regard to this sad affair” (Poe 173). As mentioned before, the newspapers’ role became more important in the nineteenth century and this development is shown here. Dupin seems to recognise the importance of the penny press as a quick source of information. He focuses on L’Etoile, Le Commerciel and Le Soleil (respectively modelled after nineteenth-century New York City papers Brother Jonathan, Journal of Commerce, and the Philadelphia paper Saturday Evening Post) which he critically compares in order to get the best insight in the mystery. The word ‘critically’ is paramount, because Dupin appears to be one of the first conscious readers of the nineteenth century papers:
We should bear in mind that, in general, it is the object of our newspapers rather to create a sensation—to make a point—than to further the cause of truth. The latter end is only pursued when it seems coincident with the former. The print which merely falls in with ordinary opinions (however well founded this opinion may be) earns for itself no credit with the mob. The mass of the people regard as profound only him who suggests pungent contradictions of the general idea. (Poe 181).

Newspapers not only want to diminish the time gap between event and its textual representation, but also want to attract major attention by diverging from ordinary opinions in creating pungent contradictions in their articles. Journalists, according to Dupin, only “busied themselves in suggestion” (Poe 175), whilst Dupin refuses to build his theory on “palpable traces of suggestion. The opinions must be rigorously the public’s own; […]” (Poe 195). Like in the “Rue Morgue” story, glimmers appear of the nineteenth century prominence of the penny press and newspapers, whilst also engaging with the debate concerning the factual value of these papers.

Towards the end of the “Marie Roget” short story, Dupin also conceptualises a dichotomy between the city and the country, reminiscent of the antebellum debate concerning urbanisation. In this debate rural Americans were largely skeptical of the city as a new nineteenth-century phenomenon, distrusting its impact on their daily lives. A strong argument against the city was that it limited individual freedom (cfr. chapter 1 for the elaborate discussion). This is exemplified by following excerpt:

Let any one [sic] who, being at heart a love of nature, is yet chained by duty to the dust and heat of this great metropolis—let any such one attempt, even during the week-days, to slake his thirst for solitude amid the scenes of natural loveliness which immediately surround us. […] It is now especially that, released
from the claims of labor, or deprived of the customary opportunities of crime, the town blackguard seeks the precincts of the town, not through love of the rural, which in his heart he despises, but by way of escape from the restraints and conventionalities of society. He desires less the fresh air and the green tress, than the utter license of the country. (Poe 197)

The dichotomy Dupin creates between the country and the city is seemingly one between freedom and ‘license’ on the one hand, and restraints and conventionalities on the other. In the city individual freedom appears limited by restraints and conventionalities of society. Conjointly with Orwell’s 1984, the city is no place for the individual, even if the individual desires to engage in crime like the town blackguards. Like Big Brother, urban society looms over the individual and checks its every move, thus limiting individual freedom. Correspondingly, the alleged body of Marie Roget and the thicket in which her handkerchief was found is placed outside the city. This detail becomes significant when Dupin expresses his elopement theory, as only in the country could Marie Roget evade the conventionalities of the ‘great metropolis’. These are illustrations that in the eyes of the narrator the urban environment is juxtaposed with the ‘utter license of the country’. This opposition between the city and the country can thus be said to mirror the debate in America concerning the shift towards an urban oriented society away from a predominantly rural society. Therefore, by indulging with the nineteenth century phenomenon of the newspaper and by referring to the city, the mystery stories reveal their social nature.

Another short story that comments on its urban setting is “The Man of The Crowd”. This is confirmed by Bran Nicol: “it would be perverse to deny that ‘The Man of the Crowd’ gives a valuable insight into the urban conditions of the early- to mid-nineteenth century” (483-484). Furthermore, Nicol asserts that a sociological reading belongs to the “story’s strange capacity to deflect the attention of readers away from what is on the page towards what it
suggests about the contemporary social scene, a move from text to context, in other words— […]” (472). Whilst reading his newspaper—once again there is the presence of newspapers—the narrator comments on the masses commonly associated with an urban environment: “at first my observations took an abstract and generalizing turn. I looked at the passengers in masses, and thought of them in their aggregate relations” (Poe 475-476). Moreover, the city is a place for businessmen, wound up in their businesses, which do not appeal to the imagination of the narrator, as these “[…] noblemen, merchants, attorneys, tradesmen, stock-jobbers—men of leisure and men actively engaged in affairs of their own—conducting business upon its own responsibility. They did not greatly excite my attention” (Poe 476). On top of commenting on the city dwellers, the narrator also mentions stock-jobbers, revealing a trace of the new economy of finance and capital originating in the Antebellum Period. As a last comment on the city’s population, the narrator points to the “many individuals of dashing appearance, whom I easily understood as belonging to the race of swell pick-pockets, with which great cities are infested” (Poe 476). Those two citations show the narrator categorising the city’s population: he superficially asserts that he is looking at noblemen, tradesmen, individuals of dashing appearance whom he identifies as pick-pockets, and others instead of truly learning their identity. The narrator categorising the city’s population can be understood as “a reflection of actual urban experience”, whilst it is also “a reflection of urban media” (Cutler 111). Everything had to be reduced to certain types in order to survive within the urban environment, because it was a much more densely populated environment. On top of this, the short story can even be linked to racial discourse like Edwards suggests in his book “such physical demarcations echo the essentialism of the racial theories of Morton, Nott, and Campbell, who attempted to rank different races in terms of intelligence and to offer scientific proof of the relationship between physical appearance and essential character” (Edwards quoting Michael O’ Malley’s “Specie and Species: Race and the Money Question in Nine-Teenth Century America”; 8). It are these
references to the new nineteenth-century urban environment and urban experience that constitute the social glimmers in the “Man of the Crowd” short story.

To conclude this chapter, I attempted to examine the social Gothic in Poe’s short fiction by analysing what I dubbed social glimmers. Next chapter of this dissertation will deal with the social Gothic in Hawhtorne’s short fiction.
5. Nathaniel Hawthorne

Nathaniel Hawthorne started his career as a historical romancer with a small capital, and primarily followed the example of Edgar Allan Poe in establishing his writing career. Like Poe, Hawthorne was impacted by the rise of the literary magazine during the nineteenth century. This had aesthetic implications for Hawthorne, because these magazines emphasised brevity in literature. An illustration of this was Poe’s insistence on brevity when he reviewed Hawthorne’s Twice-Told Tales in 1842 (Bell 7). Next to brevity of form, Hawthorne dedicated a large part of his work to exploring Puritan and New England themes, diverging away from Poe. Whereas Poe was considered a proponent of the sinister, psychological Gothic, Hawthorne developed the Frontier Gothic (Lloyd-Smith 71). This Gothic mainly dealt with the experience of the frontier and with the confrontation between Native Americans and the settlers (Lloyd-Smith 71). Moreover, according to Castillo this Puritan framework can be related to the Transcendentalist philosophical movement in American literature: “Transcendental thought reflects the Puritan conundrum about how the individual comes to apprehend truth and reality: whether it was revealed directly to the human heart, […] or whether it can be discerned through the sensory perception of ordinary experience” (109). This not only stresses the dichotomy between two kinds of experiences, but also stresses the importance of the individual.

Transcendentalism originated as a new religious movement in New England “among clergymen caught up in unresolved theological battles […], specifically between ‘New Light supporters’ of the wide-spread religious revivals known as the Great Awakening and their “Old Light” opponents” (Gura III). Transcendentalism in America was propagated around 1830 by a “loosely knit group of thinkers and activists” (Gura, IV). One of those activists was Ralph Waldo Emerson who is often mentioned in descriptions of Transcendentalism (Gura, Hurth). This group of activists
had a distinct philosophical bent toward German Idealism rather than British Empiricism, that is, toward the revolution wrought by Immanuel Kant, Johann Gottlieb Fichte, and others who championed the inherent powers of the human mind, against the philosophy of John Locke and his followers, who believed that external circumstances primarily formed man’s consciousness (Gura, IV).

Transcendentalist thought was mainly concerned with liberating individual thinking from Locke’s world, that was a predominantly rational world (Gura IV). The new transcendental philosophy was a new “way of perceiving the world, centred on individual consciousness rather than on external fact” (Gura VII). Hawthorne was introduced to transcendentalist philosophy through his friend Elizabeth Palmer Peabody, the sister of his future wife Sophia Peabody (Wayne 140). The philosophy appealed to Hawthorne, because he felt constrained by the practical world: “his own thoughts were so fantastically divided between the materiality of his duties and the creative exercises which they obstructed, […]” (Bell 34). Through his art Hawthorne felt liberated from his professional constrains which underlines his transcendentalist thinking. In this respect “it is undeniable that Hawthorne gave conscious assent to the transcendental view of art: a presentation of that ideal of which the visible world is but an imperfect expression” (Bell 34). In other words, “it [Transcendentalism] gave him support for his individualism and helped him formulate his ideas on the relative power of good and evil” (Rosa 115).

To return to the Puritan framework surrounding Hawthorne’s writing, Puritan times were perfectly suited for Hawthorne to set his stories in. According to Arlin Turner it was during the Puritan era when “human character and human action were openly displayed in the market place and the agents of good and evil were believed to be literally present and engaged in perpetual warfare. Characters from those early times could be expected as a matter of course to find in all external manifestations the kind of moral meanings” (28). This explains the main
motive for Hawthorne to draw heavily upon Puritan settings: it was the best way for him to show this perpetual battle between good and evil externally. To expand on Puritan ideology, Davitt Bell examines Puritan thinking and finds a “contradiction between the supposed advocacy of liberty and the actual denial of it[, producing] the central tension that informs the historical romance of New England” (13). Puritan ideology proposed new liberal values, but in practice these Puritan liberties were limited. Puritans of New England provided freedom and prosperity for fellow Puritans coming from Great-Britain, whilst alienating civilians with a different religious background. This is for example shown in Hawthorne’s “The Gentle Boy”, where Puritan society can be held accountable for the death of the quaker boy Ibrahim. The contrast between propagated liberty and actual constraint is symbolised by the concept of the “narrow Puritan”, which functions as a “separate character, to explain the intolerance of the Puritans without forcing a writer altogether to abandon the myth of the heroic New England Past” (Davitt Bell 85). This highlights the difficult position of Hawthorne, as on one hand he felt the need to celebrate the rich history of New England, but on the other hand he was aware of its association with cultural and religious repression. This stance likely became relevant for him when treating the Antebellum Period. He coupled an optimistic belief in progress with a pessimistic view on the social changes threatening eighteenth-century Hans Pfaalls. It seems apt to reiterate the point made by Daigrepont in the first chapter of this dissertation: a conflict arises between progress and the dream of a new Eden in America. However, critical work has largely preferred the historical dimensions of Hawthorne’s work due to his insistent use of New England and Puritan tropes. These readings are less preoccupied with the social dimensions of Hawthorne’s gothic tales, which provides a gap for the social Gothic.

In his essay “Certain Circumstances: Hawthorne and the Interest of History” Michael J. Colacurcio relates Hawthorne’s “My Kinsman, Major Molineux” and “Young Goodman Brown” to psychoanalytic theory and their historical circumstances, claiming that Hawthorne
“has of course gone on to ‘use history’ for his own literary end – […]” as a way to “spur the creative process” (38). This resulted in a surge of historical studies merely researching Hawthorne’s use of facts and citing his sources: “meanwhile, of the explicit ‘approaches’ that have retarded the interest of history, one may count the discrediting effect of ‘source studies’” (Colacurcio 38). As opposed to the rise of source studies there was also a rise of historicist and culturalist research. A major work in this respect is Michael Davitt Bell’s Hawthorne and the Historical Romance of New England, which claims that

Nathaniel Hawthorne was one of the most historically minded of our major novelists. From his first tales to his final unfinished romances he turned again and again to history—particularly to the early history of his native New England, which provided the material for his greatest novel and for many of his best tales.

(vii)

Bell examines more closely how Hawthorne used New England history to sketch the setting and the ideologies underlining his stories, emphasising the concepts of historical progress and historical processes as major themes in Hawthorne (7). Davitt Bell’s research is also comparable to David Leverenz who created a New Historicist analysis of hell in Hawthorne’s short stories by examining how Hawthorne employs the figure of Satan as represented in New England society.

However, there have been hints that Hawthorne was socially engaged during the Antebellum Period. In his influential book Davitt Bell briefly mentions Hawthorne’s lien with the nineteenth century:

In the New World, as Hawthorne read American history, this ‘life’ [associated with Europe, the Old World] somehow withered away; it perished in the soil of the wilderness. This process of withering was important to Hawthorne because,
as he saw it, his own America was its result. The conditions of nineteenth-century America were determined, in a large part, by the sort of home the Puritans made in the wilderness. Thus nineteenth-century America, in Hawthorne’s analysis, was somehow insubstantial as compared with England. American life was thinner, less robust than English life. (116)

This indicates a troubled relation between Hawthorne and his own time: American life was thinner, making him feel more related to England than to nineteenth-century America. Because of this sentiment Hawthorne largely lived a reclusive life in isolation: “isolation was a natural consequence for the man of brain who rejected the opportunities of the politician and the financier” (Bell 11). Turner confirms that Hawthorne did live in isolation during the first dozen years after he finished college (34) and this in turn resulted in him being captivated by the theme of loneliness (Bell 11).

Even though Hawthorne spent some time of his life isolated from antebellum society, he remained engaged with central issues: “he blamed himself for his seclusive habits and meagre interest in the observable (“Hawthorne and the Real” 3). Because of this, an analysis of the social Gothic in his short stories should be possible. By analysing Hawthorne’s social and cultural side, Joel Pfister creates the image of Hawthorne as a ‘cultural theorist’ and as engaged with antebellum social struggles:

Hawthorne’s fiction often addressed issues, themes, contradictions, and perspectives taken up by mid nineteenth-century social critics. In 1843 and 1844 alone his tales and sketches featured critical and sometimes satirical views of the demon of machinery, the ideology of technology-as-progress, destructive modes of labor, the exploitation of seamstresses in urban sweatshops, growing class division in cities, and money-mad American millionaires. (36)
The historical progress emphasised by Davitt Bell is interpreted more negatively here: it is seen as demonic, destructive and suppressive of the lower classes. On top of this, Pfister adds that for Hawthorne nineteenth-century America was nothing more than a “howling marketplace” (36), an industrial America that “[worshipped] industrial utility, conformity, and time-discipline”, which resulted in “individualist alienation” (48). What these accounts show is that like Poe, Hawthorne was not unaffected by the socio-economic changes of the Antebellum Period.

Arlin Turner’s chapter “Called into the world” adds to the construction of Hawthorne as an engaged writer: “Hawthorne’s was an era of reform, and even though he doubted the efficacy of most reform efforts, as will be noted later, they are mentioned repeatedly in his works: the temperance movement, with its attacks on liquors, tobacco, coffee and tea; woman’s rights; prison and asylum reform and the abolition of capital punishment; various attacks on social and economic injustices”. (45). Hawthorne was especially vocal regarding slavery. An exponent of this is Larry Reynolds’s Devils and Rebels: The Making of Hawthorne’s Damned Politics that dedicates a large part to Hawthorne’s racial politics. In it Reynolds sketches a nuanced image of Hawthorne, take for example “his [Hawthorne’s] notebook entries” which “while racist, [tended] to be more condescending than hostile” (96). This is the prevailing notion regarding Hawthorne’s racial politics: more condescending than hostile. A concrete illustration of this attitude is sketched by Reynolds: “as is generally known, racial prejudice in antebellum America was supported by so-called scientific studies that placed the Negro at the bottom of a hierarchy races. Major intellectuals of the period, including Hawthorne, did not question the validity of these studies, which seemed authoritative and informed” (90). Hawthorne did not question these studies, acknowledging them, but at the same time Hawthorne had had mulatto friends during his childhood and during his adult life he had had mulatto friends as well. Thus, Hawthorne’s racial politics were more nuanced and complex.
These instances indicate that Hawthorne was indeed concerned with social issues of his age, making an analysis of the social Gothic possible, or as Bell puts it: “social parallels exist for Hawthorne’s symbolic trait” (8). In following paragraphs I will examine certain of his short stories and how they engage with social issues.

5.1 The Social Gothic in Hawthorne’s Short Stories

If Hawthorne’s fiction often addressed issues raised by nineteenth-century social critics like Pfister mentioned, then it is worth examining how exactly Hawthorne transplanted some of those social issues into his stories.

A first short story that can illustrate this is “The Minister’s Black Veil”. Its subtitle “A Parable” already hints to that ambivalence between the New England setting and the antebellum disposition. A parable represents “an allegorical or metaphorical saying or narrative; […] a comparison, a similitude” (OED). The short story also mentions that the parable is based on the life of Mr. Joseph Moody who took up a black veil like Reverend Hooper, because “he had accidently killed a beloved friend; and from that day till the hour of his own death, he hid his face from men” (Hawthorne 10). It is a story that fits Hawthorne’s thematic insistence upon guilt and sin: “Mr. Hooper wears a veil in testimony that all carry hidden in the heart guilt which they cannot reveal even to the closest friends or lovers (Turner 54 & Turner 31). Nevertheless, by examining guilt in “The Minister’s Black Veil” the story also becomes a ground to comment on antebellum society, even though the story’s setting and the nineteenth century remain a century apart. Carnochan enables this aspect of the story by asserting that “[…], ‘The Minister’s Black Veil’ is among Hawthorne’s best stories; in mood and substance it is grimly prophetic of what was to come”. Thus, even though the story is set a century before the Antebellum Period, this does not mean that it cannot offer comments on nineteenth-century America. This likely emphasises the connection between the story’s New England setting and antebellum America,
also making the story a parable for Antebellum Period. Because of this, it can be said that an analysis of the social Gothic is a viable reading of “The Minister’s Black Veil”.

The trope of the black veil allows the narrative to develop the social Gothic strain. Presumably on a Sunday the villagers of a Puritan New England town come together at a meeting-house for whom Reverend Hooper appears with a mysterious black veil covering his face. This veil is met with great distrust in the villagers: “I don’t like it,” muttered an old woman, as she hobbled into the meeting-house. “He has changed himself into something awful, only by hiding his face” (Hawthorne 11). Furthermore, the veil seems to exert a magical power that exposes the subconscious, the Id of the inhabitants: “each member of the congregation, the most innocent [sic] girl, and the man of hardened breast, felt as if the preacher had crept upon them, behind his awful veil, and discovered their hoarded iniquity of deed or thought” (Hawthorne 13). The black veil is a symbol that unveils the hypocrisy of the parishioners. This results in an uncanny sensation: the veil confronts the villagers with their deepest thoughts which initially were unfamiliar to them. Like the spirit of perverseness in Poe’s “The Black Cat”, the black veil confronts them with their sinfulness, which they initially deem to be inexistant as it belongs to their subconscious. Thus, the veil confronts the villagers with the familiar unfamiliar within them, the epitome of the uncanny experience: “this emptiness, figured by the veil, then, comes to function as a mirror, reflecting those aspects of the self that are normally hidden” (De Baerdemaeker et al. 762). This experience mainly rests on exposing the hypocritical sinfulness of the villagers. And this Hypocritical sinfulness is based on the distinction between a conscious and a subconscious in individuals. On the one hand subjects want to present themselves as very pious to their peers, but on the other hand when nobody sees them they indulge in various sins. This ambivalence is assessed by Hooper himself when he exclaims that “there is an hour to come,” said he, “when all of us shall cast aside our veils. Take it not amiss, beloved friend, if I wear this piece of crape till then” (Hawthorne 17) and “if I cover it for secret sin, what mortal
might not do the same?” (Hawthorne 18). The story’s social layer is implied in the veil’s potency to expose secret sin, as it implies that man is in essence a hypocritical being. Hence, in the eyes of Hawthorne the Americans of the nineteenth century and man in general carry black veils over their face like the parishioners of Mr. Hooper. When Hooper is breathing his dying breath he lashes out at this hypocrisy one last time:

Tremble also at each other! Have men avoided me, and women shown no pity, and children screamed and fled, only for my black veil? What, but the mystery which it obscurely typifies, has made this piece of crape so awful? When the friend shows his inmost heart to his friend; the lover to his best beloved; when man does not vainly shrink from the eye of his Creator, loathsomely treasuring up the secret of his sin; then deem me a monster, for the symbol beneath which I have lived, and die! I look around me, and, lo! on every visage a Black Veil! (Hawthorne 22-23)

The parable Hawthorne constructed thus had to reveal the black veil of every nineteenth-century American. Like Hooper they would “never willingly [pass] before a mirror” (Hawthorne 19), implying the sinfulness Hooper associates with human existence. Turner confirms this by assessing that “this avowal that guilt is universal”, but at the same time it “was to Hawthorne only a partial statement”, because “Hooper’s action provokes responses in himself and others which in this story are shown but not explored” (31-32). De Baerdemaker et al. disagree in that Hooper merely shows guilt. Instead, “Hooper does not so much demonstrate the universal guilt that haunts the community, as he himself claims, but actually performatively produces a sense of guilt in his community” (De Baerdemaker et al. 762). This implies the parishioners are not as laden with guilt as Mr. Hooper’s testimonies would make the reader believe.

The short story that follows “The Minister’s Black Veil” is Hawthorne’s “The Maypole of Merry Mount”. As mentioned in the introductory chapter of this dissertation the story
reflects the frontier Gothic, a term used by Allan Lloyd-Smith (71). In it, the reader finds a confrontation between an indigenous colony and the new Puritan settlers that have come to conquer their land. It can be said that the story inverts the frontier Gothic perspective in that it does not relate the experiences of uncovering mysterious, undiscovered lands. Instead it shows the experiences of the indigenous population towards the foreign Puritans, who are presented in the short story as a demonic force. Like “Rip van Winkle” moreover it sketches a societal change that provides the social dimensions of the story. It opens with a significant introduction:

There is an admirable foundation for a philosophic romance in the curious history of the early settlement of Mount Wollaston, or Merry Mount. In the slight sketch here attempted, the facts, recorded on the grave pages of our New England annalists, have wrought themselves, almost spontaneously into a sort of allegory. The masques, mummeries, and festive customs, described in the text, are in accordance with the manners of the age. […] (Hawthorne 23)

Hawthorne opened by remarking that the story has become a sort of allegory. Even though the concept of allegory can be strictly defined (cf. Abrams’ definition in previous chapter), Hawthorne entertained a more complex connection with the allegory. According to Turner, he was used to referring to a lot of his stories as allegories (69). However, after the publication of the “Maypole” story Hawthorne would be troubled with the allegory. In the introduction to his “Rappaccini’s Daughter” in 1854 he remarked that dubbing his tales allegories was “a real fault” (Turner 69), because it ultimately lost him readers. On top of that Hawthorne’s conception of the allegory is different from Abrams’ conception: “it should be noted that under allegory Hawthorne would have included much of what nowadays would be called symbolism. His reference was to any of his pieces employing fictional materials and devices to develop an idea or to convey a moral” (Turner 69). This shows that the term allegory in Hawthorne’s writings should be considered more delicately. It is then unlikely that Hawthorne envisaged this
short story as a means of sketching the antebellum period, but it does not exclude social themes from the story. Hence, my discussion of the “Maypole of Merry-Mount” here will mainly concern itself with the social shift occurring in Merry Mount. This shift should be understood in terms of an evolution away from a pagan, Indian civilisation centred around the maypole towards a strict Puritan society. This shift is personified by Endicott who is the demonic representative of the Puritan force acting as the central dynamic in the village’s evolution (in this respect he is comparable to Rip van Winkle acting as a social dynamic; see chapter 2). This development would ultimately dispel the authenticity and the imaginary associated with the period preceding the Antebellum period.

“The May-pole of Merry Mount” starts off by sketching a pastoral scene: “bright were the days at Merry Mount, when the Maypole was the banner staff of that gay colony!” (Hawthorne 23). Significantly, the narrator uses the past tense which implies that this pastoral scene has already been lost in his present. This implies that the Merry Mount of the present is far removed from what it once was, signalling dire impacts of the change wrought by the Puritans. The inhabitants of Merry Mount used to live in paradisiacal world “as they stood in the broad smile of sunset round their venerated Maypole” (Hawthorne 25). However, the threat of the Puritans looms over them: “but a band of Puritans, who watched the scene, invisible themselves, compared the masques to those devils and ruined souls with whom their superstition peopled the black wilderness” (Hawthorne 25). Interestingly, the masques worn by the colonists evoke the same experience the parishioners had when confronted with Reverend Hooper’s black veil. This implies the considerable amount of guilt that can be associated with the puritans. This band of Puritans nevertheless could be seen as representative for the impending social shift that is about to take place in Merry Mount. No longer will the colonists stand in the broad smile of sunset round their venerated pole, but they will be enslaved by Puritan ideology sweeping over the country. The differences between the Puritans and the
Merry Mount colonists are shown further on in the story when the narrator refers to the historical background of the settlement and its people:

Men voyaged by thousands to the West: some to barter glass beads, and such like jewels, for the furs of the Indian hunter; some to conquer virgin empires; and one stern band to pray. But none of these motives had much weight with the colonists of Merry Mount. [...] The men of whom we speak, after losing the heart’s fresh gayety, imagined a wild philosophy of pleasure, and came thither to act out their latest daydream. (Hawthorne 27)

The libertines of Merry Mount are then directly juxtaposed with the Puritans. Unlike the Puritans, the pagans have no interest in jewels and furs, nor do they pursue imperialistic ambitions. Instead, they imagined a wild philosophy of pleasure, only coming to Merry Mount to act out their latest daydream. However, with the Puritans’ arrival the pagan festivities of the colony became “discountenanced by the rapid growth of Puritanism” (Hawthorne 27). What these passages reveal is the shift from the established social order of the pagans to the new social order propagated by the Puritans, which is illustrated by the opposition between Merry Mount and the emerging Puritan society.

Merry Mount is a colony associated with festivities and pagan rituals, whereas the Puritans are its exact opposites. They are the epitome of soberness which is reflected by their stern attitude. The narrator voices this dichotomy between the Puritans and the Merry Mount colonists more clearly in following excerpt:

Unfortunately, there were men in the new world of a sterner faith than these Maypole worshippers. Not far from Merry Mount was a settlement of Puritans, most dismal wretches, who said their prayers before daylight, and then wrought in the forest or the cornfield till evening made it prayer time again. Their
weapons were always at hand to shoot down the straggling savage. When they met in conclave, it was never to keep up the old English mirth, but to hear sermons three hours long, or to proclaim bounties on the heads of wolves and the scalps of Indians. Their festivals were fast days, and their chief pastime the singing of psalms. Woe to the youth or maiden who did but dream of a dance!

(Hawthorne 28)

The citation sketches a very sober image of the Puritans and comparing it to previous citation concerning the Merry Mount inhabitants reveals the dichotomy between the colonists and the Puritans. The citation makes ample reference to the sterner nature of the Puritans: obsessed with praying and their daily work, oppressive towards Native Americans and to anybody who does not share their worldview, and their festivals are in fact fast days. On top of that the narrator refers to the Puritans as “men of iron” (Hawthorne 29), which adds to their reputation of stern and sober men. This once again highlights the direct opposition with the Merry Mount colonists whose festivals are anything but fast days. However, because of the Puritans the pagans felt their impending end when they “looked up, imagining that a momentary cloud had overcast the sunshine, which was to be perpetual there” (Hawthorne 29). The Puritan presence is a perpetual cloud, because they will forever change the nature of their colony.

Ultimately, due to those differences between pagans and Puritans “a feud arose” (Hawthorne 29). This feud that would shape the “future complexion of New England”, because if “the grizzly saints establish their jurisdiction over the gay sinners, then would their spirits darken all the clime, and make it a land of clouded visages, of hard toil, of sermon and psalm forever” (Hawthorne 29), which is reinforced by the “Puritan of Puritans: […] Endicott himself!” (Hawthorne 30). Endicott can be seen as the incarnation of the social shift in the story, because he is the one responsible for destroying the maypole. This destruction is largely a symbolic act signifying the final transition from the pagan community of Merry Mount towards
a strictly Puritan society. The same sensation is echoed within the short story when Endicott claims that the fall of the maypole “[shadows] forth the fate of light and idle mirth makers, among us and our posterity […]” (Hawthorne 30-31). William Heath confirms that cutting down the maypole is largely a symbolic act:

“The May-pole of Merry Mount” demonstrates Hawthorne’s eye for moments of historical significance and situations of psychological complexity. [...] we come away from it convinced that Endicott’s symbolic act of chopping down the maypole somehow embodies Hawthorne’s idea that ‘jollity and gloom were contending for an empire’ (9:54) and that ‘the future complexion of New England was involved in this important quarrel’ (9:62). The event he immortalizes had a lasting psychological and historical impact on New England character and culture. (56)

Heath confirms the impact of Endicott’s act upon New England as definitive: Merry Mount cannot recover from Endicott’s act and the pagan community is forever lost. Lastly, a final remark by the narrator refers to the situation in Merry Mount. The narrator comments that “as the moral gloom of the world overpowers all systematic gayety, even so was their home of wild mirth made desolate amid the sad forest” (Hawthorne 33). This remark contains a certain nostalgia for a lost age, completing the evolution from pagan to Puritan society.

A last short story that connects a Gothic mode of writing with a social layer is “Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure”. It can serve as a final story to examine the social Gothic in Hawthorne’s oeuvre. The gothic nature is mainly derived from the monomania expressed by the story’s protagonist who ruins his family house in search for treasure. This connects the story with the modern Gothic centred around the individual psychology. Furthermore, the narrator relies on Gothic tropes adding to the Gothic nature of the narrative. This is shown when he covers the history of old Peter Goldthwaite’s treasure:
Reports were various as to the nature of his fortunate speculation: one intimating that the ancient Peter had made the gold by alchemy; another, that he had conjured it out of people’s pockets by the black art; and a third, still more unaccountable, that the devil had given him free access to the old provincial treasury (Hawthorne 152)

These elements of the story confirm its Gothic identity, making it relevant to my discussion here pertaining the social Gothic.

A first instance which reveals a connection between the Gothic and Hawthorne’s society is his mention of treasure digging. During the nineteenth century treasure digging experienced its heydays:

With educated Americans increasingly arrayed against them, money diggers displayed remarkable tenacity. While seventeenth-century records are sparse and at best suggestive, ample evidence exists that many nineteenth-century Americans dug for treasure. The practice was particularly strong in such areas as Vermont and upstate New York, where severe social dislocation, rapid cultural change, and religious experimentation seemed to give the old culture an extended life. (Walker 451)

This citation suggests that the story is more than just a Gothic tale. Instead, it chooses to discuss nineteenth-century vogues. Like I mentioned earlier in this chapter, Hawthorne was in touch with the fads of his age and often included them in his stories. Furthermore, the excerpt raises a dichotomy between educated Americans and the money diggers. This dichotomy is also present in the story with the opposition between Peter Goldthwaite and John Brown. The latter represents the shrewd, mercantile businessman, whereas Goldthwaite symbolises the naïve businessman: “the contrast between him and his former partner may be briefly marked; for
Brown never reckoned upon luck, yet always had it; while Peter made luck the main condition of his projects, and always missed it” (Hawthorne 149). As Ronald Walker notes, the character of Goldthwaite sketched by the narrator fits the typical description of a money digger: “the popular view of the treasure hunter,” observed a historian of the Vermont diggings, “is that he is not a praiseworthy industrious type but rather is the kind of person who expects something for nothing. [...]” (Walker quoting Greene’s “Money Diggers” of 1969, 449). This description provided by Walker is highly applicable to the short story’s plot, because it is mainly concerned with Peter finding this long lost family treasure hoping to generate a large capital in a small amount of time.

Early on in the narrative, the narrator also slightly hints at a shifting social and economic environment emphasising Peter’s folly. Peter fails to take into account “the limbo of departed fashions, aged trifles of a day, and which passed to the garret when that generation passed to the grave, not for safe keeping, but to be out of the way” (Hawthorne 154). Goldthwaite, who is obsessed by the past, does not realise that the money of his ancestors hardly retains any value in the present, highlighting a financial shift from old Peter Goldthwaite to Peter Goldthwaite. This idea is expressed at the end of the short story where the narrator presents an overview of the treasure’s content:

Here was the semblance of an incalculable sum, enough to purchase the whole town, and build every street anew, but which, vast as it was, no sane man would have given a solid sixpence for. What then, in sober earnest, were the delusive treasures of the chest? Why, here were old provincial bills of credit, and treasury notes, and bills of land, banks, and all other bubbles of the sort, from the first issue, above a century and a half ago, down nearly to the revolution. Bills of a thousand pounds were intermixed with parchment pennies, and worth no more than they. (Hawthorne 166)
Peter Goldthwaite did find a treasure though, but over time its value has been decreased enormously. There is indeed an incalculable sum of money in the chest, yet in the present nobody would give a sixpence for it. The financial relevance of the treasure has diminished as it is all old money, exemplified by the bills he found dating back to the Revolution. Therefore, the parchments found in the chest can no longer have any relevant value in Goldthwaite’s time. It contains bills of a thousand pounds, yet these are not worth more than parchment pennies. In short, the treasure is nothing more than “just the sort of capital for building castles in the air” (Hawthorne 166), whilst Peter has demolished his sole possession: his family house. This shift in value is also indicated by the opposition between the solid cash Peter would gain from selling the house (in this way the house can be said to represent a kind of capital) and the treasure with which Peter can “[speculate], he may do it, to his heart’s content” (Hawthorne 166) as it is valueless. Discovering the treasure and its contents is ironical regarding Peter’s situation, as he is left pondering about what his treasure actually was. He was unaware of the changing financial market rendering the contents of the treasure worthless, which makes it ironical to describe the chest he found as a treasure. But at the same time Peter was unaware the house which could have provided him with sufficient capital.

The potential capital represented by Peter’s family estate requires a separate explanation. As discussed in the introductory chapter, during the Antebellum Period a new form of capitalism arose: finance capitalism. From this form of capitalism emerged a wave of commodification, which meant that value could be derived from all kinds of objects, instead of just money. The latter was thus no longer the only object that represented value in the nineteenth century. Hence, the Goldthwaite estate can represent capital in the short story. Note, this does not imply Goldthwaite’s house was valueless before the Antebellum Period. The argument here is that before the economic changes of the nineteenth century Americans would not have deemed the house to be relevant capital (this is explicitly shown in John Brown’s remark I quote
Claus 82

later on). However, Peter is unaware of the value possibly associated with his house, making him unconscious of this antebellum economic development. This also deepens the difference between John Brown and Goldthwaite, because Brown appears more aware of commerce. In regards to the house he remarks that “real estate is well up, and I could afford you a pretty handsome price.” (Hawthorne 166), showing his mercantile spirit and his commercial thinking. Peter Goldthwaite thus becomes a Hans Pfaall-type who (unable to give up the past) fails to adapt himself to the rapidly changing social and economic environment of his age. Because of this it can be said that the short story thematises a financial shift constituting the social layer of the tale.

To sum up, I analysed “The Minister’s Black Veil”, “The May-Pole of Merry Mount”, and “Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure”. I examined how these short stories represent the social Gothic. Next I will provide a concluding overview of what this dissertation covered.
6. Conclusion

To conclude my dissertation, I present an overview of what was discussed in previous chapters. My research analysed the social Gothic in the short fiction of Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe, and Nathaniel Hawthorne. This social aspect was determined by the socio-economic turbulence caused by an immense societal shift that occurred in post-revolutionary America. The United States modernised rapidly and became an industrialised and urbanised nation. Because of the speed of this change and its far-reaching implication for all layers of American society it was likely that traces of this change could be found in the work of the three authors.

Before I analysed the short stories of Irving, Poe and Hawthorne an introductory chapter on the Antebellum Period sketched the transformations that nineteenth-century America underwent. Technological innovations, or in other words internal improvement like the construction of the Erie Canal dominated this period and allowed large cities to be connected with each other, compressing the space and time continuum. Furthermore, the phenomenon of the city spread over the continent from the east towards the west in a wave of urbanisation. John Gast’s painting was used as an illustration of this wave westward. The chapter also paid attention to the economic unstability of the period. The Antebellum Period was dominated by panics due to the frail state of speculative capitalism. One rumour was enough to cause a market to collapse, resulting in the large amount of panics as was described by Jessica Lepler. Another aspect adding to the economic unstability was the debate regarding monetary value between bullionists and legal tender advocates, where the bullionists argued in favour of a specie-based monetary system as opposed to the legal tender argument for a wide circulation of paper money.

Another part of this chapter was devoted to sketching the literary marketplace that emerged during the Antebellum Period. At the beginning of the period the book trade was still in a premature state due to copyright legislation and because bookselling was at the time largely
a local phenomenon. Gradually, however, as cities would become connected they would become urban literary centres, piloting the surge of American book trading. Because of the influence of finance capitalism, publishers were still largely in control of literary vogue, as they had to determine what would sell and thus what authors should write. In this respect Terrence Whalen’s conception of three antebellum readers was discussed. This showed that writers were part of an economic literary complex constructed by publishers and editors of magazines. Moreover, the chapter described the rise of the short story genre as typical American genre that fitted the demands of antebellum readership. The short story was short, fast to read and a democratic genre, as it became closely associated with the man in the street.

Afterwards, this contextual chapter endeavoured to describe the evolution of the Gothic mode from its British origins to its modern form, in which the American Gothic was assessed as a vital transitional phase in the evolution of the Gothic. In this respect I discussed the essence of the Gothic novel and I covered concepts like the sublime and the uncanny before taking a closer look at the American Gothic. That the American Gothic was seen as a transitional phase, was explained by looking at its double tendency to draw on terrifying fantastical elements of the British tradition, whilst other American writers prioritised the psychology of the individual character resembling the modern Gothic. It was no surprise that American Gothic was still largely influenced by British tradition, as the work of Charles Brockden Brown illustrated, yet gradually American Gothic would diverge from its British counterpart. It ultimately had to develop its own themes and preferences due to a different cultural background of the Gothic. The core of the American Gothic, however, was the nostalgic expression to the period before the Antebellum Period, an expression that became important in the literary analysis chapters. Afterwards, the chapter ended with an overview of New Historical writing and a conceptualisation of the social Gothic. To reiterate, social Gothic has to be understood in terms
of a combination of a Gothic mode of writing with social concerns or references to the socio-economic environment.

After this contextual chapter my project analysed short stories from Washington Irving, Edgar Allan Poe and Nathaniel Hawthorne. These chapters emphasised the short stories’ use of the social with a Gothic mode of writing.

In regards to Irving, my project covered four short stories: “Sleepy Hollow,” “Rip van Winkle,” “The Adventure of The German Student,” and “Roscoe”. In “Sleepy Hollow” I discussed the tale’s connection with its socio-economic context. In my analysis, the short story contained traces of the period’s precarious economic state, exemplified by the character of Ichabod Crane. Secondly, I analysed “Rip Van Winkle” in which I explored the social shift theme by relying on the pattern drawn by Walter Shear. In it he established three phases: a first phase in which society resembles a harmonious, pastoral scene followed by a transitionary phase in which social fantasies are expressed. In relation to Rip his dream to be released from Dame Van Winkle was used as an illustration here. Then the second phase initiated the third phase in which the individual is left pondering upon his relation to society. Regarding Rip, he was confronted with a new society he was unfamiliar with and which was completely incomprehensible to him. Following “Rip van Winkle” I examined “The Adventure of the German Student” and “Roscoe”. Both stories (of which “the German Student” was the predominantly more Gothic story”) revealed a strong insistence upon the social.

Following the Irving chapter, the short stories of Edgar Allan Poe were discussed. In respect to these stories I established the use of social glimmers, which had to be seen as small remarks pertaining to social issues like slavery or the changed socio-economic situation of the nineteenth century. An example of this was given through the Hans Pfaall short story. Afterwards, the chapter analysed Poe’s “The Black Cat,” “The Murders in the Rue Morgue,” “The Mystery of Marie Roget,” and “The Man of The Crowd”. Amongst others, Poe’s racial
discourse was predominantly present in my analysis of these short stories. An example of a socio-cultural phenomenon that was discussed was the rise of the public press in Poe’s detective tales, which were seen as a significant glimmer of the nineteenth century.

Lastly, my project covered Nathaniel Hawthorne. After presenting an overview of Hawthorne’s insistence on a New England setting, Puritanism and his insistence upon the theme of guilt, the chapter assessed some of Hawthorne’s pivotal short stories. It started with the “Minister’s Black Veil,” followed by the “The May-Pole of Merry Mount,” and “Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure”. The short stories were shown to comment substantially on nineteenth century finance like in “Peter Goldthwaite’s Treasure”, but were also shown to engage with the theme of social shift like in “The May-Pole of Merry Mount”.

However, this investigation of the social in antebellum Gothic writing is far from complete. The question inevitably remains whether the social strain of the Gothic mode can be extended to other Gothic novelists and short story writers of the Antebellum Period. Also, this research could be extended to incorporate the end of the nineteenth century and investigate whether a corresponding tendency can be found in regards to modern Gothic. The periodisation of the modern Gothic is comparable to the antebellum American Gothic, as both periods constituted radical societal changes. Nevertheless, it can be said that the three writers were more engaged with society than their use of the Gothic mode initially implied. The Gothic mode is more complex than its terrifying or fantastical elements and exists of different layers which make Gothic narratives ideal for extensive critical scrutiny.
7. Works Cited


