

# “Everybody you tell will be haunted too”: Examining the Melding of Gothic and Modernist Literature in Mildred Haun’s *The Hawk’s Done Gone*

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## ABSTRACT

This essay examines how Mildred Haun uses Appalachian themes and settings to bridge the melding of Gothic and Modernist fiction through her short story collection, *The Hawk’s Done Gone*. By examining this melding of two polar genres, I seek to bring attention to an underappreciated author’s work and further expand the canon of Taryn Norman’s concept of “Gothic Modernism” into the rural literature space and beyond. I use cross-references to aid my literary analysis of several stories in Haun’s collection to showcase her usage of “Gothic Modernism.”

*The Hawk’s Done Gone* is a collection of stories that merges superstition, folklore, and modern realism with dark themes of witchcraft, infanticide, and incest to create a series of darkly-themed snapshots of Appalachian life ranging from the Civil War era to the 1940s. Despite the haunting threads connecting these stories, Haun deftly injects Appalachian songs, dialect, and culture into her writing to lend an Appalachian spin on the expected conventions of Modernism’s cityscapes or Gothic literature’s rural, wealthy plantations. Haun’s skillful blending creates a new, liminal space of terror, where readers feel tension from the characters, situations, and landscapes. In this essay, I show how this text combines its Modernist timeliness, using Ezra Pound’s idea of “make it new,” while also bringing in classic Gothic literature tropes (fearful weather, blood curses, and prophecy) to deepen the text’s complexity and showcase Modernist concerns, fears, and horrors.

The history of Gothic literature “usually begin[s] in 1764 with the publication of Horace Walpole’s *Castle of Otranto*.”<sup>1</sup> Gothic literature is generally discussed as a means of reaction to the Enlightenment period of literature that came before it. Interestingly, many tropes from this classic era of Gothic literature—such as a “fascination with dreams and ghosts, guilt and shame, dismemberment and death”<sup>2</sup> as well as the more sensational aspects, like “the unconscious and subconscious, the influence of unseen agencies, and trespass, abjection, sacrifice, and extinction”—still permeate the genre to this day.<sup>3</sup> Literature later moved into an age of modernity from the late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries—where a focus on the internal workings of the mind, emotion, and mental deliberation often trumped the overall Romanticized aspects of human life. Modernist writers were particularly interested in how individuals moved through society’s challenges, such as socially-acceptable behavior. However, Gothic characteristics of earlier literature returned during the Modernism Movement as a technique for writers to amp up the personal horrors and anxieties that living in Modernity often brings.

Ezra Pound famously named one of his books after a phrase he often said, *Make It New* (1934). This book, combined with Sigmund Freud’s ground-breaking work on both the mind and dreams, had Modernist writers taking the idea of making something new to heart by combining elements of multiple genres in their texts. This kind of experimentation was common—and indeed encouraged—in Modernist writing. Much of Mildred Haun’s work reflects this combination of genres to make something new. For example, Haun’s short story “Melungeon-Colored” employs techniques where Gothic elements (fearful weather, blood curses, and prophecy) and characters meet Modern senses of internalization. Haun then creates what Taryn Norman identifies as a “Gothic Modernism,” which is “a strain of Modernism that makes use of the well-established language and conventions of the Gothic terms to express recognizably Modernist concerns about the nature of subjectivity, temporality, language, and knowledge”<sup>4</sup> to make her work new.

*The Hawk’s Done Gone* is a collection of ballads and stories primarily linked by its narrator Mary Dorthula White Kanipe. The collection merges superstition, folklore, and modern realism with dark themes of witchcraft, infanticide, and incest

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1. Nick Groom, *The Gothic: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), xiii.

2. Groom, *The Gothic*, xiii.

3. *Ibid.*, xv.

4. Taryn Louise Norman, “Gothic Modernism: Revising and Representing the Narratives of History and Romance” (PhD diss., University of Tennessee, 2012), 2.

to create a series of snapshots of Appalachian life ranging from the Civil War era to the 1940s. Despite the haunting threads connecting these stories, Haun deftly injects Appalachian songs, dialect, and culture into her writing to bring mountaineer life to the surface of those blackened waters. Her writing also manages to weave Gothic tropes into ecologically horrifying settings, where readers feel tension from the characters and situation at hand and the very landscape. After Haun's death, editor and literary executor Herschel Gower edited and republished the original collection of *The Hawk's Done Gone* in 1968 with ten added stories to flesh out Haun's works even further in *The Hawk's Done Gone and Other Stories*.<sup>5</sup>

One impactful and complex story from Mildred Haun's *The Hawk's Done Gone* collection is "Melungeon-Colored," a dark tale of secrets, murder, prophecies, and bad weather. The narrator, Mary Dorthula White Kanipe, is unnamed in this particular story; however, in the introduction to the collection by Mildred Haun, she is listed as the primary narrator for many of the first-person narrated stories. "Melungeon-Colored" begins with a Gothic-style prophecy after one of the main characters, the young Cordia, runs off and marries Mos Arwood. The narrator, Mary, reveals: "Of course, Cordia didn't know but what me and Ad were her real pa and ma. I give Effena [Cordia's mother and the narrator's daughter] a death-bed oath that I would never tell. You know, if you tell something a dying person asks you not to tell you will be haunted by that person the rest of your life. Everybody you tell will be haunted too."<sup>6</sup> The idea of a haunting or ghostly presence is what Nick Groom calls a psychological Gothic trope since the assumption is that ghosts cannot physically harm a person; ghosts can only haunt a mind by appearing as a physical manifestation.<sup>7</sup>

Effena, Cordia's mother, is white, while Cordia's unnamed father is later revealed to be a darker-skinned mixed-race, which Mary identifies as Melungeon. Thus, the narrator is held by an oath that she will never reveal Cordia's true parentage to anyone, especially not to Cordia herself. Unfortunately, Effena dies soon after the promise is made, hence the "death-bed oath" the narrator mentions.<sup>8</sup> The narrator raises Cordia as her child; while it is not explicitly said, it is implied in the story that Cordia has white or light skin like her grandparents, Mary and Ad Kanipe. This section of the

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5. Herschel Gower, "Introduction: Mildred Haun, Storyteller," in *The Hawk's Done Gone and Other Stories* by Mildred Haun, ed. Herschel Gower (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), ix.

6. Mildred Haun, "Melungeon-Colored," in *The Hawk's Done Gone and Other Stories*, ed. Herschel Gower (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 97.

7. Groom, 78.

8. Haun, "Melungeon-Colored," 98.

story acts as both the revealing of a secret as well as a Gothic prophecy, predicting the narrator's difficult choice between telling Cordia the truth of her mixed-race parentage and the narrator being haunted for the rest of her life or the decision to let Cordia's future baby come and deal with the situation then. Cordia's real father, readers shortly learn after this prophecy, is a man identified as "Melungeon," a name for a person of mixed races, most commonly of Caucasian, Hispanic or Native American, and African-American descent.

In previous stories in *The Hawk's Done Gone*, Melungeons are respected and are treated as somewhat mysteriously attractive. The Appalachians in this collection believe that Melungeon people "are an old race of folks, and how they were started somewhere on a ship. They had some kind of trouble on the ship and ended up here."<sup>9</sup> However, the common knowledge within the story's society changes when it is revealed that Melungeons have "Negro blood in them." It is implied within the story that having a different kind of darker skin and heritage, such as Hispanic or indigenous blood, was acceptable to this society, but being Black was not. Racist ideology resurfaced in the community after this rumor was started, and therefore, "some folks were getting so they held it against a body for being a Melungeon" since people now thought of them as partially black.<sup>10</sup> Effena, Cordia's mother, probably requested that the narrator never tell Cordia the truth because Cordia might have faced racist comments and actions against her if anyone knew. While Cordia is presented in the story as light-skinned enough to pass as a white woman, she still can pass down "Melungeon" features to her children, such as a darker skin color or eye color. In addition, the narrator exhibits both her medical knowledge of genetics and past experiences as a granny woman when she says, "I knowed if Cordia ever had any boy youngons they would be Melungeon-colored and her man might not understand."<sup>11</sup> Presumably, a "Melungeon-colored" child would greatly upset a white father due to the aforementioned hostile nature toward Melungeons in this story.

Rather than focus on the individuality that a mixed-race character who does not know it could bring as other Gothic novels do, Mildred Haun chooses in the quotation mentioned above to focus on the Gothic aspects of family secrets, fear, and strange storms, which reflect emotional turmoil, and death. Haun simultaneously gives the readers a look into the narrator's, Mary Dorthula White Kanipe, stream-of-consciousness from the beginning of "Melungeon-Colored," which becomes a

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9. Mildred Haun, "The New Jerusalem," in *The Hawk's Done Gone and Other Stories*, ed. Herschel Gower (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 81.

10. Haun, "Melungeon-Colored," 98.

11. Haun, 98-9.

favorite technique of authors in Modernism. The stream-of-consciousness tool is very effective in this story because the reader can peek into the mind of Mary and see her anxiety and fear; this helps build the reader's tension as the story unfolds. The narrator warns Cordia "to come right to [the narrator] and let [her] know at the first sign" of pregnancy, intending to give Cordia a Pennyroyal tea, even though the narrator claims, "I never have give anybody a thing to knock a youngon."<sup>12</sup> The Pennyroyal, or *Mentha pulegium*, tea, made from either the dried leaves or the flower itself, will supposedly induce menstruation and cause Cordia to have an abortion, so the mixed-race nature of her heritage will remain a secret. Due to the forethought of these actions, a plan for violence is set into motion before Cordia even becomes pregnant.

However, the narrator begins to see more signs of a prophecy that Cordia is pregnant as she does the daily chores on the farm, and Mary realizes that there is nothing she can do to prevent the truth of Cordia's mixed-race ethnicity from unearthing. Omens, portents, and visions are an often-used trope in Gothic fiction, presumably because the idea that someone can tell or see the future—especially when their predictions come true—is unsettling but also uncanny.<sup>13</sup> The narrator leans heavily on her superstitions as she tells us, "[e]verything I saw made me think of a baby being born, of a ma trying to save a youngon."<sup>14</sup> A second prophecy comes into the narrator's thoughts as she muses, "then I told myself again that any ma that loved her youngon wouldn't let harm come to it."<sup>15</sup> After Cordia announces that she is indeed pregnant, the prophecy deepens as the narrator thinks in fear, "I begun saying to myself that I wished Cordia would die before it was born."<sup>16</sup> While Cordia passes as a white woman, the narrator fears the skin color of Cordia's child will prove dark. This assumption comes from the narrator's experiences as a Granny-woman; in her experience, male babies typically had darker skin, and female babies had lighter complexions. However, the narrator also remembers that Mos "had a Melungeon boy . . . staying over there" at Cordia and Mos' home, which the narrator "seed that [the Melungeon boy] would make things worse"<sup>17</sup> if or when the baby is born with dark skin.

The narrator has another Gothic-style prophecy the day Cordia goes into

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12. *Ibid*, 99.

13. Robert Harris, "Elements of the Gothic Novel," Spring Grove Area School District, accessed November 5, 2021, <https://www.sgasd.org/cms/lib/PA01001732/Centricity/Domain/553/Franken%20Gothic%20and%20Romantic%20Notes.pdf>.

14. Haun, "Melungeon-Colored," 100-1.

15. Haun, 102.

16. *Ibid*, 103.

17. *Ibid*.

labor: "I had a feeling it would have to happen that night, that night it did happen."<sup>18</sup> Instead of referring directly to the birth, the narrator chooses to call the birthing event "it," a sign that the narrator was full of dread and fear about the outcome of the birth. The narrator recalls similar ominous luck signs throughout the day: dreams of green snakes, death bells tolling in her ears, and the inability to sleep the night before.<sup>19</sup> The sense of gloom and foreboding continues as Haun uses a great Gothic-style storm to reflect the narrator's internal emotional battery the night Cordia goes into labor. Groom identifies this tempest-like storm as a Meteorological Gothic trope.<sup>20</sup> The narrator comments, "It was the worst storm I ever saw," and "There wasn't any air—not enough for a body to breathe. I thought I was going to smother."<sup>21</sup> This description of the figuratively suffocating storm with the narrator trapped inside the house foreshadows Cordia's baby's actual suffocation in a coffin when Mos buries it alive because of its dark skin. Robert Harris calls this trope of the Gothic-style storm "the metonymy of gloom and horror" because the storm is a metaphor for the narrator's complicated emotional state, warring between saving herself and saving Cordia and the child.<sup>22</sup>

Cordia's husband, Mos, comes to fetch the narrator because, in classic Gothic-Romantic fashion, Cordia goes into labor as the aforementioned great storm comes to change the world as the characters know it. Mos and the narrator fight the storm's pounding rain and brisk wind, a flooded river, lightning strikes, and endless mud to try and get to Cordia and help her give birth safely. The idea of the environment fighting against the characters themselves to prevent them from a goal is what Groom identifies as a Topographical Gothic trope.<sup>23</sup> However, the labor is over when the two characters arrive back at Cordia's home. The narrator throws back the quilt to cut the umbilical cord, and as she sees the baby, she speaks the words which doom Cordia to her premature death: "Its skin! A Melungeon! I knowed it."<sup>24</sup> Mos sees the darker skin of the baby and is enraged by the apparent infidelity between his wife and the Melungeon boy they had staying at the house. Mos kills Cordia with a stick of firewood rather than face society's shame; thus, he creates another familial secret—this time violently—to add to the story's Gothic sensibilities.

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18. Ibid.

19. Ibid, 103-4.

20. Groom, 77.

21. Haun, 104.

22. Harris, "Gothic Novel," 2.

23. Groom, 77.

24. Haun, "Melungeon-Colored," 108.

Mos' actions show the violence-driven Gothic reaction toward an object of fear and the Modernist anxieties about life or living with a soiled reputation. The narrator blurting out Cordia's unknown secret and being too shocked to act exhibit two more tropes of Gothic fiction: high, even overwrought emotion and women in distress.<sup>25</sup> Mos looms over the narrator and makes her fear that he will kill her next if she does not help him both build the coffin and carry it up the hill to be buried,<sup>26</sup> another trope of Gothic fiction that shows a woman threatened by a powerful, impulsive, or tyrannical male figure.<sup>27</sup> The narrator and Mos build a coffin for Cordia, working through the night, then "break[ing] her knees to get her legs to go down."<sup>28</sup> Mos, disgusted by the hungry, still-screaming, and not-white baby, "just picked it up and put it on in" the coffin with Cordia before he and the narrator nailed the lid to the coffin shut.<sup>29</sup> While Mos digs the grave for his murdered wife and suffocating child, the supernatural elements creep in again when a cat begins clawing at the door and sounds "like a woman's screaming" outside, signifying what Cordia herself can no longer do.<sup>30</sup> Mos and the narrator eventually start to haul the coffin up the hill behind the house, where Mos dug the grave mentioned above. A previously ordinary piece of land becomes Cordia's burial site in what Groom notes is an Architectural Gothic trope, where a space becomes haunted due to the actions of Gothic characters.<sup>31</sup> Finally, the cat follows the pair, jumps onto the coffin, and meows, warning of the horrible deed Mos and the narrator have committed. This technique, too, is Gothic: the cat represents Cordia's spirit in a supernatural element as a type of warning or begging to save the child in an echo of Edgar Allan Poe's similarly guilt-ridden tale, "The Black Cat." The narrator reflects darkly that she "could hear the baby smothering" the entire time inside the coffin.<sup>32</sup>

The ending of this tale merges the Gothic sensibility of a violent prophecy ending with Cordia's and the baby's death, where the secret of Cordia's mixed-race blood no longer matters, to the Modernist technique of showing the narrator's emptiness. The narrator numbly tunes out her granddaughter's funeral seven months later and thinks through her emotional justification for her actions. Similarly, Mos, Cordia's former husband and killer, comes to the funeral with "his new woman," and

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25. Harris, "Gothic Novel," 1.

26. Haun, "Melungeon-Colored," 108-9.

27. Harris, "Gothic Novel," 1-2.

28. Haun, "Melungeon-Colored," 109.

29. Haun, 109.

30. *Ibid.*

31. Groom, 77.

32. Haun, 110.

the narrator notes that Mos "hadn't waited till the dirt settled on Cordia's grave" before he found a different lover.<sup>33</sup> The idea of Mos, a husband who should have been grieving, bringing his new love interest to the funeral of his recently-deceased wife, Cordia, would be offensive and frankly taboo to people even today. This small detail reflects Haun's bringing in her Modernist writing tropes to the story; since Modernity is concerned primarily with the individual and how said individual navigates society and its pressures, Haun shows us here that Mos goes against the accepted social tradition of at least waiting until the first spouse is buried to marry again.

The narrator ends the tale with "Darkness, fire and pain. They were what I had been through. But God said he understood," and thus, she absolves herself of all guilt, noting, "I felt peaceful as a kitten."<sup>34</sup> The narrator, perhaps selfishly, sees the violent end of Cordia and the baby as a better fate than betraying the deathbed promise made to her daughter, Effena. Since the secret is kept, the narrator feels no one is returning to haunt her, despite her part in the violent acts committed against Cordia and her baby. The narrator effectively sheds her guilt when she believes God understands and forgives her participation in the violence that ended Cordia's life. This strange religious-working-through of the narrator's hand in murder reflects the spiritual Gothic, bending religious belief into a justification for an action.<sup>35</sup>

Of course, "Melungeon-Colored" is not the only one of Mildred Haun's stories full of Gothic literature tropes mixed up with Modernist literature techniques. Haun's story "The Pit of Death" still features Mary Dorthula White Kanipe as the narrator; however, this story focuses on Mary's first child, a bastard named Joe. Of course, Modernism is very concerned with the individual and how one navigates society and societal expectations. Joe grew up playing with a neighbor's little girl, Tiny; Tiny comes over before dawn to see Joe one day because she had a nightmare about Joe getting thrown into a hole inside a cave like a rock. This seemingly disturbing but likely innocent dream ends up being a Gothic-style prophecy combined with Appalachian folklore; the narrator, Mary, notes that she "didn't ask Tiny if she eat breakfast before she left home. I wondered if Sadie [Tiny's mother] had ever told her not to tell a dream before breakfast if she didn't want it to come true."<sup>36</sup>

The reader gets the narrator's stream-of-consciousness story-telling as Joe and Tiny grow up; this stream-of-consciousness technique was new to Modernist

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33. Ibid.

34. Ibid, 111.

35. Groom, 78.

36. Mildred Haun, "The Pit of Death," in *The Hawk's Done Gone and Other Stories*, ed. Herschel Gower (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 11.

literature, but it is very effective in Haun's writing as a mode of time passing quickly. Eventually, Joe wants to marry Tiny; however, her father says no, but Tiny and Joe do not stay away from each other. Tiny becomes pregnant, and Joe again tries to marry her, but Tiny's father refuses again. Joe goes after Tiny and his unborn child to try and rescue them, and he plans to bring them back to his ancestral home so his mother can help take care of the child. Unfortunately, Tiny's childhood nightmare comes true: Tiny's father and Joe's stepfather kill Joe and hide his body in a cave.<sup>37</sup> The cave becomes an unvisited, inaccessible, and haunted space—a mode of both topographical and architectural Gothic<sup>38</sup>—to Mary as she “feared to pass that cave” because of the violence committed and hidden there.<sup>39</sup>

“A Wasp Sting” begins with Mary reflecting on the unspoken accusation that a couple she went to heal, Elzie and Froney, made against her. Elzie, the husband, retrieves Mary under the presumption that Froney is sick, and once they arrive at Elzie and Froney's house, Mary discovers a broom lying across the doorway. One commonly held belief in Appalachia and outside of it was that “if you placed a broom over or across your front door, a witch would have to either pick-up said broom or count the bristles upon entering,” which would alert the homeowners that the guest was a witch so they could protect themselves from evil.<sup>40</sup> Of course, Mary steps over the broom with no issue, and immediately the couple is embarrassed since they are so sure that Mary is a witch that had cursed them. Eliza and Froney's cow had begun bleeding into the milk, and they decided their cow, “Old Heif[,] was bewitched,” so they needed to find someone to blame.<sup>41</sup>

Another superstition about witches held by the Appalachians is that they could “perform curses, evoke pain or death in another person, or destroy [the] property and livestock,” which was associated with black, or evil, magic.<sup>42</sup> Since the only healer in the area is Mary, she was naturally the first target; this example showcases both a spiritual and a textual trope in Gothic fiction because the rumors and folk beliefs of the society meet with concerns of evil or witchcraft to create a nuanced and, to the

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37. *Ibid.*, 11-24.

38. Groom, 77.

39. Haun, 24.

40. Mildred Haun, “A Wasp Sting,” in *The Hawk's Done Gone and Other Stories*, ed. Herschel Gower (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 1968), 265.

41. *Ibid.*, 267.

42. J. Tyler Chadwell and Tiffany D. Martin, “Mountain Mystics: Magic Practitioners in Appalachian Witchlore.” *Philology and Cultural Studies* 9, no. 1 (2016): 54.

Appalachian people in the story at least, a believable problem to be solved.<sup>43</sup>

Fronney's sister, Mallie, comes to visit the next day while Mary is still there, and Mallie stops at the doorway and picks up the broom before she starts asking to borrow anything she can see. However, "it was often said that if you give a witch an item from your house, even a drink of water, he or she could put a spell or curse on you,"<sup>44</sup> and since she had already picked up the broom, everyone was suspicious of her. So, no one let Mallie borrow anything from the house. Later that night, after Mallie supposedly left, a commotion in the chicken coop brings everyone out of the house to find a fox; Elzie, being prepared for any witches that might visit, shoots the fox with a silver bullet. There is a superstition that a silver bullet is the only thing that can kill a witch and that a witch could "shed her skin, and in some occasions, even take the form of an animal."<sup>45</sup> So, of course, if a shape-shifted witch was hit with a silver bullet, they would die; the fox runs off, injured, but the following day, the news comes that Mallie is dead from a supposed wasp sting. However, Mary notes as she looks at the body that the hole was "big enough, it looked like, for me to stick my little finger into;" it is, of course, then decided as truth that Mallie was the witch that cursed the family instead of Mary.<sup>46</sup> The horrifying realization that one's own family caused harm is a classically Gothic-style convention because the harm is personal and, therefore, very unsettling because that harm could come from any person.

Mildred Haun's short stories in *The Hawk's Done Gone* are multi-faceted collections representing folklore, superstition, and darkness via Gothic Modernism in an Appalachian setting. Several stories contain Gothic manifestations of familial sin, fear, and supernatural anxieties. The text also shares numerous facets of Modernism—such as the social and societal anxieties of race, focus on internalizing emotion, and real-life monsters—manifesting within the text. Several characteristics of the classic Gothic tropes also appear in this text, including prophecies, familial sins/blood curses, and supernatural elements such as ghosts and weather, which reflect the characters' internal struggles. The Gothic elements, such as the tempest-style storm before the murder of Cordia Arwood, are deliberate in showing intense emotion and anxiety in a time of Modernity. This text also indicates its Modernist timeliness while bringing classic Gothic literature tropes to deepen its complexity and showcase modern concerns, fears, and horrors. This idea of Modernist texts being both timely and complex reflects Octavio Paz's view where "Modernity [like the Gothic] . . . is

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43. Groom, 77.

44. Chadwell and Martin, 54.

45. Chadwell and Martin, 55.

46. Haun, "A Wasp Sting," 270.

always [concerned with] the other. The modern is characterized not only by novelty but by otherness."<sup>47</sup> Haun took inspiration from other Modernist creators around her as they strived to experiment and create something new. Haun then created a text of Gothic Modernism, which Taryn Norman identifies as "a strain of Modernism that makes use of the well-established language and conventions of the Gothic terms to express recognizably Modernist concerns about the nature of subjectivity, temporality, language, and knowledge"<sup>48</sup> to make her work complex and new as Modernist audiences demanded.

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47. Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire: Modern Poetry from Romanticism to the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 14.

48. Norman, "Gothic Modernism," 2.

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