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Rust Belt Gothic Fiction

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This dissertation examines an emergent subgenre of Gothic fiction geographically situated in the Rust Belt region of the United States related to anxieties stemming from the socioeconomic conditions of the area. The novels examined are Stewart O'Nan's *Snow Angels*, Tawni O'Dell's *Back Roads* and *Coal Run*, Russell Banks's *Affliction,* and Richard Russo's *Empire Falls*.

The Gothic is a mutable genre that transforms itself and manifests in new contexts when social anxieties arise and need to be addressed. Each of these novels deals with Rust Belt anxieties related to landscapes being ruined by the presence of abandoned mines and rusting factories, to a depressed economic climate that offers no hope for financial security, and to challenged or diminished masculinity. These are the themes that identify Rust Belt Gothic Fiction, while it still maintains older Gothic tropes concerning mortality and death. Although this subgenre is currently under examined, the socioeconomic conditions that caused its appearance have only gotten worse, meaning there is more Rust Belt Gothic to come.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

THE MUTABILITY OF THE GOTHIC AND ITS REGIONAL RE-EMERGENCES

There is a scene in Stewart O'Nan's *Snow Angels* (1994) where a teenage Arthur Parkinson leaves his therapist's office and proceeds downstairs to the Hot Dog Shoppe to eat two hot dogs while standing at the counter. The therapist's office is a work of fiction, but the restaurant and the town in which the novel takes place, Butler, PA, are real. I know this because I am from Butler and have stood at the very same counter Arthur visits in the novel. While reading *Snow Angels*, I experienced what Sigmund Freud called the "uncanny," an unease at finding something simultaneously familiar, but also unfamiliar and frightening. The story takes place in what is recognizably my hometown, but recast as a Gothic setting with a dark undertone that was frightening to me precisely because it was otherwise so familiar. And if a small mill town in Western Pennsylvania could be the setting for Gothic fiction, perhaps other towns in the region could be as well.

It is clear, if one studies the history of Gothic literature, that the genre is mutable, that it changes and adapts over time. Most critics agree that Gothic fiction resurfaces in a new form whenever the society that spawns it is suffering from a collective anxiety that this fiction can both represent and assuage. There are numerous subgenres of the form that have demonstrated this over time, but there is one that has had no critical attention thus far. That would be Rust Belt Gothic fiction. This new flavor of Gothic fiction needs to be recognized because the particular social factors that contributed to its existence are not going away, and in many cases are growing stronger. The region has not recovered from the economic decline that created it in the first place, and as those struggles continue, more literature dealing with ruined landscapes, financial insecurity, and

challenged masculinity in the Rust Belt will be written.

As the name implies, this subgenre of Gothic comes from the Rust Belt, a geographic region of the United States, stretching roughly from Michigan to New Jersey that was at one time the heart of American industry; but now, due to prolonged economic decline, is impoverished and physically scarred by the abandoned mines and mills that mark the landscape. The Rust Belt was formed approximately between 1970 and 1985, but here in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the economic climate is arguably worse. If not for the most recent recession, these novels may have eventually faded away, emblematic of a short, difficult history for the region, yet ultimately no longer culturally relevant. But under the current circumstances, it is likely that they will instead be forerunners of further Rust Belt Gothic novels to come, novels that will be written because the anxieties are still the same and people are still asking for them to be dealt with.

The purpose of this study is to explore Rust Belt Gothic fiction, establish the parameters that define it and make it a distinct type of Gothic fiction, to demonstrate why it is worthy of scholarly attention, and to critically analyze works that represent it, through both historical and psychoanalytic lenses. To do so, I will examine five novels representative of this movement: the aforementioned *Snow Angels* by Stewart O'Nan, *Back Roads* (2000) and *Coal Run* (2004) by Tawni O'Dell, *Affliction* (1989) by Russell Banks, and *Empire Falls* (2002) by Richard Russo. These five novels, written around the turn of the twenty-first century, share certain themes and motifs that classify them as Rust Belt Gothic fiction. However, before examining those, it is necessary first to establish what traditional Gothic fiction is and what allows a genre that first rose to prominence in

the last decade of the Eighteenth Century in Europe to reappear in America at the beginning of the Twenty-first. It will also be necessary to look at the Rust Belt to determine what characteristics of the geographical region make it well-suited for a reemergence of the Gothic.

In order to understand what it means to describe a contemporary novel as "Gothic," it is necessary to trace what the term has historically meant when applied to literature. Critics generally agree that the first Gothic novel was Horace Walpole's 1764 *The Castle of Otranto*. As E. J. Clery notes in "The Genesis of 'Gothic' Fiction," that Walpole's characters, while seeming primitive by today's standards, would have resonated emotionally for contemporary readers. He goes on to claim, "Consequently, this novel provides the template for all future fictions of supernatural terror, including film. The credible emotions of the characters connect us to incredible phenomena and events and allow terror to circulate via processes of identification and projection" (25). With that book allowing a transference of emotions for its readers, an experience with potentially personal consequences, Gothic fiction was born.

The term "Gothic" itself has numerous definitions. As David Punter and Glennis Byron explain in their book *The Gothic*:

> Clearly it is possible to speak of the Gothic as a historical phenomenon, originating (in its literary sense, but not necessarily in other senses) in the late eighteenth century. Equally, it has seemed to many critics more useful to think of it in terms of a psychological argument, to do with the ways in which otherwise repressed fears are represented in textual form. A more radical claim would be that there are very few actual literary texts which

> are 'Gothic'; that the Gothic is more to do with particular moments, tropes, repeated motifs that can be found scattered, or disseminated, through the modern western literary traditions. (xviii)

They would not be the only ones to observe that the literary use of the term shares little with its other uses, such as art or architecture. Jerrold Hogle points out that, “Gothic fiction is hardly 'Gothic' at all. It is an entirely post-medieval and even post-Renaissance phenomenon” (1). He later adds, “Even the use of the Gothic label, which has become even more common today compared to its very sporadic use to describe romantic fiction in the eighteenth century, turns out to be equally counterfeit, though quite usefully so, partly because *Gothic* as an aesthetic term has been counterfeit all along” (16).

These critical perspectives demonstrate that there is no single, clear, universally agreed upon definition of what “Gothic” means or is. Nonetheless, the Gothic clearly exists as a literary genre and it will be useful to identify what characteristics defined early Gothic literature in order to be able to track what has changed between then and the time Gothic re-emerged in the Rust Belt.

Some of these characteristics are articulated in Horace Walpole's preface to the first edition of *The Castle of Otranto* wherein he suggests the biblically-derived moral of the story is that “the sins of the fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation” (18). The fear of the past returning to haunt or threaten the living is a recurring one in Gothic fiction. As Hogle notes, “Beneath this tangle of contradictions, moreover, is the deeper lingering fear for readers of the Gothic that [Leslie] Fiedler recognizes: the terror or possible horror that the ruination of older powers will haunt us all, not just with out desires for them, but with the fact that what "grounds" them, and

now their usurpers, is really a deathly chaos" (5). Referring to a "half-alive/half-dead, half-organic/half-artificial, and obscurely desirable/obviously repellent specter/creature," he says that, "He/it locates our longings and fears as though they are *and are not* ours, allowing them to be visible as part of our present fearfully threatening us and yet making them either a relic of the decaying past or perhaps the avatar of a mechanistic or radically other future" (5-6). This, too, is a recurring theme in Gothic analysis, that the appearance of fear and anxieties in the literature may be a way for readers to deal with their own. As Hogle has it, "The Gothic is the form of western fiction-making [...], where such symbolic 'abjection' most frequently occurs precisely because its highly mixed form allows both the pursuit of sanctioned "identities" and a simultaneously fearful and attractive confrontation with the "thrown off" anomalies that are actually basic to the construction of a western middle-class self. (7-8). Though he applies this to Michael Jackson's *Thriller* music video, it works equally as well with early Gothic like *The Castle of Otranto*, giving the audience characters they can both relate to and separate themselves from. As Fred Botting puts it in *Gothic*, "Gothic terrors and horrors emanate from readers' identifications with heroes and heroines: after escaping the monsters and penetrating the forest, subterranean or narrative labyrinths of the Gothic nightmare, heroines and readers manage to return with an elevated sense of identity to the solid realities of justice, morality and social order" (7). But this conflict between the familiar and the unfamiliar is not the only one.

Hogle describes another juxtaposition common to Gothic literature:

> The Gothic mode begins, we have found, by employing the deliberate functionality of the 'terror sublime' to both draw us toward and protect us

> from virtually *all* that we might associate with the destruction of our presumed identities. The Gothic intermixture of the sublime with what [Edmund] Burke calls the unthreatening "beautiful" *and* with the comically bathetic and other incongruous elements only adds to the deliberately forced unreality that allows this mode to symbolize the threatening inconsistencies – including irrational desire and the immanence of death – in the personal and the political unconscious. (15)

These threatening inconsistencies are made all the more visible by the sharp contrast between the sublime and the terror that many Gothic works try to represent. Arguably, the greatest source of terror in any work of Gothic fiction is the immanence of death. The characters, and by extension the readers, must be confronted by the possibility of death, and often in the most concrete and physical way possible. In *Gothic*, Fred Botting puts it this way:

> Horror, however, continually exerts its effects in tales of terror. Horror is most often experienced in underground vaults or burial chambers. It freezes human faculties, rendering the mind passive and immobilising the body. The cause is generally a direct encounter with physical mortality, the touching of a cold corpse, the sight of a decaying body. Death is presented as the absolute limit, a finitude which denies any possibility of imaginative transcendence into an awesome and infinite space. It is the moment of the negative sublime, a moment of freezing, contraction and horror which signals a temporality that cannot be recuperated by the mortal subject. Horror marks the response to an excess that cannot be transcended. (75)

The confrontation with a corpse, whether real or only perceived to be so, whether of the characters' own making or not, and the freezing of the character (along with the cringing of the reader) are aspects of nearly every Gothic novel, including all five of the novels described above as representing Rust Belt Gothic. These are traits that tie Rust Belt Gothic back to the genre's original form.

In "The Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It," Steven Bruhm explains why it should not be surprising that contemporary Gothic shares many traits with older, traditional Gothic. He says that, "the central concerns of the classical Gothic are not that different from those of the contemporary Gothic: the dynamics of family, the limits of rationality and passion, the definition of statehood and citizenship, the cultural effects of technology" (259). This is important because contemporary fiction bearing the Gothic label often appears, at first glance, to be very different, though at the core they have much in common. One difference Bruhm does see is how the past is perceived by modern day Gothic characters:

> In the late eighteenth-century Gothic of Ann Radcliffe or Matthew Lewis, moments from the historical past (often appearing as spectral figures) haunt the heroes in order to proclaim some misdeed regarding property or domestic relations. It is often the project of those novels to expose ancient tyrannies, to foil the characters perpetuating them, and to return property and persons to their divinely ordained spheres. In so doing, the classical Gothic returns its society to a logic of historical progression. The contemporary Gothic, conversely, cannot sustain such a program, precisely because of its characters' psychological complications. With the ravages of

> the unconscious continually interrupting one's perception of the works, the protagonist of the contemporary Gothic often experiences history as mixed up, reversed, and caught in a simultaneity of past-present-future. (276)

Essentially, modern Gothic uses many of the same features as traditional Gothic, but seen from a different, often postmodern, angle. Or, new features appear and fill the same role as old features.

This is because if there is one thing most Gothic scholars can agree on, it is the mutability of the genre. In the introduction to *The Gothic*, Punter and Byron write, "It is sometimes said that Gothic has flourished at times of actual or potential social upheaval – in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, for example, or at the end of the nineteenth century – but it would also be possible to ask what periods of recent western history could not be described this way" (xix). So many new forms of Gothic have developed precisely because there have been so many periods of social upheaval in recent western history. They later go on to note, "The Gothic novel began to emerge at a time when the forces of industrialization were transforming the very structures of society" (20). A perfect example of this is Mary Shelley's 1818 novel *Frankenstein*, which gives voice to fears of the age about what possible negative results might come about from the rise of scientific exploration and experimentation. Martin Tropp suggests that, "In part, *Frankenstein* and its Monster have remained with us since then because the new machinery and the factory system entwined technology in our daily lives, blurred the distinction between man and machine, and gave a new and fearful face to the future"(8). When Punter and Byron say, "The Gothic is frequently considered to be a genre that re-emerges with particular force during times of cultural crisis and which serves to negotiate

the anxieties of the age by working through them in a displaced form" the Industrial Revolution is only the first of many crises (39). Hogle says something similar when he claims that, "[T]he longevity and power of Gothic fiction unquestionably stem from the way it helps us address and disguise some of the most important quandaries, and sources of anxiety, from the most internal and mental to the widely social and cultural, throughout the history of western culture since the eighteenth century" (4). In the essay "Aftergothic: Consumption, Machines, and Black Holes," Fred Botting also argues along these lines when he says, "Gothic representations are a product of cultural anxieties about the nature of human identity, the stability of cultural formations, and the processes of change. As a result, the representations are influenced by the cultures that produce them" (280). So it is clear that Gothic literature can represent a displaced sense of anxiety for the culture in which it was written; and as these cultures and anxieties change, so too does the Gothic, as it has in the past and will undoubtedly continue to do in the future.

In *Gothic*, Botting goes on to explain some of these changes:

> Gothic atmospheres – gloomy and mysterious – have repeatedly signaled the disturbing return of pasts upon presents and evoked emotions of terror and laughter. In the twentieth century, in diverse and ambiguous ways, Gothic figures have continued to shadow the progress of modernity with counter-narratives displaying the underside of enlightenment and humanist values. Gothic condenses the many perceived threats to these values, threats associated with supernatural and natural forces, imaginative excesses and delusions, religious and human evil, social transgression, mental disintegration and spiritual corruption. (1-2)

It is true that these Gothic atmospheres do reoccur, but they need not be identical in appearance, only in the effect they have on the reader. As Cleary points out, "Originality, not a medieval setting, is the vital component of the evolving literature of terror. What such texts share is a revolt against the representation of a common experience and familiar situations" (35). This is true for subsequent manifestations of the Gothic, including Rust Belt Gothic.

Again, Botting covers this extensively in *Gothic*. Regarding the changes and mutations occurring in Gothic tropes, he says:

> Many of the anxieties articulated in Gothic terms in the nineteenth century reappear in the twentieth century. Their appearance, however, is more diverse, a diffusion of Gothic traces among a multiplicity of different genres and media. Science fiction, the adventure novel, modernist literature, romantic fiction and popular horror writing often resonate with Gothic motifs that have been transformed and displaced by different cultural anxieties. Terror and horror are diversely located in alienating bureaucratic and technological reality, in psychiatric hospitals and criminal subcultures, in scientific, future and intergalactic worlds, in fantasy and the occult. Threatening figures of menace, destruction and violence emerge in the form of mad scientists, psychopaths, extraterrestrials and a host of strange supernatural or naturally monstrous mutations. (13)

It is primarily these naturally monstrous mutations that will be covered in the following chapters as the more realistic forms of Gothic often have little room for actual ghosts and monsters, only imagined ones. But if Cleary would say this is necessary originality,

Botting offers another explanation:

> A sense of cultural exhaustion haunts the present. An inhuman future is shrouded in old Gothic trappings emptied of any strong charge; past images and forms are worn too thin to veil the gaping hole of objectless anxiety. Gothic fiction, which served as earlier modernity's black hole and has served up a range of objects and figures crystallizing anxiety into fear, has become too familiar after two centuries of repetitive mutation and seems incapable of shocking anew. Inured to Gothic shocks and terrors, contemporary culture recycles its images in the hope of finding a charge intense enough to stave off the black hole within and without, the one opened up by postmodernist fragmentation and plurality. Gothic figures, once giving form to the anxieties surrounding the transition from aristocratic to bourgeois culture, now disclose only the formlessness, the consuming void, underlying the flickering thrills of contemporary western simulations. Since they seem unable to envisage a future that is not finally cloaked in darkness, the only projections to be made offer us a weary and ominously doom-laden view. (298)

While I would disagree that Gothic no longer has the power to shock, it cannot be denied that contemporary Gothic fiction has a much more pessimistic outlook than traditional Gothic. If works like *The Castle of Otranto* or Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* are about balance being restored and property returning to its rightful owners, modern Gothic shows that there is no balance to return to in the first place. Yet despite this obvious paradigm shift, both are still called Gothic. As Michelle A. Massé notes, "'Gothic'

increasingly becomes an adjective as well as a noun, a literary mode as well as a genre. Texts written in different periods and cultures (particularly in the United States) are regularly discussed as 'Gothic', albeit far removed from the historical events that helped to spawn the first generation" (253). So while it is difficult if not impossible to define "Gothic" clearly and succinctly, to understand what it means to call a novel Gothic, one needs to know about the historical baggage the term carries, even when that history is complex and hard to trace.

Botting and Massé are not the only critics to notice that this mutation of Gothic forms often makes it difficult to recognize any of the original in the modern versions. Punter and Byron observe:

> Yet one interesting feature of Gothic, if we consider, for example, the difference between the classic ghost story and the more brutal forms of horror fiction, is not so much how Gothic has 'kept up to date', whatever that might mean, but rather how it seems to enact for us a continuing psychic balancing act whereby the explicit and the contemporary can in some ways be put into relation with the most archaic – of forms, but also of psychic materials. Some would say that this is force of the Gothic; if so, it is also the force of the two most powerful sources of contemporary cultural ideas: psychoanalysis, through its insistence on the power of the primeval inner, and deconstruction, in its insistence on the impossibility of the fading away of what we might paradoxically call the 'originary trace'. (xi-xii)

Through whatever lens one chooses to examine Gothic, be it psychoanalysis,

deconstruction, or even historical, one is going to see the base components of Gothic adapting and changing.

Steven Bruhm brings up an interesting point when he asks, “The Gothic has always been a barometer of the anxieties plaguing a certain culture at a particular moment in history, but what is the relationship between these general social trends and particular individual psyche?” (260). He then answers his own questions by saying:

> The "we" who needs the Gothic is by no means a homogeneous group. I do not necessarily need the same things from a Gothic narrative as do the other who have bought the book or the theatre ticket. Like the question of origin I addressed above, the basis of need and desire is not only a theme in Gothic narratives but a theoretical quandary for the spectators and readers who consume those narratives. (260)

This is why it is not only important to ask why readers consume Gothic fiction but to acknowledge that the answer might not be the same for each reader or each group of readers. Bruhm goes on to say, “We can best address the question of audience need by placing the contemporary Gothic within a number of current anxieties – the ones we need it to both arouse and assuage” (260). I would like to show that this is true by examining the “current anxieties” of certain geographic locations and how those anxieties gave rise to specific sub-genres of Gothic during certain periods in history. Understanding how and when new subgenres of Gothic are formed will make it clear why Rust Belt Gothic needed to come into being.

As mentioned above, the Industrial Revolution and the progress of science and technology helped to spur some of the anxieties to which traditional Gothic spoke.

Obviously, these anxieties were different for those living and writing in early America. Allan Lloyd-Smith explains some of these in his essay "Nineteenth-Century American Gothic." In it he says that, "In the early years of the colonies and the young United States the settlers were acutely conscious that they existed on the verge of a vast wilderness, a land of threat as much as material promise, where many lived in isolation or in small settlements with memories and sometimes real fears of Indian warfare" (109). In addition to the frontier, Lloyd-Smith also lists the legacy of Puritanism, race, and politics as key elements of American Gothic. Of the last of these, he says:

> But along with the utopian inspiration came profoundly pessimistic insights into the dangers of trusting a society to the undisciplined rule of the majority, fear of faction in democratic government rule of the mob and the danger of a collapse of their whole grand experiment. In the early years of the nineteenth century, as the franchise widened, such anxieties provided a political undertone in fiction as in the rest of public life. (110-11)

Lloyd-Smith suggests that these political undertones may explain why Charles Brockden Brown sent a copy of *Weiland* to Thomas Jefferson: the disintegration of the Weiland family was meant to symbolize the potential disintegration of the newly formed country (112). But, of course, American Gothic is not homogeneous. As the country expanded, different regions developed in different ways, leading to several different subgenres.

Probably the most well-known of these is Southern Gothic, a sub-genre commonly associated with authors such as William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Carson McCullers, Tennessee Williams, and Eudora Welty. In *Gothic*, Fred Botting describes

common attributes of this school of the Gothic.

> The sense of a grotesque, irrational and menacing presence pervading the everyday, and causing its decomposition, emerges in the Gothic fiction produced, predominately, in the Southern states of America. Centered on houses in the tradition established by Poe, in 'The Fall of the House of Usher', the disintegration of the normal and familiar in Southern Gothic signals the decay of family and culture. (160-161)

Carson McCullers herself took issue with the term Southern Gothic. In her essay "The Russian Realists and Southern Literature," she wrote:

> In the South during the past fifteen years a genre of writing has come about that is sufficiently homogenous to have led critics to label it "the Gothic School." This tag, however, is unfortunate. The effect of a Gothic tale may be similar to that of a Faulkner story in its evocation of horror, beauty, and emotional ambivalence—but this effect evolves from opposite sources; in the former the means used are romantic or supernatural, in the latter a peculiar and intense realism. (252)

McCullers placed great emphasis on this realism, suggesting that the Southern writing of her time was, "the progeny of the Russian realists. And this influence is not accidental. The circumstances under which Southern literature has been produced are strikingly like those under which the Russians function. In both old Russia and the South up to the present time a dominant characteristic was the cheapness of human life" (252). She wanted to push aside the Gothic label, though when she claimed that for Southern writing, "The technique briefly is this: a bold and outwardly callous juxtaposition of the

tragic with the humorous, the immense with the trivial, the sacred with the bawdy, the whole soul of a man with a materialistic detail," it does not sound that different from the traditional Gothic juxtaposing terror with the sublime (252-253). Still, McCullers has an important point to make about socioeconomics:

> To understand this attitude one has to know the South. The South and old Russia have much in common sociologically. The South has always been a section apart from the rest of the United States, having interests and personalities distinctly its own. Economically and in other ways it has been used as a sort of colony to the rest of the nation. The poverty is unlike anything known in other parts of the country. In social structure there is a division of classes similar to that in old Russia. The South is the only part of the nation having a definite peasant class. But in spite of social divisions the people of the South are homogenous. The Southerner and the Russian are both "types" in that they have certain recognizable and national psychological traits. (253)

The issues of poverty and class with which Southern Gothic is so often concerned are also very important in the structure of Rust Belt Gothic, showing that similar circumstance in one area can lead to new Gothics despite the regions being otherwise quite different. But there are other regional Gothics to acknowledge as well.

In "Wisconsin Death Trip: An Excursion Into the Midwestern Gothic," Charlotte Louise Quinney proposes a Gothic for that region. She claims that Midwestern Gothic, "depicts the particular psychic and social attributes of a region which failed to provide many with the cultural rewards promised by the mythology of the rural idyll and the Old

Republican idea of a Jeffersonian ideology, Manifest Destiny and Turner's heady Frontier Thesis" (ii). As Gothic is well-suited to adaptation, there should be little surprise that it would spring up in the Midwest. Quinney adds that, "Midwestern Gothic is characterized by visual rhetoric, the repressed secrets of the archive, monomania, insanity, and familial trauma, framed through the lens of the economy and nation mythology" (ii). As with Southern Gothic, Midwestern Gothic places emphasis on the desperate economic climate of the region at the time. A literary journal based in Ann Arbor, Michgan named *Midwestern Gothic* seeks to highlight literature from and inspired by the region. In an interview with Danielle Chapman, journal co-founder Rob Russell said, "During graduate school I spent time studying American regionalist writing and noticed there was a severe lack of Midwestern literature, no real national push like there was with the Southern, Eastern, or even Western Lit. And I thought, 'Wow, that's a shame, considering how ripe with mythology and history and uniqueness the Midwest is'" (n.pag.). It is this history and uniqueness that gives the Midwest its own particular brand of Gothic fiction and this journal shows that it is still evolving. Indeed, the genre appears to be so new that there is not yet an agreed upon text that can be called representative of it.

There has also been the development of a sub-genre called Suburban Gothic that, as one would expect, came with the rise of suburban America. While not limited to a specific region, it covers areas in various parts of the United States that have much in common. Bernice M. Murphy says, "Simply put, the Suburban Gothic is a sub-genre of the wider American gothic tradition that often dramatizes anxieties arising from the mass suburbanisation of the United States and usually features suburban settings, preoccupations and protagonists. Minorities tend not to feature much, save as exploited

outsiders, bit players or dangerous interlopers" (2). The anxieties here tend to come from a different direction that those of previous Gothics. She says, "Suburban Gothic is a sub-genre concerned, first and foremost, with playing upon the lingering suspicion that even the most ordinary-looking neighborhood, or house, or family, has something to hide, and no matter how calm and settled a place looks, it is only ever a moment away from dramatic (and generally sinister) incident" (2). Murphy suggests that, even if it has not been labeled as such until more recently, Suburban Gothic has been around for quite some time:

> The trope of the peaceful-looking suburban house with a TERRIBLE SECRET within is one so familiar as to have passed into cliche. It reflects the fear that the rapid change in lifestyles and modes of living which took place in the 1950s and early 1960s caused irreparable damage, not only to the landscape, but to the psychological state of the people who moved into such new developments and broke with the old patterns of existence. (2)

This fear about the landscape, that changes in social behavior might negatively and permanently change the physical attributes of a place is a characteristic that Suburban Gothic shares with Rust Belt Gothic. Murphy adds that in this sub-genre:

> one is almost always in more danger from the people in the house next door, or one's own family, than from external threats. Horror here invariably begins at home, or at least very near to it, and in that sense the sub-genre continues the uneasy fascination with the connection between living environment and psychology which helped reinvigorate the haunted house story in the mid-twentieth century. (2)

Murphy is quick to point out, however, that this does not actually mean that these houses are literally haunted, noting, “Crucially, the Suburban Gothic has always had much more to do with how people chose to perceive suburbia than the reality of such neighborhoods” (5). There is a good deal of psychological interpretation to be done here, as with much of the Gothic.

Murphy describes Shirley Jackson's *The Road Through the Wall* as, “one of the foundational texts of the Suburban Gothic” (12). She also lists novels such as Richard Matheson's *I am Legend*, Jack Finney's *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, Ira Levin's *The Stepford Wives*; films such as *A Nightmare on Elm Street* and *Serial Mom*; and television shows such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Desperate Housewives* as prime examples of Suburban Gothic while also pointing out that, unlike other sub-genres of Gothic, geographic location does not play a strong role in these works (12-13).

Having established that the Gothic is a mutable form of fiction that manifests itself in new areas when anxieties arise, it is now necessary to examine the history of the Rust Belt to understand why it proved a fertile ground for new Gothic fiction. As with Southern and Midwestern Gothic, it had a great deal to do with the economy. In *Reorganizing the Rust Belt*, Steven Henry Lopez examines postindustrial Pittsburgh as a microcosm of the Rust Belt, studying the massive shift of jobs into the service sector. He says that, “Between 1974 and 1993, the Pittsburgh region lost 157,000 high-wage manufacturing jobs—just over 18% of the region's total employment” (xii). This did not necessarily mean that all of those people were unemployed, just that the nature of the available work had changed. “In fact, so many new service jobs have been created that, despite the exodus of 150,000 industrial jobs between 1974 and 1993, total employment

in the Pittsburgh metro held steady (at 863,000) between 1974 and 1984 and then actually *grew* by 105,000 jobs by 1993" (Lopez xiii-xiv). So if the actual number of jobs has increased, what is the problem? One problem is wages. "Today the steelworkers and miners are gone and rapidly vanishing with them is the very idea that working-class jobs ought to pay enough to raise a family, buy a house, take vacations, and put the kids through school. The new low-wage workers find themselves faced with the prospect of lifelong, working poverty" (Lopez xiv-xv). To be sure, the notion that "the jobs just aren't there any more" pervades the Rust Belt and in turn Rust Belt Gothic fiction.

In *Industrial Sunset: The Making of North America's Rust Belt, 1969-1984*, Steven High takes a much broader look at the area and its economic turmoil. As far as the term itself, High claims it came into common usage around 1984 and, "The new expression had the advantage of being a counterpoise to the idea of the Sunbelt and a more accurate representation of the spatial distribution of the heavy industry in a belt running from Chicago and Milwaukee in the west, to Buffalo and Pittsburgh in the east" (33). Looking back to the height of the region's industry, he observes:

> Youngstown had once been part of the industrial heartland of North America that stretched from western Pennsylvania to Wisconsin, and from the Ohio Valley to the Canadian Shield. This industrially diverse heartland region, which straddled the Canada-United States border, produced most of the consumer goods bought by North Americans. The region was home to the auto, steel, rubber, and agricultural machinery industries, and its great cities of Cleveland, Detroit, and Chicago were the wunderkinds of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. (5)

In explaining the breadth of the region, both industrially and geographically, he explains that, "In the United States, there were steel towns such as Youngstown, Lackawanna, New York, and Gary, Indiana, auto towns such as Kenosha, Wisconsin, and Flint and Detroit, Michigan, and towns such as Akron and neighboring Barberton, both in Ohio, that produced rubber products" (6). Unfortunately, it did not last. As High points out, "Two great waves of plant closings inundated the region between 1969 and 1984, washing away millions of jobs," and as a result, "Gaping holes could be found in cities across the region and mirrored the emotional loss felt by residents and industrial workers. As always, emptiness disturbs and empty spaces beg for explanation" (6). That many of these holes remain today is part of the reason Rust Belt Gothic has developed.

But lower wages and landscapes filled with emptiness are not the only problems. Referring to the closing of an American Motors plant in Kenosha, Wisconsin, High says:

> Displaced auto workers stood to lose much more than their jobs. They lost a social structure on which their collective integrity depended. The workplace culture that had sustained and legitimated individual pride and dignity was replaced by a post-industrial culture that measured hard work by educational credentials rather than seniority and physical prowess. Industrial workers, who had once stood at the centre of local life, now seemed out of place. (9)

This loss of identity is related to loss of income, but it is not the only cause, as there is also a gendered aspect to it. This is not to say that women did not also lose their jobs or feel displaced, but that observers have seen the effects of this economic downturn wear harder on men. In addition, the increase in jobs that Lopez cites were not in

manufacturing, but in the service industry, jobs that have been traditionally held by women. With anxieties about threatened masculinity, job loss and downward social mobility, along with ruined landscapes, the socioeconomic factors that lead to Rust Belt Gothic fiction become more clear. As High puts it:

> The emptying of the mythical heart of the United States – and the birth of the Rust Bowl and Rust Belt labels – signaled the decrepitude of the heavily industrialized states of Pennsylvania, Ohio, Michigan, Indiana, Illinois, and Wisconsin. As the Great Lakes states metamorphosed into the Rust Belt, the problem became imaginatively contained, tied to one place. Having interpreted industrial decline through the filter of popular regional identities, Americans settled on a new regional hierarchy of have and have-not regions. In the public's mind, the industrial Midwest became a no man's land between the fading smokestack industries and the ascendant post-industrial economy. (192)

From the have-not South of Carson McCullers to the no man's land Rust Belt of O'Nan, O'Dell, Russell, and Russo, the Gothic has found new sources of anxiety and thus a new home.

This, then, is Rust Belt Gothic: a sub-genre that has arisen in an economically distressed area because of anxieties about landscapes containing abandoned mills, mines, and factories that are now dead and will never have the vibrancy of industry they once possessed; because of anxieties about job loss, underemployment, and the inability to make ends meet; and because of anxieties about masculinity and potential loss of manhood due to lack of money, a subverted social order, or inadequate sexual encounters.

Rust Belt Gothic has yet to be critically recognized, and this is an oversight that must be addressed because the socioeconomic factors that have contributed to its genesis have not abated. Most of characters in these novels represent the first generation of Rust Belt life, those who had the jobs and lost them and must now adapt to living without them. But the few characters who are under twenty years old represent the second generation, the ones for whom the jobs never existed in the first place. As real life economic distress remains the same or gets worse, more people are going to be born into this second generation, and more Rust Belt fiction is going to be created to tell their stories. It is crucial to now establish the social, economic, historical, and psychological factors that led to the creation of this subgenre.

In Chapter 2, I will address landscapes and the physical setting of Rust Belt Gothic. While a sense of decay or dilapidation is common to nearly all Gothic literature, the factories, mills, and mines of the Rust Belt add a region-specific color to things. The Rust Belt got that name for a reason, after all. The two most prominent ways this is handled in these novels are a sense of decay due to the loss of economic livelihood and the sense of the scarring of nature by these rusting hulks. People are abandoning the towns, and the ones that stay cannot afford to make things look nice, and while the mills and mines are no longer open, they are still oppressively there.

In Chapter 3, I will cover anxiety related to money, or lack thereof. In contrast to early Gothic novels, such as Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* or Matthew Lewis's *The Monk*, the fear is not falling from a high social station, such as nobility or respected clergy, to a lower class. It is a fear of falling from the lowest class into nothingness. In each of these novels, there is a pervading sense of dread regarding money and finance

that simultaneously identifies and contrasts them with more traditional Gothic. While the main characters must confront death physically in the face of corpses each discovers, there is a less overt fear of death through loss: loss of work, loss of home, loss of sustenance. Money is the means of survival, and the fear of not having any is a driving force in these novels.

In Chapter 4, I will examine anxieties related to masculinity. While not always clearly separate from those related to finances, they definitely bother most of the male characters in these novels. As noted above, the loss of manufacturing jobs in the Rust Belt left men unemployed while the rise in service sector jobs often positioned women as the providers instead. This perceived failure is a strong source of anxiety. Most of the male characters perceive a socially agreed upon definition of what a man should be, and convince themselves that for myriad reasons they do not and cannot ever measure up.

In Chapter 5, I will attempt to explain what makes these novels popular and why those living in the Rust Belt might find them useful. The question of why people read, and frequently enjoy, literature that ought to be disturbing to them is one that comes up frequently in Gothic criticism, and one that I must address as I demonstrate why Rust Belt Gothic fiction serves a valuable purpose in 20th- and 21st-century society. To the extent that I will place it in a theoretical context, that context will be psychoanalytic, but I also wish to respond to critics such as Steven Bruhm and Walter Kendrick who offer varying explanations of why that which is terrifying continues to enthrall. For many, it seems counter-intuitive that some people enjoy reading literature that shocks, scares, or disturbs them, as generally those negative emotions are to be avoided, yet Gothic literature has persisted for hundreds of years despite its disturbing nature. Obviously

readers find something worthwhile in this fiction, and I will argue that in the case of Rust Belt Gothic that something is a connection to characters going through similar troubles while at the same time a distancing from the presence of death that the characters must face head on. Financial burden, challenged masculinity and ruined landscapes in the Rust Belt all cause anxiety to real people; reading this literature can help assuage that anxiety.

CHAPTER 2

THE GOTHIC LANDSCAPE OF THE RUST BELT

Nothing is deader than this small town main street,
where the venerable elm sickens and hardens
with tarred cement, where no leaf
is born, or falls, or resists till winter.

But I remember its former fertility,
how everything came out clearly
in the hour of credulity
and young summer, when this street
was already somewhat overshaded,
and here at the altar of surrender,
I met you,
the death of thirst in my brief flesh.

It is with this excerpt from Robert Lowell's "Returning" that Stewart O'Nan prefaces *Snow Angels* (1994) and elegantly captures the essence of what makes a Rust Belt town a Gothic setting. These towns were formerly fertile in the sense of industry, their products of steel or coal or textiles being shipped away while the jobs those mills and mines provided stayed rooted in the community. The eventual loss of those jobs frequently resulted in the slow withering of the town as it came to resemble Lowell's sickened elm covered in tar. It is that image of the decay of the very objects that once represented life that gives these landscapes their Gothic pallor. Where a ruined castle might once have shown the lost wealth and prestige of a former aristocrat, a closed steel mill, rusty from neglect, shows the lost wealth and prestige of the town that depended on it.

While I call these Rust Belt settings "Gothic," it is true that they are far from the traditional sites of Gothic setting, so it is useful to look at the path of development these settings have taken to arrive where they are now. Referring to the works of seminal

Gothic authors Horace Walpole and Ann Radcliffe, Fred Botting notes that their "geographical settings were usually in southern European countries, Italy and France in particular" and that "The physical settings, too, were suitably Gothic: isolated and ruined castles and abbeys, old chateaux with secret vaults and passageways, dark forests and spectacular mountain regions populated by bandits and robbers" (*Gothic*, 63-64). Indeed, if there were a recipe for writing a Gothic novel, these would be the key ingredients. Jerrold E. Hogle presents a similar list when discussing Gothic settings:

> Though not always as obviously as in *The Castle of Otranto* or *Dracula*, a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space – be it a castle, a foreign place, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office with old filing cabinets, an overworked spaceship, or a computer memory. Within this space, or a combination of such spaces, are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story. (2)

Each of these perspectives offer an array of settings that combine age and potential mystery while still covering enough territory to accommodate everything that might fit into the often nebulous definition of the Gothic.

David Punter and Glennis Byron attempt to distill it even further by arguing that, "If there is such a thing as a general topography of the Gothic, then its central motif is the

castle" (259). In addition to its use as a physical setting of antiquity, the castle is also a highly packed image. Punter and Byron attempt to unpack it and they find myriad meanings:

> The castle is a labyrinth, a maze, a site of secrets. It is also, paradoxically, a site of domesticity, where ordinary life carries on even while accompanied by the most extraordinary and inexplicable of events. It can be a place of womb-like security, a refuge from the complex exigencies of the outer world; it can also – at the same time, and according to a difference of perception – be a place of incarceration, a place where heroines and others can be locked away from the fickle memory of 'ordinary life'. The castle has to do with the map, and with the failure of the map; it figures loss of direction, the impossibility of imposing one's own sense of place on an alien world. (261-62)

Rust Belt Gothic frequently uses imagery that evokes the same emotions as the imagery of more traditional Gothic, even while the physical objects of that imagery are often quite different. For example, the atmosphere and tone a traditional Gothic story might create with a castle or an abandoned moor, Rust Belt Gothic creates with a shuttered steel mill or an abandoned mine. Because of this, it is useful to contextualize Rust Belt Gothic with the situation of traditional Gothic. Robert Miles describes Ann Radcliffe and Matthew Lewis as "the two most significant Gothic novelists of the 1790s" who "permanently altered Gothic writing" (41). In outlining their two styles of writing, Miles finds several dichotomies, one of which is the distinction between terror and horror, with Radcliffe representing the former and Lewis the latter. Miles explains, "Terror is an affair of the

mind, of the imagination; when the threat takes a concrete shape, it induces horror, or disgust" (41). As far as the Rust Belt Gothic landscape goes, there are very few examples of Radcliffian terror. It is rather the more visceral horror of Lewis' work that appears in these novels. If terror is the idea that a noise heard in the middle of the night might be a monster, horror is discovering that it actually is a monster. There is no fear that the towns might one day deteriorate; there is revulsion because they already have. These characters do not have to deal with the worry that something bad could potentially happen, they must confront the fact that it already has. The landscape has been devastated, and it will not be going back to the way it was. But before examining the anxieties the state of the landscape creates, first let us look at the Gothic landscape as it relates to the map.

In *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares*, Robert Mighall explains that, "the Gothic, at its emergence and in its development through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, testifies to a concern with the historical past, and adopts a number of theoretical and textual strategies to locate the past and represent its perceived iniquities, terrors, and survivals" (xiv). This holds true for the Rust Belt as well. The history of these places as former booming industrial areas cannot be overlooked by those who live there after the heydays of the towns, and survival is certainly a recurring theme in these novels. Though Mighall does not mention the Rust Belt in his study, I believe my notion of the emergence of the Gothic in this area fits well within his framework.

> Gothic settings change—from Naples in the thirteenth century, to Madrid in the late eighteenth, or even to London in the nineteenth century—if the location in question is perceived to harbor unreasonable, uncivilized, and

> unprogressive customs or tendencies. And history is important because what remains constant throughout the development of the mode, and which serves as its defining characteristic, is the imputation of historicity, of 'Gothic-ness', regardless of immediate or calendar time. 'History' reveals itself to be central to the Gothic mode even when it depicts a contemporary setting. (xviii)

The Rust Belt has developed into a Gothic setting and, as a result, contemporary Gothic fiction is being written that takes place in that area, in part because of the constant reminder of the history these settings provide. These settings reveal the landmarks of former industry: factories that have been closed, mines that have been shut down, houses that have been abandoned as people left to look for work elsewhere. New generations of people are born into these environments and even though they did not experience the prosperity themselves, they can see the remnants of what once was and compare it to what is. This sense of history and loss contributed to the Gothic nature of these locales. This is true not only of the Rust Belt, but in the setting for Southern Gothic as well. As Mighall notes, "The Gothic is a process, not an essence; a rhetoric rather than a store of universal symbols; an attitude to the past and the present, not a free-floating fantasy world. Epochs, institutions, places, and people are Gothicized, have the Gothic thrust upon them. That which is Gothicized depends on history and the stories it needs to tell itself" (xxv). This is why, though contemporary Gothic novels may lack many of the tropes that characterize eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Gothic, the landscapes of these Rust Belt novels thrust the Gothic upon them though the history that is attached to them. Given the mutability of the Gothic genre, it is no surprise that the geographical

settings would change. Looking at Gothic literature from the perspective of the twenty-first century, Punter and Byron note that, "What we find in the numerous conjunctions of Gothic and the postmodern is a certain sliding of location, a series of transfers and translocations from one place to another, so that our sense of the stability of the map is – as indeed it has been since the first fantasy of a Gothic castle – forever under siege" (51). Part of what makes the Gothic unsettling is a certain instability about it, and this in turn adds to the anxiety created by the Gothic landscape. When these various industries left the Rust Belt, they thrust the Gothic upon it in a way, causing a sense of loss for the people still living there while leaving a constant reminder of that loss in the form of abandoned mines and mills. A person's own hometown causes uncanny dread because it was not Gothic at first, but has become so. This instability is not only economic, but sometimes physical in the cases where characters of these novels literally watch their towns crumble beneath their feet.

In *Snow Angels*, when Arthur Parkinson returns to his hometown of Butler, Pennsylvania, he takes stock of the landscape. Repeating with his sister the ritual of visiting the house in which they grew up together, he observes, "The shrubs have grown up and filled out around the foundation, but the house itself hasn't changed much. Astrid thinks it's sliding. On the roof stands a faded Santa, waving" (13). As they drive further, he shifts his gaze to other houses:

> On both sides lie nothing but fields, snow in the ditches, telephone poles. A wind break of old oaks waves around the house. . . Beside a pair of school district vans a camper sits on cinderblocks, beside it a snowmobile, a fat stack of tractor tires. In back leans a small barn, doorless, a car

> peeking out its nose like a mouse. . . The house, like ours, betrays little, but the paint is new, and the tin roof and quaint lace curtains. (14)

The sliding house and fading Santa are just the first bits of external evidence that things are not what they once were, and while new paint and curtains may attempt to mask that, the fact remains. Changing the surface cannot help here. Painting a house does not change the fact that it is falling apart and painting an abandoned mill might make it look nicer, but will not bring about a return of industry.

While flying over the town, Arthur narrates a bird's-eye-view of it, and in doing so encapsulates Butler as what it is compared to what it once was:

> The plane I take goes right over Butler. Fifty miles out of Pittsburgh, the pilot drops down under the clouds and I can find the city. It is not much, the downtown clumped around the Main Street section of Route 8, then the bridge, the train tracks snaking with the Connoquenessing, the blue blocks of the Armco mill. Cars crawl up the long hill. I am looking for the aqua dot of the water tower, though it is always some other landmark that jumps out. The mall that used to be new. The post office depot with its rows of Jeeps. The Home for Crippled Children—now the Rehabilitation Center—where my mother still works. Roads crisscross and connect; woods neatly part to let the power lines through. This high up, I feel as if the place I was raised is not such a mystery. (16)

The "blue blocks" of the local Armco steel mill dominate the landscape. This particular mill stands out in these novels because the version that exists in real life never actually closed, an oddity for the area. In "Polishing the Rust Belt," in which he examines the

modern condition of the area, Bruce Stokes points out that, “In a region where many steel mills have long since closed, the continued operation of AK Steel [who purchased Armco in 1999] is one of the primary reasons that the county's manufacturing sector has remained relatively strong” (25).That being said, the labor force employed by the mill declined steadily over the years until the point it was no longer the town's largest employer, that title passing into the service sector with the local hospital (Stokes 23). Even with the mill continuing to operate, then, the steel industry is no longer the lifeblood of the town that it once was. While the enormous blue buildings of the mill remain, they grow less blue with each passing year, offering a perfect visual example of how the Rust Belt got its name.

But it is more than just the steel mill that gives this passage a sense of decay. Arthur also mentions “the mall that used to be new.” While it is difficult to pinpoint the time frame of the “present day” narration, the flashback scenes take place in the 1970s, from which I infer Arthur is referring to the Butler Mall, constructed in 1974. This means that the denizens of the town were once excited about the “new mall,” and continued to refer to it as such until the name was no longer accurate. A newer mall, The Clearview Mall, was built roughly three miles north of town in 1981 and yet another new shopping plaza was built roughly three miles west of downtown at Moraine Point in 1992. The Clearview Mall was built on Route 8, which is also Main Street in downtown Butler, meaning that, for many, a trip to the mall at least meant driving through downtown. The Moraine Point Plaza, on the other hand, offered shopping opportunities on the outskirts of Butler without requiring anyone to travel near the heart of town. According to Pozar and Purvis, this had a negative effect on business downtown and those in the Butler Mall as

shops moved to newer facilities or closed (173). Even this progress causes loss for older parts of town. Referring to it as "the mall that used to be new" when it was devastated by another "new mall" reinforces that sense of loss.

The same can be said of the reference to the post office. While at the time it would not have been unusual for a post office to use Jeeps to deliver the mail, the mention of the vehicle is particularly relevant to the town as Butler is considered the birthplace of the Jeep. The staff of the *Butler Eagle* explain in *Butler County, Pennsylvania Celebrates Its Bicentennial* that the Jeep "was designed and produced in Butler as World War II heated up in Europe but before the United States was involved in the conflict" (194). The Jeep was invented by the Bantam Car Company, which sadly lacked the capacity to meet the military's demands. "During the summer of 1941, as the prospect of war grew to a probability, in an all-or-nothing contract for 16,000 Jeeps at 125 per day, Bantam was underbid by Willys. The Bantam car company was never again party to any of the large production contracts for Jeeps. (Pozar and Purvis 140) The Bantam Car Company closed in 1956, another example of the bygone heyday of the town.

Of course, Butler is not the only town to succumb to the specter of its past and transform into a Gothic landscape for its inhabitants. Nearby Black Lick, Pennsylvania, another non-fictional town, is the Gothic setting of Tawni O'Dell's novel *Backroads* (2000) and exhibits the same symptoms of a town suffering from long decay. Like Arthur Parkinson, Harley Altmeyer, protagonist and narrator of *Backroads*, observes the slow decay of his hometown with equal parts disgust and affection. Early in the novel, Harley reflects on his childhood, a time during which even he knew that his town was dying.

Reminiscing about plots to help “murder” his best friend Skip's little brother Donny, he recalls, “Another time we promised him a box of Little Debbie Star Crunches if he would let us tie up his feet and hands and lay him on the railroad tracks but they were freight tracks—the same ones that run by the old mine—and we all knew a train hadn't been down them since we were born” (3) Their childish and cartoonish plot is completely robbed of any danger, and from Harley's point of view any maliciousness, based on the fact that, now that there was no mine to necessitate it, there was no reason for a train to ever travel those tracks again.

Harley also reflects on the tradition of his father's generation to refer to the dirt road on which he lives as “Pot Shot Road,” as any hunter near there could take a shot at random and kill a deer. But as he notes, “The deer had thinned out the past couple years though. Even the stupidest animal could sense when a place had gone bad” (12). He undoubtedly views his hometown with a “rats escaping from a sinking ship” mentality, but he also cannot seem to deny that, as it was the place he was born and raised, as well as the only place he really knows, he likes it in some way. It is a recurring theme in these novels for main characters to express dislike for their hometowns without ever managing to leave them.

For someone who has been told his entire life that he is stupid, he describes the landscape with a poetic voice that belies even his own low opinion of himself:

> The first half-mile of our road was straight uphill and the trees grew together over the top of it making a tunnel of leaves in the summer, and a tunnel of snow in the winter, and a tent of bare branches like charred fingers the rest of the year. Our house sat at the crest. Across the road

> was the clearing, stretching out green and smooth, then disappearing over a slope into a rolling sea of hills the color of rust and soot and worn yellow carpet. The power lines and the smoke-belching twin coal stacks of the Keystone Power Plant in the distance were the only signs of humanity. Whenever people asked me how we could stand to stay in the house, I told them I liked the view and then they thought I was even crazier than before they asked. (13)

It is worth noting that as Harley paints a verbal picture of the landscape, his colors dip into rust, soot, and faded yellow, as if these colors form a natural part of the palette. In fact, Harley will later compare this real landscape to others he sees, and find them unnatural.

While waiting in the bank one day to receive more bad news about his already bleak financial situation, Harley regards a bank calendar. "I got up and walked over to the Pennsylvania Scenic Wonders calendar hanging on his office wall. The month of August was a bright red barn sitting in the bottom of a bright green valley surrounded by bright blue sky. I have lived in this southwestern corner of the Allegheny Mountains my entire life and I had never seen a barn or a day that color." (144) It is clear that Harley's predilection to paint with little more than rust and soot is the result of having lived with nothing else, and thus bright colors that might represent cleanliness or vitality somehow ring false. He is conditioned by his experiences to see life this way. Truth for him has become the Gothic decay he sees all around him. Anything clean, or fresh, or new, anything with a sense of hope or optimism must therefore be a lie.

The bank calendar image contrasts perfectly with another observation Harley

makes while traveling to visit his incarcerated mother.

> The prison was easy to see from the interstate. It sat at the bottom of the kind of valley pictured in every local bank calendar except the calendar photos always had a big red barn in them instead of an enormous angular gray building that cast a stark shadow like a scar against the soft hills behind it. I was sure when the government built it they were just looking for an isolated area and weren't trying to make a statement, but they had done a great job pointing out the difference between Man's ugliness and Nature's beauty. (44)

Whether it is prisons or factories, humanity ruins nature. Not only is there the decay of age that is a staple of Gothic settings, the Rust Belt Gothic also adds pollution to the equation. There is a subtle but constant sense in these novels that, though the factories have gone, the air is still bad to breathe and the water possibly not safe to drink. Even in their absence, the factories damage Nature's beauty.

Despite the muted palette with which he views the local landscape, Harley does occasionally see beauty in his surroundings. He says, “I took a moment to appreciate the view. The Mercer property dipped down to a circular pond sitting in the middle of a lawn the color of pool table felt. A twisting section of clear, pebble-shiny creek lay at the foot of the hills; and they were their hills. They owned them. Not like our hills. We just lived on ours” (58). To Harley, ownership of the landscape is very important, regardless of what it looks like. He later declares, “Even drunk in the dark, I could find my way around them. They were my woods. I didn't own them but they belonged to me because I had taken the time to get to know them. Ownership was about power. Belonging was

submission" (125). Harley's affection for and sense of ownership of the Gothic landscape around him stems from his time spent with it, his time getting to know it, and the formative effects it has had on him as a person. The relationship of the Gothic with history means that Harley, along with other Rust Belt Gothic characters, must face the consequences of living in a town that started dying before he was even born. It hearkens back to Horace Walpole's claim that the moral of *The Castle of Otranto* is that "the sins of the fathers are visited on their children to the third and fourth generation," a biblical allusion to Exodus 34:7. (18). The difference is that the biblical allusion is specific, that one man's sins will be visited on his children. In this case, it is more the actions of an entire society being felt for generations onward. It is not Harley's fault that all the jobs are gone. The economic collapse began before he was born. But even though he is coming in at the end of the story, it is still *his* story, which may explain his stubbornness in never wanting to leave Black Lick despite his expressed distaste for it.

This is most evident in Harley's relationship with the abandoned mining office behind the railroad tracks that he eventually uses to hide his relationship with Callie Mercer.

> I close my eyes and picture it. The roof with gaping holes. The rotting floorboards scattered with broken window glass, rusted screws and bolts, and pieces of flattened iron that used to be part of something bigger a long time ago. When I finally took her there, she didn't ask me to sweep it out. She said she didn't want to change anything about it because she knew it was a special place for me. She said she loved the calm of decay and desertion that reigned there. (1-2)

From his secret hideout as a child to the secret location where he conducts his love affair as an adult, the abandoned mining office is for him a symbol of peace and serenity; it is a place to which one can escape. Most citizens of Black Lick would view it as a symbol of failed vitality and loss from which one would want to escape. When viewed through Punter and Byron's description of a castle as both a central symbol of Gothic and "a place of womb-like security," it is clear that the office is standing in for a castle in this novel (261). Just as a castle can, this abandoned mining office serves multiple purposes, and it is Harley's extended relationship with the place over the course of his life that allows him to see in it a meaning that no one else could. It does not need to physically be a castle to be part of the Gothic trope, it only needs to fulfill the same roles, which, in this case, it does. In spite of his declared bitterness about the way his life has turned out and the condition of his surroundings, Harley belongs there because those surroundings mean so much to him.

Harley is not the only person like that in the novel, even if he has difficulty seeing it. His father plays the role of villain throughout the novel, despite the fact that he is deceased for the entire narrative. His specter figuratively haunts Harley, who pauses multiple times in the novel in anticipation of the pain of his father's hand across the back of his head, only to be jerked back to reality when he remembers that his father is dead. For most of the novel, his father is little more than a caricature of a drunken, child-beating redneck. But there is one scene where Harley's recollection gives his father some humanity and, perhaps tellingly, that scene has to do with landscape.

> He didn't say a word during the drive. He didn't seem to notice his surroundings at all until we rounded a bend in the road and off to one side

> was a small city of rust-streaked, iron gray buildings standing grim and empty in the middle of ten contaminated acres. A chain-link fence ran for a mile along the road posted with bright orange HAZARD signs and bright yellow NO TRESSPASSING signs, all of them shot full of bullet holes. (151-52)

Harley recognizes it as the Carbonville Mine Water Reclamation Plant and adds that it only served its purpose for a year before being shut down and existing for the next twenty-five as a "monument to the folly of trying to clean up a region that was poisoned from the inside" (152). It should also be noted that in this instance, bright colors represent failure instead of the wholesomeness of nature, and thus it is somehow fitting that those vibrant signs have been riddled with bullets.

Harley's father has brought him here to show him something, and, "He stopped when we came within view of a couple dozen small, gray, Insul-brick houses scattered along the outside of the chain-link like the plant had shook and showered its perimeter with tiny replicas of failure," before gesturing to the scene and revealing "That's where I grew up" (152). Harley is unsure at first if his father is serious, and struggles to work out the meaning.

> I couldn't read his expression at first. I expected him to be torn up or pissed. Or he could have been happy: one of those ass-backwards people like Grandpa who only felt fondness for terrible places and bitched like hell if he had to go on a picnic. But I didn't see bitterness of self-pity or some warped nostalgic wistfulness in his face. What I saw was something like pride but pride without ego, something like acceptance, but

> acceptance without ever being allowed to consider any other options. I didn't figure it out until I was back home lying on my sore butt on my new sheets in my new room, feeling the familiar ache spread through my chest and face where Dad had hit me, that what I had seen was a gracious loser. (152-53)

Harley has this same pride without ego about where he lives, even as others think he is crazy for it, and just as he thought his father was crazy for it. More importantly, he has the same acceptance without having any other options. Even though the landscape may be painted in rust and soot, he cannot leave it behind.

Like Harley, Ivan Zoschenko, protagonist of Tawni O'Dell's second novel *Coal Run* (2004), tried to leave the small mining town where he grew up, but eventually found circumstances bringing him back. Ever since the accident that ruined his chances at a pro football career (and his chances to escape from Coal Run), he watches his life degenerate in tandem with the town. Regarding Main Street, Ivan observes another microcosm, "The three buildings form a sort of condensed history of the town. First National. Woolworth's. Brownie's. Boomtown, Shutdown. Remnants." (55) Obviously, the bank represents the Boomtown era of Coal Run, when there was enough money to make it worth having a bank account. The shuttered department store is emblematic of the many businesses that closed when the miners and their families were no longer around to support them. Representative of the remnants is Brownie's, the dive bar where the remaining residents drink to escape the realities of what their town has become.

If we take the mouldering castle as a touchstone symbol of a traditional Gothic landscape, the town of Coal Run makes an excellent Rust Belt counterpart as it has more

than its fair share of both literal and figurative disintegration. The story opens with the mine fire that killed Ivan's father, as well as a substantial portion of the population of the town. "All around us the world was crumbling. Sections of the road sagged. Halves of houses sank into the ground. I watched a dog disappear with a solitary yelp, his paws scrabbling uselessly at the ground as the weight of the doghouse he was chained to pulled him down. I thought the world was coming to an end. I couldn't know that acres of mine tunnels were collapsing beneath the town" (7). While the world does not come to an end then, it is an apocalypse of sorts, as the mine fire destroys what kept the town alive and subsequently, slowly, the town itself. It is reminiscent of a scene in William Beckford's *Vathek.* "Vathek beheld the earth open; and, at the extremity of a vast black chasm, a portal of ebony, before which stood the Indian" (23). In exchange for the treasures Vathek desires, the Indian demands the blood of fifty children. Vathek agrees, despite the consequences it will have for his rule and his kingdom. Both chasms steal any future potential of their locations. In this way, the landscape of each of these Gothic novels provides more than a setting, it plays an active role in shaping the events of the story. The underground fire in the mines also has imagery of Hell, both the literal inferno that raged beneath and the figurative Hell that Ivan comes to see Coal Run as having become. In addition, while the town has no castle, the abandoned mines serve as the catacomb for the miners who failed to escape.

When the novel resumes decades after the mine collapse in the prologue, the landscape is heavily scarred by the coal industry that used to exist there. Ivan, returning to Coal Run scarred himself by life, observes all the marks the industry had left on his town. He notes, "At the rail yards, rust-streaked coal cars sit beneath the disintegrating

metal mouths of giant loading tipples waiting for a final run that's never going to happen" (29). The reader is also shown that, "The empty [mining] complex could be seen clearly across the valley from the Coal Run junkyard. It sat gutted and forbidding against the lush hillside, tempting and frightening at the same time, like an old castle or the stripped gray skull of some colossal monster" (59). Here again, the Rust Belt remnants of a bygone industry stand in so appropriately as the backdrop in this Gothic tale. That the coal mine is also a colossal monster is also to be expected as its collapse claimed the lives of half of the men of Coal Run, not to mention the accident that broke Ivan's leg, robbing him of his pro football career and, he believes, his dignity and his life. While those who speak of the mines of Coal Run occasionally acknowledge their importance as opportunities for employment, even the seemingly positive references carry an undercurrent that the mines are always viewed as a source of suffering.

It is not only the people of Coal Run who suffer, but also the environment. Observing the ruined town where he grew up, Ivan says,

> The roads to Coal Run are hilly, twisting, ruined ones with broken shoulders and potholes made a generation ago by coal trucks too heavy to travel them and left unmended by a generation who doesn't come out here anymore. Clumps of houses, lone trailers, gap-faced barns, a beer distributor, and a one-pump gas station fly past my window before I plunge into a corridor of trees, several miles long, where the day's weak light filtered through the bare branches onto the blacktop makes the air look watery and gray. (120).

The roads are damaged, the hills are strip mined, and the trees and plants die slowly from

the unquenchable mine fire that continues to rage underneath the little town. Even the air is unclean. “I park far away from everyone else, roll down my window, and take a deep breath. The home's about two miles downwind from Franklin Tires. Years after its closing, the subtle reek of chemicals and burned rubber still lingers, as if the air has been permanently saturated like a rag and the sky might burst into flames if anyone lit a cigarette nearby” (80). The town, while never affluent, at least had life. Now all it has is ruin.

It is worth noting that this sense of decay that begins in Coal Run actually spreads to other towns. Thinking about the county seat of Centresburg, Ivan recalls it with awe:

> When I was a kid, a trip to Centresburg was as momentous as a journey to see the Great Wall of China or the Taj Mahal. In some ways it was more exciting and enviable than traveling overseas to exotic locales, because those places didn't impress the people who lived in Coal Run. It wasn't that they hadn't heard about them or didn't appreciate their significance; it was simply that they had no need to go there and we were a community ruled by need. (27)

Ivan highlights this by explaining that on every trip to Centresburg, his little sister Jolene would eye the costume jewelry at Woolworth's and although the stones in the birthstone rings she envied were false, it was a luxury they could never afford. In his flashbacks, Coal Run is presented as a town for people just surviving and Centresburg as a town for people who have money. But as an adult, he notices that, “Centresburg hasn't changed much since Jolene and I were kids, except that when we were kids, everything functioned. The building and structures are all still here some thirty years later, but the

reasons behind them are long gone" (29) From the small town to the larger town that once seemed more splendid than the Taj Mahal, once the J&P Mining Company chooses to shut down their mines, any sense of purpose has been taken from these place and only the abandoned buildings are left. Were this novel written from the perspective of a resident of Centresburg, the story might resemble a more traditional Gothic tale with anxiety stemming from the potential loss of wealth and social class. Had Ivan ever made it as a professional football player and actually had something important to lose, the narrative might have followed that course. Instead, *Coal Run* is about people who have very little and are afraid of trying to live with even less. By the end, as Ivan drives through Centresburg, "The houses look blurred and browned around the edges, like they're made of singed paper, until they disintegrate altogether into puddles of dirty gray" (261).

Once again, the colors used to describe the landscapes here contribute to the Gothic setting. The best part of Ivan's life was when he escaped Coal Run to play football at Penn State, and O'Dell shows this by describing the two locales with a stark color contrast.

> It was spring and the countryside surrounding State College was a vista of rolling hills and green velvet forests and a soft turquoise sky that looked rubbed on. But a hundred miles west, the sky was the color of old bones and the trees hadn't bloomed yet. The bare, gray maples and elms behind Coal Run were topped with tight red buds. From a distance they tinged the hillsides a sore dark pink. (104)

The old bone color again paints Coal Run as a sort of cemetery or crypt. Bright and

cheery colors are reserved for places where happy people live. Meanwhile, Ivan observes of Centresburg, “To the left sits Franklin's smokeless smokestacks. To the right sits the silent, burned-out shell of Packard [Mining Equipment]. A fire raged through it a couple years after it closed, gutting it and scorching the red brick to the color of spoiled beef” (29). Now the colors represent not only visual decay, but help the reader to image these towns as places that actually smell like they are rotten and, in turn, provide very similar imagery to crypt or catacomb scenes found in traditional Gothic fiction. This goes back to the landscape of Rust Belt Gothic being in the vein of Matthew Lewis' horror of physicality. While there is no shortage of corpses in Rust Belt Gothic, the crypt does not fit well into the modern setting. But by comparing a color to old bone or spoiled beef, O'Dell is able to generate in her readers the same sense of physical revulsion Matthew Lewis did when he described Agnes. A nun whose pregnancy exposed her violation of her vow of chastity, Agnes is locked in the crypt by a vengeful Prioress where she delivers her baby, only to have it dies shortly afterward. Agnes is eventually discovered clutching the decomposing body of her child and refusing to part with the coprse. This goes back to the idea that Rust Belt Gothic tends away from Radcliffian terror, where most of the fears are theoretical, to the visceral horror preferred by Lewis. Though the settings are different, by comparing a landscape to a decomposing corpse or spoiled food, objects most people would reject and shy away from, O'Dell is using literary techniques similar to those of her literary forebearers.

Seemingly in contrast, the description of Lawford, New York, the setting of *Affliction* (1989) by Russel Banks, starts off picturesque. Narrator Rolfe Whitehouse instructs the reader to, “Think of a village in a medieval German folktale. Think of a

cluster of old and new but mostly old houses and shops and a river running through and hillside meadows and tall trees" (2). But instead of continuing on with the kind of descriptions that would resonate as tourist advertisements, Rolfe goes on to explain why he and anyone else with ambition did everything they could to escape this town, which the text implies is located somewhere in the North Country. He describes the history of the town, saying, "In the Great Depression, the mills got taken over by the banks, were shut down and written off, the money and machinery invested farther south in the manufacture of shoes. Since then, Lawford has existed mainly as someplace halfway between other places, a town people sometimes have to admit having come from but where almost no one ever goes" (9). Other aspects of the town reinforce the sense of a dwindling population. "From a distance, a half mile down the road, the trailer park in the dim new light looks like an abandoned migrant worker's camp or a deserted military post. At half that distance, the trailers resemble metal coffins awaiting shipment" (49). This trailer park is the home of protagonist Wade Whitehouse. This place where people are supposed to be *living*, from a distance appears to be at best abandoned, if not full of those who have already died.

The mountain setting dominates the landscape, and Rolfe has conflicting opinions of it, much like Harley does of Black Lick. He is both in awe of its beauty and in fear of its climate.

> For the tens of thousands of years that these narrow valleys and abrupt hillsides have been populated by human beings, life has been characterized by winter, not summer. Warm weather, high blue skies and sunshine, flowers and showers—these are aberrations. What is normal is

> snow from early November well into May; normal is week after week of low zinc-gray overcast skies; is ice that cracks and booms as, closer every night to the bottom of the lake, a new layer of water cools, contracts and freezes beneath the layer of old ice above it. (60)

He believes this is the result of living north of an invisible line that runs across New England, a line that divides a tolerable climate and a threatening one, noting, "those who have lived north of it have reflected in their daily lives the astringency, the sheer malignity and the dull extreme of the climate there" (61). It is the sort of hostile climate that permits no weakness. Rolfe claims, "people adapt, or they quickly die. Or they move" (61). He sums it up by observing, "It is poor and lonely but undeniably lovely country; yet in spite of its loveliness, there is an overabundance of madness and despair in those settlements and towns. So much deprivation and so much natural beauty combine in a life to make it sad and angry beyond belief to an outsider" (214-215). Because of this, it is easier to understand why, in a place where living is so difficult, so many people ended up hurt or dead at the hands of Wade Whitehouse.

The other element of the landscape in *Affliction* that merits attention is the crumbling barn on the Whitehouse property. Wade recalls that he and his brother Charlie both approved of their father's plan to repair the structure. "[T]he barn had been ugly to them for years, an embarrassment, even before the roof had collapsed at the rear from the weight of the snow one particularly bad winter, and they had learned to avert their gaze from the decrepit leaning unpainted structure, to pretend that it was not sagging there in the lot between the house and the woods (183). While perhaps not a symbol of lost prosperity, the crumbling barn is a symbol of the Whitehouse family's impoverishment, a

representation of shame that they pretend not to see. The only way they can save it is to shorten it by thirty feet and recycle the wood to build a new wall to close it in. Wade and Charlie know all it will cost their father is the price of nails as they will be providing him free labor. But when the project is halfway done, their father feels that Charlie has challenged his masculinity and, after declaring victory in an arm-wrestling match on a technicality, leaves his sons in the barn. After the conflict,

> They knew now that the job would never be done, that tomorrow our father would find other things for himself to do and other chores for them, and the barn would stay the way it was, its ribs and spine exposed to the weather, the rest slowly rotting off, as rain blew in and snow fell. It would be like a huge long-dead animal come upon in the woods when the snow melts, half in the ground and half out, half bones and half flesh and fur, and when you walk up on it, you see what it is and remember what it was, and you look away. (188)

Both before and after the attempted renovation, the barn is something from which their gaze must be averted, something to be ashamed of because it could not be saved.

Like the coal mines in *Coal Run*, this barn also serves its turn as symbol of death. After murdering his father, Wade places the body on the workbench in the barn.

> He stood over his father's body like a priest blessing the host, unscrewed the cap on the base of the lamp, and poured the kerosene over the body, from the shoes up along the torso and over the hands and face and hair, until the lamp was emptied. He moved to the end of the bench and looked up along the body from the feet. He had his cigarette lighter in his hand: he

> ignited it and extended it forward slowly, holding it before him like a votive candle, and instantly the body was wrapped in a shroud of yellow flames. (344-45)

This is more than a man destroying the evidence that he killed his abusive father and more than wanton destruction of an old building. It is a religious ceremony. It does not take place in a castle with a private cemetery or in the catacombs of a monastery, but in the functional Rust Belt equivalent, which is just as macabre and Gothic in this setting.

Empire Falls (2001), by Richard Russo, although set in Maine and thus technically outside of the Rust Belt proper, is still an abandoned mill town and so also provides these Gothic settings, beginning with the eponymous waterfalls. In the flashback prologue to the novel, factory owner C. B. Whiting intends to build his mansion on the riverfront of the Knox, away from the rest of the town, but, "When the bulldozers began to clear the house site, a disturbing discovery was made. An astonishing amount of trash—mounds and mounds of it—was discovered all along the bank, some of it tangled among the tree roots and branches, some of it strewn up the hillside, all the way to the top" (8). C. B. at firsts suspects an enemy or disgruntled form employee of polluting the site of his future home, but eventually has to face the truth: "While it seemed unlikely that so much junk—spent inner tubes, hubcaps, milk cartons, rusty cans, pieces of broken furniture and the like—could wash up on one spot naturally, the result of currents and eddies, there it was, so it must have" (8). C. B. muses to himself that God has chosen to punish him for some unknown sin and decides that he is perfectly capable of winning that fight. He purchases land upriver for an exploitatively low price and bombards it with dynamite, speeding up the flow of the river and sweeping the garbage away from his

house. Of course, by increasing the speed of the river, he also made it more dangerous, setting up the epilogue where, decades later, the river floods and kills his wife, Francine, the antagonist of the story. This could be seen as poetic justice, or the will of God, but in the context of the Gothic landscape, this can be seen as the landscape fighting back.

While "Empire Falls" serves as the name of the town that is the backdrop of this novel, it also serves as its own descriptive phrase. Just like all of the other towns in these Rust Belt Gothic novels, the industry that was the lifeblood of the town was at one time prosperous, but eventually faded away, which is why I place this novel under the heading of Rust Belt Gothic despite the fact that it takes place geographically outside of the area. In this instance, the town's downward economic march comes at the hands of Francine Whiting, a shrewd enough businesswoman to make sure she got richer, even as the rest of the town had less and less. By owning nearly the entire town either through property rights or influence, Francine made a number of people her subjects and amused herself by controlling their lives as they had little choice but to obey the one person in town wealthy enough to employ them. Yet at the end, as the title implies, her empire falls.

Before that occurs, however, the other characters must live out their lives in what remains of the town. One place most of the characters choose to do so is the Empire Grill.

> The Empire Grill was long and low-slung, with windows that ran its entire length, and since the building next door, a Rexall drugstore, had been condemned and razed, it was now possible to sit at the lunch counter and see straight down Empire Avenue all the way to the old textile mill and its adjacent shirt factory. Both had been abandoned now for the better part of

> two decades, though their dark, looming shapes at the food of the avenue's gentle incline continued to draw the eye. Of course, nothing prevented a person from looking up Empire Avenue in the other direction, but Miles Roby, the proprietor of the restaurant—and its eventual owner, he hoped—had long noticed that his customers rarely did. (19)

The Empire Grill is both a symbol of hope and a trap. On the on hand, it is a place for community where the citizens of Empire Falls can gather and talk. But as the novel progresses, the reader comes to realize how many of them do not like each other and only continue to meet with each other at the Empire Grill out of habit and lack of other options. The local newspaper runs a photograph of the Empire Grill from circa 1960 to show how much has changed, as well as what has not.

> One of the younger men pictured at the counter still came in and always sat on the same end stool if it was available. For reasons that mystified Miles, the series [of photographs] apparently had a cheering effect on the citizenry. People actually seemed to enjoy recalling that on a Saturday afternoon forty years ago Empire Avenue was bustling with people and cars and commerce, whereas now, of course, you could strafe it with automatic weapons fire and not harm a soul. (297)

The photograph, a reminder of lost vitality, is highlighted by the notion that the town is currently so dead, an act of mindless violence can do nothing to hurt it. This turns out not to be the case, but it is the impression those dining at the Empire Grill receive.

For Miles Roby, the Grill is part of his dream. He keeps telling himself that one day Francine Whiting will leave the restaurant to him in her will and he will be a small

business owner with some degree of freedom. Yet it also traps him, as he reluctantly obeys Francine's every whim. He always submits to her out of fear of ruining his dream, even while he knows in the back of his mind that she enjoys manipulating him and making him suffer. So he remains in his position as manager of the Grill where he can see the deadest parts of the dying town every day.

Indeed, he remains in Empire Falls because of Francine's machinations as she convinced Miles to drop out of college and tend to his dying mother, much against his mother's wishes. After her death, he looks at the house in which he grew up and sees in it the same sort of decay that he sees in the rest of the town.

> The house he grew up in on Long Street had been on the market for more than a year, and Miles was parked across the street, trying to imagine what sort of person would purchase it in its present condition. The side porch, dangerous with rot even when he was a boy, had been removed but not replaced; visible evidence of where it had been wrenched away remained in four ugly, unpainted scars. Anybody who left the house by the back door, the only one Miles had ever used, would now be greeted by a six-foot drop into a patch of poisonous-looking weeds and rusted hubcaps. The rest of the structure was gray with age and neglect, its front porch sloping crazily in several different directions, as if the house had been built on a fissure. Even the FOR SALE sign on the terrace tilted. (53-54)

The place where Miles grew up is now covered with scars and falling apart, and he notices sloping similar to what Arthur Parkinson saw in his visit to his own boyhood home. It is a place inhospitable to life, or, as one of the town's police officers notes, it

"Looks haunted" (56). Even if there are no ghosts around, the town and everyone living there is haunted by the past. Arthur Parkinson, Harley Altmeyer, Ivan Zoschenko, and Rolfe Whitehouse, victims of troubled pasts themselves, would know the feeling.

This haunting permeates the whole town. The people living there do not look at the former prosperity with any real sense of hope that it could be achieved again; they look at the hardship they have endured and submit themselves to more of the same. Miles reflects on this while in the recurring Rust Belt Gothic setting of a bar.

> Paint was peeling off the walls of the men's room in strips. Last January the pipes had frozen and burst, and whomever Bea had hired to fix them had cut large squares out of the walls in half a dozen different spots, as if hoping to locate the rupture by pure chance. When they were finished, they'd patched the Sheetrock in some places, left gaping holes in others. This crapper, it occurred to Miles, was his hometown in a nutshell. People who lived in Empire Falls were so used to misfortune that they'd become resigned to more of the same. Why repair and repaint a wall you'd only have to deface again the next time the pipes froze? (339)

The comparison of his hometown to a public restroom aside, what Miles sees here is the manifestation of the despair caused by living in these Rust Belt settings. People may not have lost the will to live, but they have lost the will to make their lives better. Arthur Parkinson could join Miles Roby in lamenting that their childhood homes are sliding, but both would likely agree that there seems to be little point in repairing them. If possible, the better option is to move away.

This is true not only of Empire Falls, but of Butler, Black Lick, Coal Run,

Lawford, and any other Rust Belt towns, fictional or real, where the reality of decay is part of the landscape itself. As Fred Botting says in his study *Gothic*, "Gothic landscapes are desolate, alienating and full of menace. In the eighteenth century they were wild and mountainous locations. Later the modern city combined the natural and architectural components of Gothic grandeur and wildness, its dark labyrinthine streets suggesting the violence and menace of the Gothic castle and forest" (2). I would argue that this evolution has carried on into Rust Belt Gothic. The major difference between Rust Belt Gothic landscapes and those of traditional European Gothic is the amount of distance between reality and fiction. Early Gothic novels were usually set temporally and geographically as far away from the societies they were reflecting as credulity and storytelling would allow. Conversely, Rust Belt Gothic novels take place in the Rust Belt and in the present day. No matter how the people living there may try to ignore it or look away, those abandoned and rusting mills, factories, mines and houses are there serving not only as a reminder of the history of the area, but as a source of anxiety for those who, by choice or by circumstance, live there. For the characters in these novels who are frustrated with their lives, the places where they live, even if they have grown attached to them through long acquaintance, are a very real source of their anger, though certainly not the only one.

CHAPTER 3

FINANCIAL ANXEITIES IN THE RUST BELT WORKING ENVIRONMENT

In Rust Belt Gothic novels, the anxieties over lack of money and lack of masculinity are often directly intertwined in such a way that it is difficult to talk about one and not the other. Yet women often worry about their financial situation and men often feel emasculated for reasons unrelated to their income, so there are clearly aspects of these issues that deserve to be analyzed independently. In this chapter and the next, I will discuss anxieties related to money and those related to masculinity respectively, with the acknowledgment that there is necessarily some overlap in the coverage. This chapter will focus on financial instabilities related to social class, economic downturns, and gendered perceptions of employment. These financial instabilities are particular to Rust Belt Gothic and cause a great deal of anxiety for the characters, especially the males.

Before discussing these anxieties as they manifest themselves in Rust Belt Gothic Fiction, I would like to address an argument put forward by Chris Baldick and Robert Mighall in their essay "Gothic Criticism." In it, they take issue with the way much Gothic criticism is framed in terms of cultural anxieties. They argue that "In our view, Gothic Criticism has abandoned any credible historical grasp upon its object, which it has tended to reinvent in the image of its own projected intellectual goals of psychological 'depth' and political 'subversion'" (209). While directing their arguments specifically at criticism of late nineteenth-century Gothic works, they claim that "it relies on the doubtful assumption that the Gothic writings of the period offer an index to supposedly widespread and deeply felt 'fears' which troubled the middle classes of the time" (221). Baldick and Mighall go on to add, "Since Gothic horror fiction has a *generic obligation* to evoke or

produce fear, it is in principle the *least* reliable index of supposedly 'widespread' anxieties. One might with equally misplaced confidence cite *Punch* magazine or the comic opera of Gilbert and Sullivan to establish the widespread cheerfulness and levity of Victorian culture" (222). It is an amusing comparison, but a potentially troubling argument for a study such as this one which does assume that the fiction accurately represents widespread cultural anxieties. To respond to this charge, I argue that, based on studies on the effects of layoffs and unemployment, which undeniably occurred in the Rust Belt and can be proven to be part of the historical milieu of the area, it is legitimate to claim that Rust Belt Gothic is accurately representing the anxieties of the culture. In particular, it justly represents the financial worries of Rust Belt citizens.

In their study *Coping with Job Loss*, Carrie R. Leana and Daniel C. Feldman look at both the physical and psychological effects of layoffs. Citing Pittsburgh as a prime example of Rust Belt unemployment, they note, "In 1978, U.S. Steel had six operating facilities and employed 42,000 workers in the greater Pittsburgh area. By 1986, all but two of those plants were closed and employment was down to just over 6,700, a loss of over 35,000 jobs. Those eight years of plant closings and pink slips were described by one former steel-worker as a "slow-motion holocaust" (33). It is, of course, treading on emotionally-charged ground to refer to something as a holocaust, especially when referring to massive layoffs as opposed to genocide, but that this unnamed steel worker would do so underscores a sense of trauma about the events. Leana and Feldman claim, "On virtually every indicator of mental and physical health, job loss has a negative impact. People who have lost their jobs have been found to be more anxious, depressed, unhappy, and dissatisfied with life in general. The unemployed have been found to have

lowered self-esteem, to be more short-tempered, to be more fatalistic, and to be more pessimistic about the future" (5). Again, referring specifically to the Pittsburgh region, they note, "There was a strong sense that, with the collapse of the steel industry in western Pennsylvania, their lives had also collapsed. Nearly one-third reported severe financial problems as a result of the layoff" (35-6). But this goes beyond just a lack of money. "In addition to these immediate financial hardships, job loss also took its psychological toll. Among many, there was a strong sense of shock and disbelief. Life as they had known it—and as their fathers had known it before them—had suddenly changed" (36). This sense of shock at job loss appears in Rust Belt Gothic fiction as it holds a mirror up to reality, including a generational perspective that shows a difference between how the group who endured the layoffs responds and how their children respond. While Baldick and Mighall are correct about Gothic's generic obligation to cause fear in its readers, in this case, the research shows that the anxieties truly were widespread.

Leana and Feldman are not the only ones to conduct research into this area. In *The Social Costs of Unemployment*, David Dooley and Joann Prause take a long term view of the concept of the job and how some people find it difficult to cope with a changing definition.

> From a historical perspective, the "job" is a social construction that arose only in recent centuries with the industrial revolution (Bridges, 1994). The job served to provide the employer a fixed number of the worker's hours at the work site on a fixed schedule, in return for which the worker got fixed wages regardless of the amount of work produced. This familiar employee-employer relationship is now beginning to disappear. Although

> plenty of work remains to be done, it is no longer being packaged in the familiar envelope called jobs. Instead, organizations are said to be "dejobbing" in favor of more flexible arrangements in order to get work done at less cost. The problem from a psychological perspective is that people have come to base their sense of identity and security on their jobs. (7)

Although not limited to the Rust Belt, Dooley and Prause's research found that those who were unemployed, as well as those who had jobs but were not working as much as they wanted or needed to, suffered negative effects. In their conclusion, they sum it up:

> This research has produced the key finding that not only job loss but also other kinds of adverse employment can carry psychological and health costs. Specifically, these studies show that falling into various types of underemployment is associated with a variety of undesirable outcomes. These outcomes include decreased self-esteem, increased alcohol abuse, elevated depression, and lower birthweight. (201)

These studies show that not only is job loss a reality, but the negative consequences thereof are real and observable. It is therefore reasonable to claim that people's fears about job loss and financial difficulty are not merely fictional representations isolated in the few Rust Belt Gothic novels I have chosen to analyze, but that these representations clearly represent widespread social anxieties. This means that these novels are not trumping up a minor point just to scare more people or claiming that what is true for a single town is true for the entire Rust Belt. Unemployment and underemployment were, and in many cases still are, widespread: and while these novels are works of fiction, the

financial anxieties they depict are real.

In *Snow Angels*, set in a fictional version of the real mill town of Butler, Pennsylvania, the teenage Arthur Parkinson of the flashbacks must deal with the social consequences of being poor. After his parents separate, he moves into a small apartment with his mother.

"Do you know why we're doing this?" she asked me, and pointed around to the bare wall.

"Because we don't have enough money without Dad," I said, trying my best. (66)

He finds his new life difficult, and while both he and his mother try to pretend that things will work out, the hope they offer each other is often hollow. His mother tells him, "'Next year if I can help it we'll be out of here,' she said over our Hamburger Helper. She did not know much, she said, about handling money, but she would be careful. We would be alright" (112). Arthur begins to resent his father and the new life he assumes his father is living. "Lake Vue, where my father now lived, was new. I had never been in it, but when the bus picked us up, the kids who got on there were wearing neat Levi's and rugby shirts and blue suede Puma Clydes. They were semi-preppy in their down vests, and scorned long-hairs like Warren and me. I imagined them poking fun at my aunt's old Nova" (120-121). Already believing that he has earned the disdain of others who have more money than he does, matters only get worse when he discovers his father is actually living in a small room with little more than a sleeping bag and a hot plate. Apart, his family just does not have enough money to live well. Yet for all that, these are teenage concerns and Arthur manages to grow up and move away. Others in this novel are not so lucky.

Glenn Marchand desperately wants to prove to his estranged wife Annie that he can love and care for their daughter, Tara. Unfortunately for Glenn, he sees money as the

evidence for both love and care, and he does not have enough money. A symbol for this in the novel is a stuffed bunny. Glenn's father Frank is the first to observe it. "On a chair in a dark corner sits a plush bunny Glenn has bought for Tara, a red ribbon around its neck, its arms open as if ready to hug someone. It is nearly the size of Tara, and Frank does not want to think what it cost" (19). He is not the only one to feel that way, as Annie also struggles because of Glenn's inability to keep a job.

> Sunday they see each other when Glenn picks up Tara. He brings a huge stuffed bunny Annie thinks is too expensive, meaning she can't afford it. When they first separated, Glenn sent her a check every month, but during his problems he stopped. Unbeknownst to him, his father offered her money, which she indignantly refused. She's a month behind on rent; luckily the Petersons—her landlords, since they convinced old Mrs. Peterson to leave—are in Florida. She can stall them indefinitely, but Christmas will be coming up before long. (84-85)

This passage, from early in the novel when the couple are estranged but still considering getting back together, shows is how the rabbit is emblematic of both parents' desire to show they love their daughter: Glenn spends too much on it and Annie laments that she cannot afford it herself, not to mention that she worries she will be unable to buy Christmas presents. But even more than material goods, Annie needs Glenn to support her and Tara, which he cannot reliably do, which in turn makes her anxious that at some point she will not be able to pay the rent and will be forced to leave her home. Because Glenn is not fulfilling his role as provider for the family, Annie is forced to financially support herself and her daughter, and she is not confident that she will be able to do so.

Glenn's aforementioned problems, primarily alcohol-related, are what stop him from being a provider. His friend Rafe has an additional take on the problem. “One-thirty and Rafe has work tomorrow. He's hoping Glenn, who's been drinking steadily since he made bail, will pass out soon. Rafe paid again, but he doesn't mind. His parents left him money and the house; what else is he going to spend it on? Glenn's his friend, a fuck-up like him. No one else is going to help him” (195). One of the keys here is that Rafe has money and therefore does not need to worry because his parents took care of him. The other key is that no one will help Glenn if he does not. Indeed, this idea holds true for most of the characters: there is no one to turn to for help. Glenn cannot turn to his family as none of them has any money either. His depression and alcoholism are both symptoms of not having a job, though in his case they are both also causes that prevent him from getting a new one. As Dooley and Prause point out above, alcohol abuse and depression are common symptoms of unemployment. What Glenn demonstrates is how those symptoms prevent him from getting another job, trapping him in his cycle of anxieties.

In O'Dell's *Back Roads*, Harley Altmeyer is also constantly thinking about money. Regarding the possibility of leaving the home in which he grew up, he says, “Aside from Laurel Falls National Bank, the only thing that could have driven me away was the sight of the four empty dog-houses. Every time I parked my truck and was greeted with silence instead of the barking chorus I had come to expect ever since I was old enough to put meaning to sound, I hated myself for failing them. But dog food cost a fortune” (13). In a way, the guilt Harley takes on regarding the dogs spurs him to work harder because he knows he cannot let down his sisters in the same way. He finds that managing the household funds requires a great many sacrifices, and balancing that while keeping

himself and his sisters happy is practically impossible. He lets his sister Amber set him up on a date, but, “I barely noticed her. I was thinking about how much money I had spent on a lame movie and popcorn and Cokes. Being the breadwinner took the joy out of a lot of things” (107). He also clashes with his therapist, Betty, whom he regards as out-of-touch and elitist, about his finances.

> "Have you given anymore thought to visiting your friend Skip?" she asked, still standing.
>
> "I just bought new underwear," I said.
>
> "I'm afraid I don't see the connection."
>
> "I'm so strapped for cash, buying underwear is a big deal."
>
> She still didn't get it.
>
> "I can't afford it," I explained further. "I'd need gas money, and money for food and beer and shit. I don't have it."
>
> "I see," she said, even though I knew she didn't. (79)

She refuses to relent and continues to question him despite his growing anger.

> "I haven't asked about your financial situation in a while. How are things going? Certainly your father's estate is through probate by now."
>
> My father's estate. That cracked me up. I was wearing my father's estate.
>
> "I told you before all he had was some life insurance through his job. The government took a third and the rest went to back taxes on the house, Mom's lawyer, the funeral home . . ."
>
> My voice died before I could finish the list. The cost of funerals had been as big a shock to me as the cost of dog food. (79-80)

The pangs of guilt about the dogs are a foil to his recollections about his father. While he is repeatedly surprised and relieved when he finds himself expecting a smack to the head from his father that will never come, he is also stopped short when he thinks about the dogs, the difference being that he actually mourns the loss of the dogs.

With his father dead and his mother incarcerated, Harley is the subject of much gossip around the town, but is able to swallow his pride for the sake of his remaining family. He reflects, “Either way, I was a freak show, but it was better to be a freak show with a paycheck than one on welfare so I jumped at the Shop Rite job. A couple months later I got a job at Barclay's Appliances too” (26). Reflections like this are emblematic of Harley's greatest and worst trait: his introspective nature. He is aware of how helpless he is and smart enough to understand all of the implications. What is more, he shows that having a job, or even two, is nowhere near enough for him to be financially secure and ease his worries. He adds to his suffering by obsessing about it. Regarding the huge change in his life style after the murder, he thinks:

> One day you're a guy who's happy he managed to survive high school and get that almighty piece of paper, and you're thinking you might try and get a job at Redi-Mix Concrete where your dad's worked since the beginning of time or maybe Sharp Pavement. Good pay and good bennies, you dad's always telling you. Blue Cross Blue Shield: none of that HMO crap. Good Pension plan. Good workman's comp: he knew a guy who threw out his back moving his brother-in-law's pool table and blamed it on a job pouring a 7-Eleven and got full pay for three months of couch time. (26)

Harley is clearly aware of how good he could have had it had jobs like those still been

available and had his family not self-destructed. Unfortunately for him, neither of those things is true. His perception of himself is tied to the sorts of jobs he can get. He might have been able to see himself as a provider for his family if he had had one of those "good" jobs, but instead he sees himself as the poor freak who bags groceries and cannot afford to make his family happy. He adds, "One day you're that guy, and the next day you're assigned a social worker and a therapist and given the choice of either being a LEGAL ADULT with three DEPENDENTS or an ORPHAN with NOBODY" (27). He knows his decision to be an adult with dependents is the right thing to do to keep what is left of his family together, but there is nothing he can do to change the altered economic climate.

The job situation is different from how it was for the older generations, as Harley repeatedly tries to explain to himself and others. Echoing back to his claim that his father had poured concrete "since the beginning of time," Harley thinks back to his grandfather. "Grandpa, on the other hand, was always mean. He did nothing but sit in his recliner and rant about the environmentalists in Congress who had shut down all the mines. He had already been retired before his mine closed but apparently he resented that his sons and grandsons didn't have a job waiting to kill them too" (119-120). The tradition, the expectation even, that sons would work the same jobs as their father, has been broken. Working the same job as his father is not even an option. Harley tries to explain this to his sister Amber, who desperately wants to get her driver's license.

> "Even if I was the greatest guy on the face of the earth who only cared about making you happy," I went on, "I don't make enough money to give the Good Hands People a thousand fucking bucks. Do you

understand me?"

Amber puckered her lips and blew air out of her nose in frustration. "I don't get it," she said. "How did Daddy do it?"

"Dad made good money."

"Driving a cement mixer?"

"Yes," I cried.

"Why can't you drive a cement mixer?"

"I can drive a cement mixer. I can't get a job driving a cement mixer. There's a big difference." (85-86).

The distinction that Harley draws here is important because it contrasts his situation with his friend Skip's. Skip was able to go to college and escape from the life that Harley has to live. Harley, meanwhile, is not totally useless even without a college education. He has skills that would allow him to work better jobs, he just does not have access to those jobs. Harley is a man with no opportunities. This distinction between those who managed to leave the Rust Belt and those who stayed is important because the two groups have a different psychological outlook on their lives.

Harley and Skip may be a perfectly contrasting pair, but the issue is not always clear cut. In O'Dell's *Coal Run*, Ivan Zoschenko is a man who had an opportunity to get out of the Rust Belt and lost it, but he sees people like Harley around him all the time. Reflecting on his favorite watering hole, Ivan says, “I prefer Brownie's to other bars because the clientele is composed of career drinkers. There's none of the false camaraderie or violent outbursts or slobbering confessions of amateurs to deal with. Only the silent, steady, earnest consumption of alcohol by men who drink not because

they think their lives turned out poorly but because they turned out exactly the way they thought they would" (55). Ivan takes care to note that the indigence and need of the people he sees every day is specific to the working class.

> It's an odd kind of depression and a purely blue-collar American one, from what I know of poverty in other countries, past and present, that my father was always quick to point out to me on television news shows and in books and newspapers when I was little.
>
> No one's starving here; on the contrary, many are fat. No one's lacking material goods; everyone has clothing, a place to live, a TV to watch, and a car to drive. (30)

Even with physical needs met, something is missing. He adds, "But despite all this, there's still deprivation in the air. It's something my father predicted years before it happened" (31). It could have to do with the sorts of chronic underemployment described by Dooley and Prause that result in enough money to live, but not enough for one to establish an identity. As such, even with a house to live in and food to eat, the characters in Coal Run never have enough money.

Early in the novel, Rick Blystone has gotten drunk and fired his shotgun at his mother-in-law's car. Deputy Zoschenko arrives on the scene and explain that at the very least, if he arrests Rick, it will cost the family thousands of dollars in court fees they cannot afford. He agrees not to arrest Rick if Rick's wife Bethany allows him to confiscate all of their firearms, which she readily agrees to do. Ivan feels comfortable breaking the law this way, even as a representative of law enforcement, because doing the "right" thing would ruin this family. Rick claims he only fired the weapon to prevent his

mother-in-law from leaving to tell her friends that he was laid off again. He tells Ivan, “I don't want to do it again. I can't do it again. Being unemployed” (20). Though it is not his fault that the mine closed and he lost his job, unemployment causes Rick to become unstable, and he is not the only one. Dr. Ed tells Ivan that Jess Raynor often goes on benders.

> “Drunken ones where he goes off into the woods behind his house with a rifle and takes potshots at anything that moves in his yard.”
>
> “Are you kidding me?”
>
> “No, I'm not kidding you. He lost his job about a year ago. Things are pretty bad out there.” (63)

In both of their cases, the anger and frustration is as much, if not more, about the loss of the job as a center for their lives than about the income the job provided, given the way the mining companies treated their workers.

> The miners called the company stores "pluck me" stores because their prices were about 25 percent higher than stores in surrounding towns, but if a miner bought his supplies somewhere else, he was fired and blacklisted. His pay was a pittance to begin with, and, along with feeding and clothing his family, he also had to buy his own tools, dynamite, and carbide. The pluck-me stores gave credit, and miners ended up so far in debt to the company that they could never leave the coalfields. The debts didn't die with them either. They were passed on to their sons and their sons' sons. (148)

Despite the poor pay and working conditions, the work was important to these men. For

Ivan's father Rado, it was important that his family not starve, but that was not what was most important to him, though, “Mom thought it should be. His main concern was spirit, she told me. His fear was poverty of purpose” (31). Not being able to feed their families is bad, but not having a purpose causes even more anxiety.

Though he has a job, Ivan is not above worrying about money. It is not just the fortune he failed to make when his NFL career was cut short before it even began. He also laments that his lack of money prevents him from being with his crush, Chastity Morrison. It tears him apart when he learns she is engaged to Mike Muchmore, a man Ivan despises.

> She's going to marry Muchmore? I can't believe it. I won't believe it. There's no way she could want to spend even fifteen minutes with that guy, let alone her whole life. What could she possibly see in him? What could they talk about? What could they do? What opinions could they share? There's only one answer. Money. Money and power and social status. She's a doctor. Of course she's going to marry a fucking lawyer. Who else would she marry? A mechanic who can fix her carburetor? (164)

Though he sells them both short in his analysis of their relationship, Ivan expresses how his lack of money prevents him from getting what he wants. While he has social status as, arguably, the town of Coal Run's biggest celebrity, he feels he cannot measure up to Mike Muchmore in terms of wealth and power. (For more on Ivan's feelings of emasculation regarding Muchmore, see chapter 4.) He also lays out what he perceives to be hypocrisy in Chastity. She claimed to want to be with a man who was useful and could fix things, but apparently not if he was from a lower social class. Though this point is undercut by

the fact that Ivan and Chastity do end up together in the end, he does express a sentiment that echoes through all of these novels: “We don't have money and therefore aren't good enough.” This is a large reason why so many of these characters have self-esteem issues.

Near the end of the novel, Ivan and Chastity are discussing the house that the late Zo Craig left her son in her will, a house that sits on “[t]wo hundred acres of untouched hills and forest” (297). Ivan speculates that Randy Craig will sell the property to J&P so they can turn it into a strip mine. Chastity is bothered by that thought.

> “Destroying all this land would be awful," she says.
>
> "Yeah. But we all need money." (300)

This brief exchange encapsulates the conflict of anxieties for these characters. Though the idea of marring the landscape even further is repulsive, especially for a town that already suffers from raging underground mine fires, they all need money, and the opportunity to get some simply cannot be turned down. The interplay here between the Rust Belt Gothic anxieties of ruined landscapes and lack of money is interesting. They know they would be disgusted to see a beautiful piece of land be turned into yet another mine, but the implication is they would allow it to happen if the right amount of money were offered. But even if that did happen and any anxieties about money were lessened, anxieties about the landscape would surely increase. It is a conflict with no positive resolution.

Most of the conflict in Banks's *Affliction* could be described as class conflict. The poorer characters are jealous of the wealthy characters, who in turn lord their wealth over others. The drama of the novel stems from Wade Whitehouse's insistence that Evan Twombley did not die in a hunting accident, but was actually murdered by Jack Hewitt. Russel Banks encourages the readers to believe this as well, at least early in the novel, by

taking the reader into Hewitt's mind as he raises Twombley's rifle.

> It was a lovely thing, not a scratch or a blemish on it, a Winchester M-94 pump-action, a .30/.30 with a custom carved stock. It must have set Twombley back two thousand bucks. Ah, sweet Jesus, these rich old guys and their toys! Jack seemed almost to sigh, but he ended by pursing his lips again as if to whistle. Men like Twombley, over-the-hill fat cats, cannot ever truly appreciate the beauty of things they can afford to buy. And men like Jack Hewitt, say, who can remember the feel of a particular gun in their hands for years afterwards, as if it were a marvelous woman they slept with once, will never be able to own it. (65)

There is a clear tension between Hewitt and Twombley, one that exists solely because of their relative financial circumstances. Hewitt, as "a man who worked overtime to pay interest on borrowed money," is of course jealous of Twombley's wealth, symbolized by the fine rifle (66). Twombley, for his part, treats Hewitt like a dumb hick, useful only as a hunting guide. Because of this conflict, the reader is most likely only mildly surprised when Jack asks to check Twombley's rifle and instead shoots him with it.

What is more surprising is that, after an interstitial scene, Banks takes the reader back to the forest where the same scenario plays out again, except that this time Twombley slips and accidentally shoots himself. This forces the reader to ask which scenario is true, the murder or the accident. This is the same argument that Wade has with anyone who will listen, particularly his girlfriend Margie Fogg and his brother Rolfe. Margie is incredulous.

> "*Wade!* How can you even think such a thing? Why would Jack

Hewitt do that, shoot Twombley on purpose?"

"Money."

"Jack doesn't need money."

"Everybody needs money," he said. "Except guys like Twombley and that sonofabitch son-in-law of his. People like that." (171)

Wade's certainty fades, but he has his brother so caught up in the idea of murder that they begin to convince each other.

"Motive, Rolfe. You got to have motive."

"For Jack? Money."

"Okay. Money. Jack always needs money, and he's had big ideas about life ever since he got all that attention for being a ballplayer. But come on, who the hell would pay Jack that kinds of money? Bonus-baby money." (242)

Together, they imagine a plot where Mel Gordon, Twombley's son-in-law, paid Hewitt to murder him so he could take control of illegal union dealing with the mafia. Rolfe eventually begins to doubt this, but Wade is so sure of what happened that he murders Jack Hewitt and then flees the country. In the epilogue, Rolfe explains that all the evidence indicated that Twombley died in an accident and Wade murdered an innocent man, finally revealing to the reader that the scene in which Hewitt shoots Twombley is merely the way Wade envisioned it happening. Again, the reason the reader is willing to believe Wade's imagined version of events for so long is this tension between the classes in Lawford.

Wade dislikes one of his bosses, Gordon LaRiviere, for what he perceives as a

smugness about his social position, as well as a tendency to manipulate local politics to his own benefit. Though Wade works for him as part of his well-digging company, LaRiviere also meddles with Wade's job as a police officer.

> Wade did not enjoy this part of his job—for one hour a day five days a week he was the crossing guard at the school—but it was required. Wade's annual police pay, $1500, one tenth of his total income, was a line item in the school budget that got authorized every March at the town meeting. LaRiviere, who had been a selectman for over a decade, allowed Wade to come in at eight-thirty, a half hour later than anyone else who worked for him, so he could claim he personally saved the school board the extra fifteen hundred dollars a year they would have to pay someone else to do the job if Wade had to be at work at eight o'clock. (69)

Wade, who does not have enough money as it is, cannot afford to give up one tenth of his income to get out of doing a job he dislikes. LaRiviere likes to appear as though he is personally and graciously saving the town money. Meanwhile, Wade's tardiness to work forces him to use older, less functional equipment, which only exacerbates his bitterness. But it is not only LaRiviere with whom Wade comes into conflict. In his duties as school crossing guard, Wade is almost hit by Mel Gordon, who chooses to ignore the traffic regulations and speeds past several stopped school buses. Wade decides to take it personally and drives to Mel Gordon's house to confront him. After Wade attempts to give him a ticket, he becomes enraged. “He yanked open the door, turned Wade toward it and said, 'I can put your country ass out of work with one phone call, Whitehouse, and I'm just pissed enough to do it now'” (145). Because he projected his own anger onto Jack

Hewitt, it is easy to see why Wade might think that Hewitt shot Twombley. It was, after all, something Wade would have wanted to do himself.

In the end, nothing changes. Wade is a murderer and a fugitive, and the rich get richer, though not through a conspiracy to kill Evan Twombley. Instead:

> LaRiviere and Mel Gordon were indeed in business, buying up as much high-country real estate as they could, but there was nothing illegal about it, although it probably was not proper for Mel Gordon to finance the operation with union funds when he was a director and major shareholder in the company receiving the funds. It was a legitimate investment, however, one that has paid off handsomely—for the union membership, for Mel Gordon and Gordon LaRiviere, and for almost everyone one else in town too. The Northcountry Development Corporation has brought enormous changes to the region: Parker Mountain Ski Resort is advertised all over the northeast, full-page ads in the Sunday travel section of the *New York Times*, the *Boston Globe*, the *Washington Post*, and so on. Fifteen lifts, seventeen miles of trails from beginners to advanced, with several fancy lodges, over a hundred chalet-like condominiums installed along the old Parker Mountain Road in a development called Saddleback Ridge, a half-dozen après-ski lounges, restaurants and bars, including Toby's Inn, now called the Skimeister's Hearthside Lodge. (351-52)

This turn of events should constitute a happy ending. Lawford, struggling economically since the mills closed, now has business again. The tourism industry could revitalize the town. But that does not mean the class conflicts experienced by Wade Whitehouse will

disappear.

Class conflict also appears in *Empire Falls*, though the upper class seems to be comprised solely of the Whiting family. The novel begins with a description of their homes, including the Whiting family mansion, a "Georgian affair" that was "built to inspire awe and loyalty among the Irish, Polish, and Italian immigrants who came north from Boston, and among the French Canadians, who came south, all of them in search of work" (4). It is, in essence, a way to let everyone else in Empire Falls know that the Whitings are better than they are. Not wanting to mix with the working class, C. B. Whiting opts to build his house across the river. "Compared to the Whiting mansion in town, the house Charles Beaumont Whiting built a decade after his return to Maine was modest. By every other standard of Empire Falls, where most single-family homes cost well under seventy-five thousand dollars, his was palatial, with five bedrooms, five full baths, and a detached artist's studio" (3). Again, the homes are symbols of the wealth the Whitings hold over the other citizens, most of whom are (or were) employees of a Whiting Mill or factory. When the Whitings would hold parties to boost employee morale, "it seemed to Honus Whiting that many of the people who attended these events anymore were singularly ungrateful for the free food and drink and music, some of them regarding the mansion itself with hooded expressions that suggested their hearts wouldn't be broken if it burned to the ground" (5). As Miles Roby and others find out, it is nearly impossible for anyone to live in Empire Falls and not be under the thumb of the Whitings, especially Francine.

> In fact, now that the mills were all closed down, it sometimes appeared that Mrs. Whiting had cornered the market on business failures. She

> owned most of the commercial space in town and was all too happy to help new enterprises start up in one of her buildings. But then rents had a way of going up, and none of the businesses seemed to get anywhere, nor did their owners when they appealed to Mrs. Whiting for more favorable terms. (24)

While many residents feel the burden of being unable to get ahead in the largely Whiting-owned town, Miles Roby is singled out in particular to suffer in a job at the diner where there is no hope of advancement or of escape. It isn't until late in the novel that Miles realizes Francine Whiting has been punishing him for decades for an affair that Miles's mother had with Francine's husband, C. B. The shrewd Francine convinced Miles to drop out of college to be near his dying mother, very much against Grace Roby's wishes, and then strung him along for year with the vague promise that Miles would inherit the Empire Grill when she died. When Miles finally has the courage to accept that she might have been lying to him all along, he breaks ranks and attempts to start up a different restaurant, only to find it shut down by the health inspector before it can open, again at the hand of Francine Whiting. Miles is a microcosm for the whole town of Empire Falls: forever led on by the hope of future prosperity with nothing real to show for it.

The other major connection between the Whiting family and the Robys is Francine's daughter Cindy. Miles and Cindy were born on the same day and their mothers recovered in the same room. Grace Roby always saw a connection between the two children, despite the circumstances.

> Two children born within hours of each other into such different circumstances, one rich, the other poor. No doubt the hospital staff

> would've made clear to Grace in a hundred small ways which was the *important* baby, and such a quiet and thoughtful woman couldn't have failed to contemplate the very different destinies in store for her child and child of a woman whose last name was Whiting. (166)

Ironically, it turns out to be Miles who is the more fortunate child after Cindy is crippled after being hit by a car, which the town took as a sign. “That such a tragedy should visit a family historically shielded from misfortune had occasioned a wave of philosophizing, especially in the mill-workers' neighborhoods. It just went to prove, people said, that God doesn't play favorites. He didn't love the rich more than the poor, not really, and it took something like this to demonstrate this oft-doubted truth” (165).

That the truth was oft-doubted, and that Cindy Whiting's vehicular crippling is the only evidence offered as proof, simply underlines the fact that the people Empire Falls take it for granted that the wealthy will get the breaks in life and they will not.

Even when the novel ends with the town poised for a much-needed economic upswing, Miles cannot bring himself to be positive about the future. Though he and his friends and family have escaped from the Empire Grill, he does not view it as their fortunes actually changing.

> If what David has described was an unalloyed blessing, then Miles would be glad. For his brother, for Bea, for Charlene, for all of them. He didn't expect anyone to share his resentment about the way it was coming about, that once again the lion's share of the wealth generated would never reach the citizens of Empire Falls. The houses they couldn't afford to sell last year would be the houses they couldn't afford to buy the next. And it was

> Francine Whiting, of course, who'd pulled it off, in essence selling the same thing twice, first the mills themselves, then the parcels of riverfront land she'd cleverly retained. (462)

Francine Whiting, though the hand behind everything, does not, in fact, profit from this turnaround, having been swept off at the end of the novel by a raging river and poetic justice. But in the minds of the citizens of Empire Falls, especially Miles, there will always be someone to take her place and keep them scrambling to survive.

The key here is that this is a fight for survival. Rust Belt Gothic distinguishes itself from traditional Gothic in this way. In traditional Gothic, in terms of social status, the fear is that one will fall from a high place to a low one, whether that be in terms of wealth or power. For example, in *The Castle of Otranto*, Manfred fights to find some marriage or other arrangement that will allow him to keep his usurped kingdom because he fears becoming like one of the peasants he mistreats. In *The Monk*, Ambrosio enters deeper and deeper into his satanic pact with Matilda because he knows if his sins are revealed, he will lose his status as the confessor to the most important people in Madrid. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Emily St. Aubert ends up in the clutches of Montoni only because her father's wealth was nearly spent at the time of his death. Whatever the example, the traditional Gothic trope is most often that the character is afraid of losing his or her high position in society. In Rust Belt Gothic fiction, there are no protagonists in high positions. There is no anxiety about falling from grace: there is anxiety about being able to feed families. There is no anxiety about no longer getting to live in a castle: there is anxiety about not having anywhere to live at all. In this mutable genre, that is one change that distinctly marks the Rust Belt Gothic version. The actual citizens of the Rust

Belt see their anxieties about making ends meet reflected in these novels and connect with these characters in a way they almost certainly wouldn't with the lords and abbots of traditional Gothic. This is why Rust Belt Gothic had to come into being: so that it can accurately portray, and hopefully assuage, some of these anxieties.

CHAPTER 4

ANXIETIES ABOUT MASCULINITY IN RUST BELT GOTHIC FICTION

Anxieties about money and masculinity are often intertwined. In the Rust Belt, this often stems from chronic unemployment or underemployment; and while this can result in financial distress, it can also result in a loss of a sense of self, a loss of a sense of importance, or a loss of a sense of social standing, particularly for men. While this situation appears to represent outdated gender stereotypes, the culturally-embedded idea that the man needs to be the sole provider for a household is still deeply ingrained in many people who live there, and failure to live up to that role can result in problems, regardless of whether the job loss occurred in the 1970s at the beginning of the economic downturn in the Rust Belt, or on into the 21st century.

In a 2009 *New York Times* article titled "Why the Sting of Layoffs can be Sharper for Men," Hannah Seligson examines some of the consequences of the recession that began in 2008. She writes that, "As job losses reverberate across the economy, differences in 'his' and 'her' layoffs are beginning to take shape — revealing gender dynamics that may not have been as apparent when the Dow was at 14,000" (BU10). She mentions interviews with several prominent psychiatrists who seem to agree that the number of men seeking therapy has increased sharply since the most recent economic downturn. Seligson concludes that, "While gender roles are malleable, and many people are adjusting the boundaries, the roles that have been templates for many generations still linger, particularly when it comes to employment" (BU10). The emotional impact of these gender dynamics is clear.

Another frequent *New York Times* contributor, Louis Uchitelle, also examined the

subject in his 2006 book *The Disposable American: Layoffs and Their Consequences*. He claims, "The laid-off are cut loose from their moorings and rarely achieve in their next jobs a new and satisfactory sense of themselves. Psychiatrists and psychologists know this; they run across it regularly in the treatment of patients who have been laid off and who suffer from depression and from a neurotic reluctance to return to challenging work and risk being disposed of again" (x) Uchitelle interviewed dozens of laid off workers to show that once one gets past the purely statistical and economic impact of job loss, there is a personal impact that is often overlooked. Based on his research, he says, "The emotional damage was too palpable too ignore" (181). His ultimate argument is that a culture that tolerates layoffs is damaging America. This theory is played out in these novels as characters are constantly struggling to find enough work, while lamenting that the "good" jobs are gone. Their lives are clearly worse because of this.

If layoffs are emotionally damaging, then massive layoffs of the sort that occurred in the Rust Belt must have been extremely damaging to the communities that suffered through them. A generation later, roughly 1985 to 2005, the time period in which these novels mostly take place, these communities have been populated with people who have grown up in a culture that essentially teaches them to think solid, respectable work is gone and they should not expect too much out of life because they certainly are not going to get it. The characters in these novels have grown up learning their community and its people have been disposed of and are now treated commensurately with that value. If that is the environment in which these characters grew up, it is not hard to see why there would be a prevailing sense of inadequacy.

Nearly every male character in *Snow Angels* feels inadequate about his

masculinity for one reason or another. For Arthur, the reason is his parents' separation. He feels obligated to help when he begins to suspect that his mother cannot sustain their lifestyle on her own, but he does not believe he is up to the task either: "Around the house I tried to fill in for my father where I could. We were still going through boxes from the move, trying out the few different combinations of furniture the tiny living room allowed. I stood around like my father would have, and when my mother pointed, picked up a table or chair or end of the couch and then stood aside again" (113). Part of this, of course, stems from the fact that Arthur is still a teenager and has the discomfort of the separation added on top of his own adolescent insecurities. However, even though he eventually grows up and moves away, his reflections on the events of the novel hint that those feelings have lingered throughout his life. When he thinks back to the massive search party looking for the infant Tara, he observes:

> Yet it will not be any of these searchers who finds Tara, but a fourteen-year-old from the high school marching band, small for his size, generally ignored, in fact, myself, Arthur Parkinson, who, because she is dead, will not be a hero—will not, years from now, even be remembered around town as the one who found her—but who, with Annie and Glenn and Brock and May and Frank and Olive and Clare and Barb, will find Tara again and again throughout his life and never ever lose her. (157-58)

The turning point of *Snow Angels* is the scene where Arthur and his friend Warren sneak away from the search party to hide in a large drain pipe and smoke marijuana and end up accidentally finding the toddler's body. It is the point where it becomes clear that the novel is not going to have a happy ending, but it also seems to be the point where Arthur,

looking back, realizes his life would have no happy ending. He did not end up being a hero; he is not even remembered as being involved. And he is haunted by the fact that he failed to do anything meaningful with his life, like saving Tara.

If there is anyone who truly failed regarding Tara, it is her father, Glenn, who has his own anxieties about masculinity. This stems mostly from his failed relationship with his wife Annie. Annie struggles to deal with Glenn when he is out of work:

> She did not want the separation, neither of them did. She wants Tara to have a father, and Glenn can be a good father, but at this time last year he was out of work and resented watching Tara while she pulled the day shift at Friendly's. It was bullshit. She'd come home and he'd be on the couch, well into his third beer and the house would be a mess and he'd expect her to get dinner and do the dishes and weekends run out to the laundry. (45-6)

At first this seems as though Glenn is ungrateful and sexist, ignoring that his wife is supporting the family financially to chide her for not doing the household chores he ignored. But his character is slightly more nuanced than that. It is clear that he feels like a failure for not being able to hold down a job and support his family, and moreover feels a tremendous sense of shame whenever Annie pays for things. This is clearest at the scene where the couple meet for lunch in an attempt at reconciliation. When Glenn goes to place their order, “He heads for the counter, hoping she won't call him back to give him money” (79). He is afraid that his wife is going to verbally emasculate him in public by offering to pay for lunch. Unfortunately, she unintentionally does this as they get up to leave:

> "Here," she says, and gives him three ones.

"The whole thing only cost two-fifty."

"You can pay for the movie," she says. (83-4)

Glenn's problem here is that he has had to ask his estranged wife out on a date, which she then proceeds to pay for, overpay even, telling him he can pay for the movie for their next date, which she only very reluctantly agreed to in the first place. He hates that he does not seem to be good enough for her.

In his final homicidal delirium:

> Glenn thinks of her at her mother's, sitting at the kitchen table, making excuses for losing Tara, for screwing Brock. When he was working at the scrapyard, he used to think of them doing it in the bed he'd paid for and he'd have to drive out in his ridiculous cart to the back fence and smash something. He liked that job. She took that from him too. (261)

The death of their daughter, Annie's infidelities, his chronic unemployment and essentially ruined life; Glenn blames Annie for everything that makes him feel bad about himself, and so he methodically hunts her down and executes her before taking his own life.

Harley Altmeyer feels questions about his masculinity coming from nearly every person with whom he interacts, including himself. At one point, he even presents his case for why he is a man, including citing the evidence, such as he sees it:

> Today was my birthday. I was twenty years old.
>
> Twenty years old. I was a man.
>
> I didn't get too excited because I knew I was only becoming a man in a certain sense. I had already become a man before in other ways.

> Legally I had become a man when I turned eighteen. Spiritually I had become a man the night Callie Mercer fucked me. Emotionally I had become a man the first time my dad belted me. Today I was becoming a man chronologically. There would be no more "teen" after my age. (271)

It is worth noting that in listing the ways he has become a man, each item is something that happened to him, rather than something he did for himself. He cannot simply look at himself and declare his masculinity; he has to have an authority grant it to him. And when those authorities refuse to grant it, his anxieties deepen.

Early in the novel, his sexual frustrations cause him to have a lower opinion of himself. He says,

> Every morning on my way to work, I drove past a yawning group of bare-legged ones in shorts and mini-skirts waiting for the school bus with Donny the stump. In the past, I would've slowed down and watched from my rearview mirror until they disappeared around a bend in the road, but lately looking at girls shredded my nerves. It was a big part of becoming a man: discovering there was a difference between wanting sex and needing it. (8)

Though Harley claims he can make the distinction, it is often unclear if this is actually true. Despite his mistrust of his sister Amber's motives, he allows her to set him up on a date, primarily because she hints at the possibility of a sexual encounter with her friend. To Harley's mortification, it all goes wrong. He later sees the girl's wedding announcement in the newspaper and reflects, “She and her husband probably lay in bed at night after a successful screw and made fun of me: the only guy in America who didn't

know how to use a rubber correctly. I didn't care. He was from Penns Ridge, and they were all a bunch of grass chewing rednecks over there" (34). When Harley does finally consummate a sexual relationship, it is not with one of his sister's friends, but with neglected housewife Callie Mercer, a conflicted act that simultaneously makes him feel more manly and less adequate. After he awakes from their first encounter to find her gone, "A terrible sinking feeling came over me as I realized I might already have blown it. I couldn't buy her nice things or take her places or provide her with witty conversation. All I could do was fuck her well. That was the only way I could keep her" (139). While he is happy to have had sex with her, he is painfully aware that he has nothing else to offer her other than that. Her husband provides everything else. He dreams about taking Callie away somewhere, but is pragmatic enough to know that such a thing could never happen. He is also conflicted about carrying on an affair with the mother of his six-year-old sister Jodi's best friend Esme. Harley feels guilty about using his youngest sister as an excuse to see his lover. He finally finds something in his life that could make him happy, but it just brings more self-doubt.

Harley's own opinion of himself most likely starts with his tumultuous relationship with his father. He observes, "I had never seen Dad smile sincerely the way Mom did. Happiness to him was just another violent emotion as far as I could tell, something he turned into backslapping and arm-punching and used for an excuse to get drunk and destructive" (36). Despite the number of times his father hit him or one of his sisters, Harley still sometimes manages to rationalize the behavior. When his mother's defense attorney suggests at the trial that his father deserved what he got, Harley mentally defends him. "He didn't talk about the PHYSICAL STIMULI that shaped Dad's world.

How he didn't like his job, but he went to it every day. How he didn't like to shave, but Mom couldn't stand stubble. How he didn't like Bill Clinton, but he had to vote for him anyway. He wasn't a monster. He was a flesh-and-blood man who couldn't stand it if you spilled something" (102). And who impulsively responded to a spilled beverage with a backhand to his child's face. But his father's abuses were not limited physical ones. Harley tries to tell his therapist about visiting his mother in prison, but:

> It got her more excited than the time I told her about how Dad used to take Misty hunting with him instead of me and every time he'd say to me, "She's more of a man than you'll ever be."
>
> Shrinks love it when dads cut down their sons. Verbal emasculation, she called it. I didn't care what it was. He was right. (71)

Harley reflects that the tomboyish Misty, in addition to actually enjoying spending time with their father, was a far better hunter than he was and is almost glad not to have had to spend that time with his abusive father himself. Harley at one point tells Betty that after the cost of the funeral, the only thing he inherited from his father was the coat he was wearing. But he also inherited his father's world view, especially with regards to his own self-worth. This is a point where Rust Belt Gothic has shifted from traditional Gothic. While many traditional Gothic texts feature characters concerned with lineage, legacy, and inheritance, those are associated with class and wealth. Within the Rust Belt, there is rarely any wealth to be passed on, so instead of a tangible inheritance, what these characters receive from the previous generation is a mindset about the way life is and what expectations should be. The legacy Harley is left by his father is the knowledge that he can never be good enough.

Of course, his therapist Betty also pressures him about his concept of masculinity. While attempting to steer the conversation away from his mother, Harley allows Betty to talk him into a corner where he insists that if he ever got a girl pregnant, he would marry her, but he cannot fully explain his reasoning.

> "So you would marry her out of responsibility?" she asked me.
>
> "I guess so."
>
> "Could I go so far as to say you would marry her as a form of self-punishment?"
>
> "I guess."
>
> "Do you hear what you're saying, Harley? You would commit yourself to another human being for the rest of your life as a form of punishment. Do you think that's what a marriage should be based on?
>
> "I don't know." (76-77)

Harley then proceeds to insist that his parents had a good marriage, despite the fact that (at this point in the novel) he believes that his mother had murdered his father. For Harley, everything comes back to his sense of needing to be a man, even when he does not understand why he believes certain actions are correct.

In fact, Harley spends a great deal of his inner monologue in the novel musing on what it means to be a man and how he measures up: “I remembered once getting into an argument with my mom about her not leaving the light on for my dad the nights he stayed out drinking. I told her a man driving up to his own house at night deserved to see a light burning no matter what he had done. She said if the man had done something that needed forgiving, a burning porch light was the last thing he wanted to see” (33). Even though

Harley hated his father, he still expects his mother to act a certain way towards the man. His mother also provides him with plenty of material to add to his list of facts about men. When he goes to see her in the Hug Room of the prison, he suspects that a male prison would not have children as visitors, theirs being mostly lawyers and whores. It makes sense to him because he believes that, "Prison was a reflection of real life, and it had always seemed to me that once a woman had a kid nothing else mattered about her. Being a dad might describe a man, but being a mom defined a woman" (44). This meshes with his later proclamation to Betty that parents worry more about daughters because a girl can get pregnant while the man can just walk away. Yet his attempts at machismo are ruined when a security guard suggests that Harley is refusing to visit his mom because he is not tough enough to handle it: "And that was the reason I broke my vow never to see my mother again for as long as I lived. Because some stranger in a polyester uniform and rubber shoes made fun of me. Sometimes I hated being a guy" (46). Given the choice between finally confronting the mother whom he feels abandoned him and actually prefers prison life to taking care of her family versus enduring some mild taunting, Harley cannot help but take the option he believes will allow him to salvage some pride.

He even goes so far as to project his feelings onto inanimate objects. "I grabbed Mom's pepper shaker shaped like an Amish guy and dumped a ton in. I set him back down next to his wife in a black bonnet carrying a basket of apples. Men were always pepper; women always salt. Black. White. Evil. Virtuous" (115). And yet, as far as evil goes in this novel, there are two murders, both committed by women and both committed by Harley's sisters, essentially proving that this is a false dichotomy.

Harley's sisters are the greatest source of his anxieties about his masculinity. With

his father dead and his mother in prison, he feels responsible for them, but not quite capable of shouldering that responsibility. Nor do his sisters make it any easier for him. At first, Harley is angry with his sisters because it does not appear that they are angry about what their mother did at all, whereas Harley wants to rage at her for abandoning them. He suspects that he knows why.

> I assumed their leniency came from being the same sex. It was just one more woman thing I would never understand like how they didn't want you to bug them but if you didn't bug them for too long, they came looking for you wanting to know why you weren't bugging them. Or how all they cared about was looking good but whenever you told them they looked good, they got insulted because you were implying there was something wrong with them. Or how they were obsessed with proving they were as good as men by trying to do things only men did, when what made them better than men in the first place was that they weren't naturally good at those things.
>
> These were a couple of the things I had learned about them during my captive years among their kind. The only thing I had ever learned about men from watching my dad was how to settle for less. (50)

But it not just his own doubts about serving as surrogate father that pressure him. It is also what his sisters say and do. His sister Misty tells him:

> "We're both sort of weird. I'm not the way a girl's supposed to be. You're not the way a guy's supposed to be."
>
> "What are you talking about?"

> “You don't like football. You don't like to mow. You keep that art book in your truck,” (294)

Referring to the same art book as Misty, the one that Callie Mercer had lent Harley, Amber assaults him, saying, “'She stopped by this afternoon and left you some recipes and a book.' Amber explained, practically spitting the words 'recipe' and 'book' at me. 'Are you turning into a fag or something?'” (86). Amber is actively hostile to Harley throughout the entire novel and Harley sometimes has the urge to lash out the way his father did, but restrains himself: “I knew it never occurred to Amber that I might hurt her. She believed violence was an act of strength, and she thought I was weak. Otherwise, she would have never risked pushing me like she did. She hated getting hit” (18). It is not until very late in the novel that Harley finally understands why there is so much tension between him and his oldest sister. As he awakes from what he believes to be a dream about Callie, he thinks, “Before I could define the horror, I simply felt it. It lifted me up off my bed and smashed me into a wall. My sense of self-preservation told me to run, told me to scrape off my skin, told me to cut off my hands, but I opened my eyes instead” (287). And what he finds is Amber on the floor completely naked and a flood of previously repressed memories about their incestuous encounters earlier in their lives. In his revulsion, he tries to put as much distance between himself and Amber as he can and, after breaking down while confessing everything to his therapist, arranges to meet with Callie to find some solace, only to pay witness to a jealous Amber brutally murdering his lover. In his understandably warped mental state at this point, Harley decides that the most responsible thing to do is to give his sister the best chance at a happy life that he possibly can, which in this instance means consensually engaging in intercourse with her

before turning himself into the police and confessing to the murder she committed. He believes so firmly in this decision that he refuses to speak to his therapist after she tells the police that Amber was the real killer. In the end, Harley is, as one of the police officers interrogating him says, “a decent responsible kid who's had a really shitty life” (318). And there is no doubt that most of Harley's problems and troubles in life were the result of growing up poor and male in the Rust Belt.

Ivan's life in *Coal Run* takes a similar path, with one major deviation. While Harley never had any real hope of a better life, Ivan did, and then had it cruelly taken away when his accident terminated his pro football career. Ivan becomes an alcoholic in response. He thinks, “I need a drink. I'm not embarrassed or apologetic about the craving. Needing a drink isn't any worse than needing to collect Beanie Babies. I'd rather be a drunk than a moron” (53). Ivan has been running from his past long enough to have become very good at rationalizing his drinking. Unfortunately, in returning to his home town of Coal Run, his past come up frequently. Further regarding his drinking, “I also like it [Brownie's] because I'm largely ignored. In every other bar in town, I'm mounted behind smudge-free glass in galloping, ball-clutching glory, my past more relevant than my present and all my current failures, misdeeds, and shortcomings neatly excused, forgiven, and over-looked for the simple fact that I used to be very good at sports” (55). He cannot stand the fact that so many people treat him like a hero, despite his private shame of being responsible for what happened to Crystal Raynor, and the far more public shame of his failure to become an NFL star.

The latter, in particular, haunts him when he first meets Chastity Morrison, who is trying to get him to agree to be part of a charity auction. She intends for one of his male

fans to win the right to spend time with him, but Ivan mistakes it for a bachelor auction. She responds:

> "Oh, a woman bidding on you. That's interesting. I hadn't thought of that" I should be welcoming death right about now, or at least exiting quickly, but I'm a man, and although male pride and the male ego can be damaged and even destroyed in extreme circumstances, the male desire to be in the presence of a woman he finds extraordinary can't be tampered with. (85-86)

Despite the severe blow just delivered to his ego, Ivan finds himself too fascinated with Chastity to just walk away. Much like Harley being taunted by the prison guard, Ivan chooses to do the "manly" thing, even if it might not be in his best interest.

However, Ivan's magnanimity towards pretty women damaging his ego does not extend to his sister Jolene. When a drunken Jess Raynor threatens Ivan with a hunting rifle, Jolene pulls off her dress to distract him while Ivan disarms him. When the predictably hung-over Ivan goes to find his sister the next morning, "She spots me and the smile disappears. I guess I wasn't imagining her little lecture last night. It may have been more. It may have been a fight. I may have started it by yelling at her instead of thanking her for saving my life. I'm all for women's rights and equality in the workplace and all that stuff, but I draw the line at heroic stripping" (108-09). He has often been bothered by what he perceives as his sister's promiscuity, but in this case he is just as angry at himself for putting her in a dangerous situation that he was not capable of handling on his own.

Were he being responsible, Ivan would have called for backup from his fellow

police officers. But even, as he notes, that might not have been enough.

> Not one of them joined the sheriff's department because he wanted to fight crime or make the world a better, safer place. On the other hand, they also didn't do it because they like to bully people or because they get off being an authority figure with a badge and a gun. We're all well aware that doesn't mean much around here. The general population is better armed than us, and most of them are better shots, too. (114)

Ivan defends the men in his profession from stereotypical claims that they are either wannabe heroes or thugs with a lust for power. He claims they are just ordinary guys who wanted a job with good benefits and a retirement plan, understandable desires given the anxiety over financial stability so many others in the region have. But then, for many of these characters, the definition of an ordinary guy is up for debate.

When Ivan goes to talk to Bobbie Raynor because he fears her husband Jess is being abusive, she tells him her thoughts on the matter.

> "You know Jess could've gone to college and played ball just like you did. He could've got a degree and had a career somewhere instead of just a job. But he had his priorities straight. He stayed here where he belonged. He was a real man."
>
> "That's your definition of a real man?" I ask her. "Someone who lives and dies within two miles of the place he was born, even if it means being unemployed and having to suffer and struggle every day of his life just to survive?"
>
> "Pretty much." (212)

Though Ivan professes shame at not having become a football star, and humility at having become a sheriff's deputy, his negative reaction to Bobbie's assessment shows that he really did think he was a man because of those roles he played.

Another harsh assessment of masculinity comes from Chastity. When Ivan asks her why she left a successful medical practice in Pittsburgh to come back to rural Pennsylvania, she tells him it was because all of the men she dated made her homesick for the men back home:

> I started tearing into my date. I said, 'Can you do anything? You have this job that pays you a lot of money to make more money for big company that makes more money for a lot of other men just like you, but what can you do besides that? Can you do anything real? Can you fix a carburetor? Paint a house? Pitch a tent? Plant a tree? Tap a keg? Sing a song? Catch a fish? Install a dishwasher? Carve a turkey? Build a table? Build a fire? Can you even fix my toilet?'"
>
> I quickly go through her list in my head. I'm falling short. (155)

Ivan is greatly discomfited when he runs up against definitions of masculinity that find him wanting. Like Harley, it almost seems as though he needs someone else to assure him of his masculinity, because he is not always capable of asserting it himself.

He especially wants this affirmation from Chastity, and virtually needs it when he learns that she is engaged to Mike Muchmore, the defense attorney who defended Reese Raynor after he beat his wife Crystal into a coma. Ivan says, “My dislike for Mike Muchmore is a fairly all-consuming emotion that takes up most of my thought processes whenever I'm reminded of it. He defended Reese, but even without that onerous

distinction, I'm pretty sure I'd still hate him. (90) It is not just that a man he has always hated always treats him politely. It is not just that a man he has always hated happens to be engaged to the woman Ivan wants more than anything. One of the real bombshell plot points of the novel is Muchmore's secret largesse. The revelation tears at Ivan's sense of self:

> I have to know for sure. I have to know if Chastity's information is true and Muchmore has a conscience. Not only a conscience, but integrity. He's kept his generosity hidden all these years when he could have made it public and received the respect and affection of a community that otherwise doesn't think too highly of him.
>
> Not just integrity but compassion. He could have lessened his guilt in a lot of ways: done pro bono work for battered wives, given a hefty donation to a women's shelter, left the public defender's office of maybe even left criminal law altogether. Instead he chose to pay a very large sum of money out of his own pocket to keep Crystal in a clean, respectable place where she'd be well taken care of and exposed to nice people, even though it probably doesn't matter, since she's incapable of knowing where she is. She lost everything else. He made sure she got to keep her dignity.
>
> His kindness eats at me, because it wasn't my kindness. (248-249)

Ivan is eaten in a lot of ways. He is ashamed of the fact that he got Crystal pregnant and then abandoned her, which forced her to turn to Reese for support, which in turn led to the brutal beating that left her in a coma. He is ashamed of the realization that even if he had never broken his leg and had gone on to become a football star, he would not have

bothered to take care of Crystal's medical bills. He is emotionally wrecked by the knowledge that Mike Muchmore did. As Dickensian as it makes the name sound, Ivan is eaten because he knows that Mike Muchmore is much more of a man than he is. Even as he is actually winning Chastity away from Muchmore, he is constantly wracked with self-doubt: "She pulls away, and I think it might be over. She stands up and panic races through me. She wants a man with a purpose, I remind myself. Not a man who can barely walk who sleeps on his sister's couch every night. A man who didn't even give her his free smiley-face cookie from Eat'nPark. I ate it in my truck on the way to the hospital" (302). In his anxiety, he can come to only one conclusion. "She wants a man like Muchmore, who silently provides quality medical care at great expense for women who've been beaten into comas by their husbands" (303). It is moments like this one that undercut the optimistic notion that Chastity might leave Muchmore for Ivan. Even if she did, it would not put a stop to his insecurities.

Finally for Ivan, it should be noted that he was essentially abandoned by both of his father figures. Because his actual father died in the mine fire when Ivan was very young, he latched on to neighbor Val Claypool as a role model: "Val did everything I aspired to do when I was full-grown. He drove too fast, threw horseshoe ringers, ate Twinkies for breakfast, bagged two bucks every season, wore the same dirty clothes day after day. He could belch the Pledge of Allegiance and throw a football through a tire swing from fifty feet away" (9-10). Ivan also felt that Val treated him differently than others did: "He had an answer for everything. Not the kind of answers my father gave me that were well thought out and took into account all the knowledge he had accumulated over a lifetime. Val's answers were instantaneous proclamations based on the

inconceivability of an alternative" (10). When his father dies, Ivan aspires to be like Val instead. Even though Val was much younger than his father, "To me he was always an adult. He did a man's job and made a man's paycheck and had a man's responsibilities. He didn't have a wife or even a steady girlfriend, but he had his mom to take care of, and a truck" (49). Ivan starts to use that for his definition of masculinity. Then Val leaves to fight in Viet Nam; but despite the fact that he survived, he never returned to Coal Run and Ivan feels betrayed. When he sees Val thirty years later as a man in his forties himself, "I find I'm not as interested in knowing what he's been doing as I am in wanting to know if he remembers anything we used to do together. Does he remember any of the things he taught me: how to change a spark plug, how to throw a football, how to shoot a gun?" (52) Things only get worse when he learns that Val does remember him, but as a neighborhood kid who always annoyed him. Val now wants nothing to do with Ivan. Eventually Ivan begins to question himself: "When Val left for war, I thought he was a man. When I was eighteen, I was certain I was a man, but I behaved like a child. Am I right now? Or was I right then?" (336). It is not a question Ivan is able to satisfactorily answer. His complicated life and conflicting definitions of what it means to be a man cause him a great deal of confusion.

Wade Whitehouse's anxieties about masculinity in Russell Banks's *Affliction* are simpler to trace because they really only come from two directions: his ex-wife Lillian and his boss Gordon LaRiviere. As the novel opens, Wade wants to spend time with his daughter Jill, but between his boss making him work late and his ex-wife being strict about the custodial arrangements, the perfect evening he imagines fails to materialize. "Now he was late, late for everything he had planned and fantasized about for a month:

late for trick-or-treating with his daughter at the homes of everyone in town he liked or wanted to impress with his fatherhood" (16). Using his child as a means of boosting his own ego is not a healthy version of fatherhood, something the narrator, Rolfe, later acknowledges. "The child becomes emblematic. This was happening to Wade, of course; and he dimly perceived it. But he was powerless to stop it" (162). Indeed, feeling powerless is how Wade spends most of the novel.

Some of this stems from his dissatisfaction with his job. He loathes driving the road grader to plow snow for Gordon LaRiviere. "It humiliated him. It was only a thing, but he despised it. It was inept and slow. It belonged to LaRiviere, and driving it made Wade feel that he belonged to LaRiviere too" (113). He thinks he has found an excuse to get out of driving it because he has duties as a police officer, but then comes to terms with the reality of his work situation:

> No, he would end up spending the whole damned day driving that damned grader. Gordon LaRiviere the well driller was also Gordon LaRiviere the chairman of the Board of Selectmen, who hired and fired the town cop. LaRiviere would tell Wade to make his goddamned investigation on his own time and turn in his report later. For now, until five o'clock this afternoon anyhow, Wade Whitehouse the snowplow driver belonged to Gordon LaRiviere the town road agent. Only then would he belong to the Board of Selectmen. And at no time would he belong to himself. (114)

As important as employment is for those in the Rust Belt, Wade despairs at doing his jobs because he feels they allow him no sense of autonomy. He is essentially Gordon LaRiviere's pawn, and it frustrates and angers him because to lose that work would be to

lose everything he has left.

Part of what he lost is his wife Lillian and the happiness she brought him. They married right out of high school and protected each other from the rest of the people in town:

> Without Lillian, without her recognition and protection, Wade would have been forced to regard himself as no different from the boys and men who surrounded him, boys his age like Jimmy Dame and Hector Eastman and grown men like Pop and Gordon LaRiviere—deliberately roughened and coarse, cultivating their violence for one another to admire and shrink from, growing up with a defensive willed stupidity and then encouraging their sons to follow. Without Lillian's recognition and protection, Wade, who was very good at being male in this world, a hearty bluff athletic sort of guy with a mean streak, would have been unable to resist the influence of the males who surrounded him. The loneliness would have been too much to bear. (300-1)

Essentially, Wade knows that Lillian made him a better person. He feared he would become just like all of the men he saw around him and disliked, and she helped him not to, for a while. Of course, Wade deserves the blame from driving her away, projecting his feelings of being trapped in his work onto his feelings about his marriage. But without her, Wade descended into self-destructive and often violent behavior, which is most likely why Lillian never told him about the affair she had with LaRiviere after their divorce. In a way, *Affliction* presents Wade's transformation from a happy young man trying to start a family to a bitter middle-aged man going on a homicidal rampage in a fatalistic way. It is

as though growing up in Lawford, in those economic conditions, surrounded by those people, there is no way Wade could have expected his life to turn out any better.

Wade, like Harley, had an abusive father, and also received his inheritance of a negative sense of self-worth. He was afraid to talk to anyone about the beatings, and the rest of his family was not much help. Rolfe explains:

> As for his older brothers, they seemed to Wade to regard our father's occasional, predictable and, for the most part, avoidable attacks as just one more of the many brutalities of our life so far, as one small corner of the rough terrain of childhood, something we were supposed to endure and then pass through and become scornful of, which was why, goddammit, Elbourne had gone, and next month Charlie was going, straight into the army without even waiting to graduate high school. So that if Wade has spoken of it to them, he would only have been pointing out his inadequacies, revealing to his older brothers, as to himself, his lesser status as a human being (182).

Growing up in an environment where he was judged for not suffering through child abuse "like a man" clearly shaped Wade's view of how a man should act, especially when the consequences of not living up to that ideal would constitute admitting being less of a human. And while certainly not every child raised in the Rust Belt grows up in an abusive home, many do grow up in an environment with deeply engrained notions of patriarchy and masculinity. This is why anxiety about masculinity is one of the key components of Rust Belt Gothic. While the physical landscape has scars that cannot be ignored, the emotional landscape has them too, it is just that they can be harder to see. In this case, the

scar that is their cultural inheritance is that many men who grow up in the Rust Belt feel that they are inadequate in their masculinity.

In contrast to Wade Whitehouse, Miles Roby in Richard Russo's *Empire Falls* did expect his life to turn out better and continues to hope that things will turn around. He is surrounded by people questioning his manhood, especially his ex-wife Janine and the man for whom she left Miles, Walt Comeau. Miles's brother David even jokingly suggests that killing the pompous Walt would be an effective way to keep him out of the Empire Grill. “Miles tried to imagine it. Assuming he could get ahold of a handgun, what kind of man, he wondered, would walk up to another human being—even Walt Comeau—and squeeze another death into the world? Not Miles Roby, concluded Miles Roby” (27-8). Though he could not bring himself to shoot Walt, he also cannot bring himself to tolerate the man, often sharing knowing glances with his co-workers and customers, none of whom can stand Walt either. One thing Miles learned not to do, though, is underestimate him. “Of course, the idea of a blowhard like the Silver Fox anywhere outside of Empire Falls was absurd, but Miles didn't dare laugh. A year ago Walt had joked that if Miles wasn't careful he was going to steal his wife, and then he'd gone ahead and done it” (31). The fitness-obsessed Walt always wants to prove his masculinity to Miles, even after stealing his wife. As Miles observes to a friend:

> "He's always trying to get me to arm-wrestle him."
>
> "Why?"
>
> "You'd have to ask him. It seems to have something to do with his belief that one of us isn't a real man." (409)

Miles is the sort of person to cheerfully endure Walt's presence even as he loathes the

other man on the inside. Miles began living in the apartment above the restaurant after the separation, but began to suspect that he was getting sick from a faulty heating system: "Last April he'd even considered asking Janine if he could sack out in the back bedroom until the headaches went away, but when he went over to ask her, he discovered the Silver Fox had all but moved in. Better to asphyxiate above the Empire Grill, he decided" (43). Indeed, Miles is the sort of person who acts like he would rather die than confront his problems, his relationship with his wife being another one. "He'd seriously considered Holy Orders well into high school, and there were still times when he wondered if he'd missed his calling. Janine had wondered too. To her way of thinking, any man with no more sex drive than Miles Roby possessed might better have just gone ahead and embraced celibacy and been done with it, instead of disappointing poor girls like herself" (47). This is essentially her reason for leaving Miles. Though she would later admit to herself that she never loved Walt, and even found him nearly as annoying as everyone else, he satisfied her sexually, something Miles could not do, and so she left.

Another person who Miles feels looks down on him is his childhood neighbor who grew up to be a police officer in Empire Falls, Jimmy Minty. When Jimmy catches Miles looking at the house in which Miles grew up, Miles immediately feels awkward: "It never took Jimmy Minty long to turn any conversation to one about money. He particularly liked to draw Miles's attention to whatever was wrong with any of his possessions, such as rust on the Jetta, of which there was plenty. Miles had long suspected that Jimmy Minty considered him some kind of yardstick by which he might measure his own economic well-being" (91). Miles never saw himself in competition with Jimmy, so it seems a little ridiculous to him, but he begins to see how it has played

out their entire lives.

> The oddest thing about this, Miles thought, was that it seemed a direct extension of their childhoods on Long Street. Jimmy Minty had always taken careful inventory of Miles's belongings, wanting to know how much everything cost and where it was purchased. If they got similar Christmas presents, Jimmy liked to explain why his was better, that it had been purchased smarter and cheaper because *his* dad knew where to go—even if the toy in question was obviously a cheap knockoff. After detailing the advantages of his present, he'd suggest they switch, just for a while; often, before Jimmy returned it, Miles's toy would get broken. (91)

While it sounds like this is mostly about money, it is not. It is more about Miles being the sort of person who allows himself to be pushed around and manipulated by others. It is also about who these two men have become. Later, the two get into an argument after Jimmy finally realizes that Miles has been passive-aggressively making fun of him. Jimmy takes the opportunity to set Miles straight:

> See, I cared who won the football game today. Maybe people like you think that makes me a nobody, but you know what? I don't give a fuck. Mr. Empire Falls? That's me. Last one to leave, turn out the lights, right? This town *is* me, and I'm *it*. I'm not one of those that left and then came back. I been here all along. Right here is where I been, and it's where I'll be when the sun comes up tomorrow. (294)

He tells Miles that they are both well-liked in town, but with a difference. People look at him, a man who has always been part of Empire Falls and they see what they love about

the town. He claims that people look at Miles, who left to try to get a college degree, and see every shortcoming in their own lives and know that they will never be good enough. He portrays Miles as a walking reminder of failure. Whether or not this is true is not as important as the fact that Miles believes it.

The final person who looks down on Miles is Francine Whiting, who, to be fair, looks down on everyone. But she takes particular joy in controlling Miles to exact her revenge for the affair Miles's mother Grace had with her husband. His brother David tries to make him realize this:

> It means she's toying with you. You're like a moth she's stuck through the chest with a pin. Every now and then she takes you out and watches you flail around for a while, then she puts you away again.
>
> "And don't tell me you're not the only one with scratch marks either," David continued, which was exactly what Miles had been about to point out. "I know half the town has scratch marks. I *know* she owns most of what's worth owning in Empire Falls. But my point is that she owns you only because you let her. You could wiggle off that pin if you wanted to." (224)

He goes on to beg Miles to make a change in his life, if only for his daughter, Tick, telling Miles that, "She's soaking up your passivity and defeatism every day" (224). Miles becomes dejected to realize that he is passing that inheritance of disappointment onto yet another generation.

When Miles finally works up enough righteous anger to confront Mrs. Whiting, she promptly pushes him back onto the pin:

> Now, before you say another word in anger, for which I should have to punish you, you'll want to stop and consider not just your own future, but your daughter's. She may require assistance with her university expenses in a couple of years, much as *you* did." She paused to let this sink in. "And of course there are your brother and the other who depend upon the Empire Grill for the admittedly slender livelihoods. In the end, though, it's up to you, just as it always has been." (435)

They are both smart enough to know that this is not true. Instead, Mrs. Whiting has manipulated Miles his entire life, and even his clear recognition of that is not enough to allow Miles to break free from her grip.

Ultimately, what ties all of these characters together, and differentiates these anxieties about masculinity from those about money, is that anxieties about money stem from a dread of poverty whereas anxieties about masculinity come from a dread of uselessness. This fear is a recurring one in these novels. In *Coal Run*, Ivan recalls his father explaining why he chose to stick to a life of working in the mines. "'You can have all the food and toys and even all the bombs,' he told my mom while they shared on of their last nights together, 'but no man can protect himself against uselessness'" (32). Or, as Ivan's mother explained it to him, "His fear was a poverty of purpose" (31). Ivan begins to understand this himself when Chastity goes on her rant about men. When she asks, "Can you do anything real?" Ivan secretly fears that he cannot, that he has been judged and justly found wanting (155).

In *Affliction*, Wade feels crushed when his ex-wife comes and takes his daughter back home when he was supposed to have custody of her for the weekend. He thinks,

“When you take a man's child from him, you take much more than the child, so that the man tends to forget about regaining the child and instead focuses on regaining the other—self-respect, pride, sense of autonomy, that sort of thing” (162). As noted above, allowing a child to become symbolic may not be the best parenting, but it is clearly happening in Wade's case, and losing his daughter makes him think less of himself.

In *Empire Falls*, Miles's elderly father Max makes the point quite clearly when he asks Miles to pay him for helping to paint the church. “'If you paid me for work,' continued Max, whose rhetoric was more sophisticated than you might expect for a man with food in his beard, 'I wouldn't have to feel worthless. There's no law says old people have to feel worthless all the while, you know. You paid me, I'd have some dignity'” (87). This is the key difference here. He does not say, “If you paid me, I'd have some money.” Max knows how to get money if he wants it and how to mooch off other people if he does not have any. He seems particularly unconcerned about his finances throughout the novel, apparently impervious to anxieties about money. But the on thing he cannot get from his son, or anyone else, is a sense of self-worth. And while Max protests that it is impossible to hurt his feelings, it is also clear that this denigrated sense of self has been passed down to his son, yet another in a series of similar inheritances.

In *The Disposable American*, Louis Uchitelle cites social worker Maureen Moorhead describing how she sees people who have suffered through these economic downturns. “'There is a brokenness in them,' Moorhead said, coining a term that captures more aptly than psychiatric language the damage from layoffs in the United States today” (198). This emotional brokenness contributes to the mindset of these communities. The men in these novels have anxieties about their masculinity because growing up and

constantly being confronted by failure, they are afraid they are going to end up the same way. Though less tangible and most likely even subconscious, the mentality of inadequate masculinity is as hard to ignore as the abandoned factories and mills that dot the physical landscape. It becomes a part of them simply because they live in the Rust Belt.

CHAPTER 5

THE FUTURE OF RUST BELT GOTHIC FICTION

While campaigning to be President in 2008, Barack Obama made some controversial comments regarding disenfranchised Pennsylvanians. Speaking at a fund-raising dinner in California, he told his audience:

> You go into some of these small towns in Pennsylvania, and like a lot of small towns in the Midwest, the jobs have been gone now for 25 years and nothing's replaced them. And they fell through the Clinton administration, and the Bush administration, and each successive administration has said that somehow these communities are gonna regenerate and they have not. So it's not surprising then that they get bitter, they cling to guns or religion or antipathy to people who aren't like them or anti-immigrant sentiment or anti-trade sentiment as a way to explain their frustrations. (qtd. in Fowler)

The discussion that followed regarded whether or not Obama was "elitist" for saying such things, or whether he was unfairly stereotyping gun owners or the religious. What most people failed to focus on were the parts of the statement that were undeniably true: that people in that region had been struggling to find jobs for decades and were frustrated by their economic situation. Regardless of the way he chose to express it, Obama noted that there was anxiety about lack of work; and, as many scholars have said, social anxiety often leads to the re-emergence of the Gothic. And once that literature exists, people often read it, even when common sense says that it should frighten then.

The argument that people are especially frightened by those things that are both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time is frequently based in psychoanalytic criticism,

starting with Freud's notion of "the uncanny." In his essay "The Uncanny," Freud explains, "In the first place, if psychoanalytic theory is right in asserting that every affect arising from an emotional impulse—of whatever kind—is converted into fear by being repressed, it follows that among those things that are felt to be frightening there must be one group in which it can be shown that the frightening element is something that has been repressed and now returns" (147). For Freud, this is most often a result of castration anxiety, an idea held in low esteem in modern psychoanalytic circles, but he does begin the argument that when people are afraid of something, they need to do something mentally to separate themselves from the fear. This argument holds true in general, though not for the specific act required.

If, for Freud, that mental act is repression, for Julia Kristeva it is abjection. As a psychoanalytical theorist, Kristeva holds many views similar to Freud's, but takes a post-structuralist approach in her work. She describes the process of abjection in *Powers of Horror*:

> The abject has only one quality of the object—that of being opposed to *I*. If the object, however, through its opposition, settles me within the fragile texture of a desire for meaning, which, as a matter of fact, makes me ceaselessly and infinitely homologous to it, what is *abject*, on the contrary, the jettisoned object, is radically excluded and draws me toward the place where meaning collapses. (1-2)

The abject is defined as being apart, other, or everything that is not part of the person defining it. We choose to push it away because it challenges or threatens our conception of ourselves. As we are all alive, one of the most primal fears is therefore death. Kristeva

observes, “In the presence of signified death—a flat encephalograph, for instance—I would understand, react, or accept. No, as in truth theater, without makeup or masks, refuse and corpses *show me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These bodily fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death” (3). It should be no surprise, then, that coming face to face with a corpse is so often a hallmark of Gothic fiction. As Kristeva puts it, “The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life” (4). In order to keep living then, we must define ourselves as “not death,” we must identify death and push it away to separate ourselves from our fears. This is what many critics of the Gothic argue Gothic fiction does: it allows us to clearly articulate fears and then abject them, push them away.

Walter Kendrick argues along these lines. He claims, “It has often been said—though a proper survey remains to be taken—that human beings are the only species who know they must die, who can conjure up the event as if it were happening now and react accordingly” (xiii). What concerns him is not so much that people have this ability, but that they choose to use it so very often. Kendrick points out that, “The vampire belongs to a lively crew of ghouls, ghosts, zombies, and man-made monsters, all of which seem, with their insistent display of what death does, to deny our very denial” (xvi-xvii). People do often consume frightening media that seems to bring death to the forefront. It is the fact that these monsters are man-made, though, that allows them to be useful. Whatever they represent, they are not real, and consumers of these novels or films are capable of making that distinction. It is a safe way to regard death, even if one would choose to deny it. Kendrick then asserts that, “The wellspring of horror remains, as it was

in the eighteenth century, the fear of death—or rather the fear of being dead, of the body's losing form, turning slimy, melting away. This source shows no sign of abatement; it seems so self-evident and natural that is has come to be regarded as eternal, part of the universal human inheritance" (260). He is correct. There is no doubt that wellspring will continue to flow, and more Gothic fiction will necessarily be created. Like Kristeva's flat encephalograph, readers know that these blatantly counterfeit man-made monsters are only symbolic, as well as frequently tailored to their culture, and this is what allows them to confront these issues from a seemingly safe place, to simultaneously experience the fear and displace it.

As far as the change to fit new cultures goes, Fred Botting sees it in many places. In *Gothic*, he says:

> Many of the anxieties articulated in Gothic terms in the nineteenth century reappear in the twentieth century. Their appearance, however, is more diverse, a diffusion of Gothic traces among a multiplicity of different genres and media. Science fiction, the adventure novel, modernist literature, romantic fiction and popular horror writing often resonate with Gothic motifs that have been transformed and displaced by different cultural anxieties. (13)

It is true that many of these little resemble traditional Gothic, but again, it is the genre's adaptability that has allowed it to remain. If it reappears in a new guise like science fiction or popular horror, it is because those adaptations keep it relevant.

In *Images of Fear*, Martin Tropp suggests of traditional Gothic fiction the point that, "While ostensibly the means to an innocent escape, it aroused in its Victorian

audience fears that lurked beneath the surface, fears connected with the ongoing upheaval of a culture discarding a way of life that had been unchanged for centuries and, amid the social, industrial, and scientific revolutions of the nineteenth century, making a modern world" (3). Tropp also stresses the point that consumers of Gothic fiction take it in knowing that it is artificial. He believes that being scared in this way makes the audience more adept at handling problems when they arise in the real world. He claims that:

> Horror stories, when they work, construct a fictional edifice of fear and deconstruct it simultaneously, dissipating terror in the act of creating it. And real horrors are filtered through the expectations of readers trained in responding to popular fiction, familiar with a set of images, a language, and pattern of development. Horror fiction gives the reader the tools to "read" experiences that would otherwise, like nightmares, be incommunicable. In that way, the inexpressible and private becomes understandable and communal, shared and safe. (5)

The key is the safety, in the way the fiction displaces the danger by allowing readers to confront their anxieties in an artificial form.

In his essay "Contemporary Gothic: Why We Need It," Steven Bruhm continues the line of reasoning about the psychological underpinning of the genre. He states:

> What makes the contemporary Gothic particularly contemporary in both its themes and reception, however, is that these unconscious desires center on the problem of a lost object, the most overriding basis of *our* need for the Gothic and almost everything else. That loss is usually material

> (parents, money, property, freedom to move around, a lover, or a family member), but the materiality of that loss always has a psychological and symbolic dimension to it. (263)

There is, for Bruhm, a decidedly Freudian bent to the genre, including anxiety over separation from the mother, fear of the father, and castration anxiety. While the Freudian tensions may be dehistoricized, it is clear that contemporary Gothic is giving voice to new tensions by expressing these cultural anxieties.

Ultimately for Bruhm, it comes back to need. He argues:

> We crave it because we *need* it. We need it because the twentieth century has so forcefully taken away from us that which we once thought constituted us—a coherent psyche, a social order to which we can pledge allegiance in good faith, a sense of justice in the universe—and that wrenching withdrawal, that traumatic experience, is vividly dramatized in the Gothic. We do not seek out on Gothic experience, read one novel, or see one movie, we hunt down many. We do not tell one story, we tell many, even as all of them are knitted together by those familiar, comforting, yet harrowing Gothic conventions. (273)

When Bruhm speaks of the loss of a sense of justice in the universe, he could be speaking specifically about Rust Belt Gothic. Looking back to traditional Gothic, in *The Castle of Otranto*, one sees the usurper Manfred deposed and Jerome, the rightful heir, taking his place. In *The Monk*, the devilish Ambrosio is ultimately punished for his crimes. In the traditional Gothic, balance is restored. But not in the Rust Belt. There is no balance and no solid center to hold on to. The jobs have disappeared, and if there were

justice in the universe, they would have come back. They did not. The characters in these novels and the people who live in the Rust Belt suffer from this loss of stability.

While the popular critical views tend to argue that readers seek out Gothic fiction in order to deal with anxieties in a displaced manner, there is, at least for Rust Belt Gothic, an additional perspective. There is a subtle theme common to all of these novels and it is one of hope. While the settings of these novels are often terribly bleak, it is strongly implied that "other" places are better. It is the characters who stay, or who try to unsuccessfully to leave, who are oppressed by the Gothic atmosphere. The characters who leave, who manage to escape these towns, generally go on to have better lives than the people they have left behind. In a way, it is almost a form of abjection. In order to separate their identities from that of the Rust Belt, they must physically move away and cut themselves off from that environment.

One of the two protagonists of *Snow Angels*, Arthur Parkinson, manages to grow up and get out of Butler. As an adult, he says, "I don't like coming home. It keeps me from being nostalgic, which by nature I am" (15). As his plane flies over town, he laments, "I know that once we touch down I will not be able to think clearly," because of his childhood and the trauma he went through. But he is smart enough to know that he eventually got away from it all. Glenn Marchand, the other protagonist, never managed to get his life together and ended up killing his ex-wife before taking his own life. While plenty of other characters continued to live their lives the same way they always had, the novel focuses on these two and the contrast is obvious. Arthur was able to abject the town and survive; Glenn could accomplish neither feat.

In *Back Roads*, Harley's therapist Betty repeatedly encourages him to go visit his friend Skip, who has gone on to college. Harley puts her off by explaining that he cannot afford it and would not want to leave his sisters alone unsupervised. Betty suggests he has another reason for not going, though he never admits to it. It is fairly clear from the subtext that Harley is afraid he is not good enough to be Skip's friend anymore. He thinks, "I always knew Skip would leave. His constant scheming never seemed a part of these quiet wounded hills" (4). Skip wrote one letter to Harley after leaving for college, and Harley reads it from time to time throughout the novel, always keeping it safe. When Harley ends up in a mental institution with his life in shambles, one of the few personal effects Harley takes with him is Skip's letter. It is as if he wants proof that someone could separate themselves from the town of Black Lick and go on to have a better life, even if he is not that person.

In *Coal Run*, Ivan Zoschenko is different because when his professional football career was cut short, he did leave for many years, but eventually found himself drawn back to his hometown. When he learns that his childhood idol Val has no intention of staying in Coal Run any longer than he has to, Ivan attempts to give him an impassioned speech.

> "You can lose a job. You can lose a woman. You can lose your sanity. You can lose your memory." I come to the end of my list, almost short of breath.
>
> "But you can't lose the place you're from," I finish. "It's always there. The land and the sky. It's always yours. No one can turn you away as long as you can say, 'This is where I'm from.'"

> “You talking to me or you?” he asks. (232)

Val speaks to Ivan's internal conflict about his hometown. He hid in Florida for years because he did not want to return home as a failure when he felt he should have been a huge success. On the other hand, he is not sure he belongs anywhere else. He does not feel like he could ever separate the town and its baggage from his own identity. Ivan's greatest enemy, Resse Raynor, puts it much more cruelly. “'Jess told me you just moved back here last year,' Resse says to me while he bends down and picks up the lid off the floor and puts it back on top of the barrel of chips. 'That makes you kind of fucked up, don't you think? Far as I know, people leave here and people stay here, but they never do both'” (266). Reese's comment highlights the “otherness” of people who choose to leave. They are different because they are no longer part of the town, and Ivan's inability to sever those ties makes him unusual to the other residents of the town.

In *Affliction*, the distinction is drawn between Wade Whitehouse and his brother Rolfe, the narrator. Rolfe says that he was the first in the family to go to college and explains that, “I abandoned the family and the town of Lawford when I graduated high school—escaped from them, actually” (3). In doing so, he constructed a happy routine for himself as a high school teacher while Wade stayed behind, the alcoholic son of an alcoholic, working two jobs he hated. Rolfe is not kind in his description of his brother or his hometown. He says, “Let me say it again. I despised Wade's life. I fled the family and the town of Lawford when I was little more than a boy to avoid having to live that life” (4) Of that town, he claims:

> Lawford is one of those towns that people leave, not one that people come back to. And to make matters worse, to make it even more difficult to go

> back—which of course *no one* who has left the town in this half century wants to do—those who remain behind cling stubbornly as barnacles to the bits and shards of social rites that once invested their lives with meaning: they love bridal showers, weddings, birthdays, funerals, seasonal and national holidays, even elections days. Halloween, as well. A ridiculous holiday, and for whom, for what? It has absolutely no connection to modern life. (5)

Though Banks wrote this nineteen years before Obama made his campaign speech, the similarity of the claim that people cling to things that have meaning for them is obvious. They need to find meaning and solace somewhere. Rolfe becomes more critical when he says, “everyone with brains and ambition, it seems, everyone with the ability to live in the larger world, has gone away” (6). For Rolfe, the town of Lawford is like the corpse is to Kristeva: something that must be pushed away if one wants to keep on living. This is not to say, however, that others did not try to leave.

Jack Hewitt, like Ivan Zoschenko, thought that sports were his ticket out of town. Drafted by the Red Sox as a pitcher, he was forced to return Lawford after a torn rotator cuff ended his career. Margie Fogg says of him “'Jack's turned into one of those men who are permanently angry, I think. He used to be a sweet kid, but it's like, when he found out that he couldn't play ball anymore, he changed. He used to be so sweet,' she said. 'Now he's like everyone else'” (171). Implied in her words are that everyone in Lawford is permanently angry, most likely at the way their lives have turned out. The shoulder injury turns out to be Jack's misfortune in more ways than one, as it also means he is around for Wade to eventually murder in cold blood before Wade himself disappears. With Wade's

whereabouts unknown at the end of the novel, it is impossible to know if he actually escaped from Lawford, or merely died in the frozen wilderness. Either way, it is a bleak end for these men who failed to make a clean break.

In *Empire Falls*, Grace Roby sacrifices herself to Francine Whiting's control in order to pay for her son Miles to go to college and give him a chance to leave town. Unfortunately for the Robys, Francine tricks Miles into dropping out of college to care for his dying mother, even though that was against Grace's wishes. At one point, Miles bitterly recalls what his mother screamed at him when he came back: "*Go away, Miles. You're killing me. Can't you understand that? Your being here is killing me. Killing me*" (436). Grace gave everything she had to keep Miles from being trapped in Empire Falls, and it wasn't enough. After he too spends his life under the thumb of Francine Whiting, he vows the same will not happened to his daughter, but the only way he can do this is to physically take her away to Martha's Vineyard and keep her isolated from events in Empire Falls. It is that physical disconnection, the abjection of the hometown, that allows Tick to become free of it.

It is, perhaps, a dark view of the world, but it does also tie back to the psychoanalytical attempt to explain why people who ought to be most frightened by Rust Belt Gothic fiction turn to it. Despite the ruined landscapes, the economic desperation, the questioned masculinity, and the general sense of disappointment, there is still hope. Satirical news site *The Onion* plays off this notion in an article titled "Remains of Ancient Race of Job Creators Found in Rust Belt." Positing the Rust Belt as a recent archeological discovery, the article explains, "According to researchers, these long-forgotten people once flourished between western New York state and Illinois, erecting

highly distinctive steel and brick structures wherever they went, including many buildings thought to have held hundreds of paid workers at a time." But consistent with the site's biting satirical style, the article somewhat cruelly concludes:

> "The remaining local population has its own mythology to explain the job-creating race's disappearance," Decker said. "Legend has it that they never died out, but rather entered a state of deep slumber from which they will one day awaken, bringing increased employment with them."
>
> "And perhaps it's best to let the locals hold on to this belief," Decker added. "It's really the only thing they have left."

Despite the cynicism from many quarters, these Rust Belt Gothic novels do have an underlying theme of hope. That hope just lies in somehow getting away. It resonates with the Kristevan idea of abjection. These Rust Belt towns come to symbolically represent death for these characters, and they cannot allow the towns to be part of their definition of themselves if they want to go on. They must get away to survive.

It may seem unusual that the path to hope lies in the characters abandoning their roots, but this speaks to another societal difference between traditional Gothic and Rust Belt Gothic. The issue at hand is inheritance. In traditional Gothic, the resolution of the story often involved inheritance and wealth being returned to its rightful heir. In Rust Belt Gothic, the inheritance from the previous generation is often little more than a ruined landscape, a negative attitude toward self and society, and the promise of the eventual death everyone must face. If the balance cannot be restored there, then they have to go somewhere else to find it.

Rust Belt Gothic came into being because Gothic is a mutable genre that re-emerges during times of increased societal anxiety, and there was no shortage of anxiety while the Rust Belt was being formed. Anxieties about the ruined landscapes created by abandoned mines and shuttered factories, about the financial uncertainties caused by the lack of jobs, and about threatened masculinity due to a perceived failure to live up to social expectations all come together to form this sub-genre of Gothic literature. People who live in the Rust Belt and share some of these anxieties can turn to the fiction not simply as a means of escape, but as a way to identify and isolate their fears, and then push those fears away. But decades after the economic collapse that created the Rust Belt, the conditions have not improved. More people are going to be born and grow up in the Rust Belt, facing these same struggles, and more fiction is going to be written about these people and their problems. Only by examining the underlying anxieties and the need for readers to assuage them will we be able to properly interpret the next wave of Rust Belt Gothic Fiction and understand the real psychological purpose it serves for its audience.

Equally important, though beyond the scope of this study, is how Rust Belt Gothic might manifest itself in other media. As the genre grows and evolves, it is quite possible it will go much further than just literature. So far, *Snow Angels*, *Affliction*, and *Empire Falls* have all been made into films, with a big screen adaptation of *Back Roads* on the way. It seems likely that Rust Belt Gothic has a presence in movies and television as well. In addition, if the economic condition in the area were to change, a change in the nature or presentation of Rust Belt Gothic could follow. The novels examined here feature only male narrators; it is likely that novels written from a female perspective would reveal

additional anxieties in the Rust Belt not covered here. As is fitting a sub-genre known for mutability and adaptation, there is still much about Rust Belt Gothic to be explored.

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