

BABEȘ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY – CLUJ-NAPOCA
FACULTY OF LETTERS
THE DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF LINGUISTIC AND LITERARY STUDIES

PhD Thesis
**FEMALE NEO-GOTHIC IN 21ST CENTURY
LITERATURE**

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CLUJ-NAPOCA

2026

Keywords: neo-Gothic, pulverization, labyrinth, spectrality, female body, alterity, fragmentarism, neo-Gothic temporality, female Gothic

ABSTRACT

This research proposes a comparative analysis of contemporary neo-Gothic prose, focusing on the complete novel corpus of Australian writer Kate Morton, alongside three novels by Diane Setterfield and three by Lauren Groff. The starting point of this endeavor was a reading of Kate Morton's *The House at Riverton*, a text which, beyond its status as an international bestseller, presents a symbolic and narrative architecture that requires an in-depth critical approach. The initial intention to produce a thesis focused exclusively on Kate Morton's fictional universe was subsequently expanded, at the suggestion of the academic supervisor, into a comparative framework including two contemporary writers from different cultural contexts: Diane Setterfield, representing the British literary sphere, and Lauren Groff, an American author. The choice of contemporary women writers was a deliberate one, offering a fertile ground for investigating the mutations of classical Gothic and the ways in which it reverberates in current neo-Gothic forms.

The central aim of the research is to investigate how Gothic symbolism migrates and reconfigures itself within the neo-Gothic, through an interpretive concept specific to this study: pulverization. This concept functions as a transversal analytical instrument throughout the entire thesis, enabling the tracing of symbolic, temporal, spatial, and identity-related transformations from the Gothic to the neo-Gothic. Pulverization does not designate destruction without remainder, but rather a redistribution of meaning into fragments which, viewed together and from the appropriate perspective, recompose a whole. Through this concept, the research seeks to demonstrate that Gothic symbols are not adopted verbatim in the neo-Gothic, but are reactivated as forms of deviation, revolt, and destabilisation, bearing an energy that subverts the traditional symbolic order.

The neo-Gothic is presented in this research as a literary genre, differentiated from classical Gothic through its own system of symbols, narrative conventions, and cultural anxieties specific to postmodernity. Whereas the Gothic responded to anxieties generated by industrialization, political oppression, and religion, the neo-Gothic emerges from a troubled relationship with the body, from unresolved trauma, from the house understood as a body that

preserves and betrays, and from memory that returns in concentric waves. This differentiation does not imply a complete rupture from the Gothic tradition, but rather a reverberation: the neo-Gothic appears as a belated echo of the Gothic, carrying within it the layers of an older cultural and historical system, which it pulverizes and redistributes into new forms.

The first chapter offers a broad contextualization of the neo-Gothic genre, tracing both its theoretical origins and the evolution of critical interpretations. The main conceptions of the genre are reviewed, including Gothic postmodernism, late Gothic, and female neo-Gothic, and the fundamental theoretical contributions to the field are discussed. The concept of pulverization is introduced and positioned within this framework as an anchoring element for the neo-Gothic within a theoretically fertile context. The chapter also develops the concepts of neo-Gothic temporality, neo-Gothic space, intersubjectivity, the house, and the image, alongside an analysis of metamorphosis, anamorphosis, and metempsychosis as distinct interpretive lenses.

The critical apparatus of the research does not rely on a pre-existing unified theoretical framework but instead constructs a network of correlated theories adequate to the specificity of the neo-Gothic. Contributions from Gothic studies are brought into dialogue with theoretical perspectives from other fields: Anne Williams, with her distinction between Male Gothic and Female Gothic; Diane Long Hoeveler and the concept of victim feminism; David Punter, for the psychological and political dimension of the Gothic as a discourse of spectrality and anxiety; and Fred Botting, for the integration of the Gothic into a logic of excess and transgression. These are placed in dialogue with Derrida's concept of ontological haunting, Foucault's perspective on power, discourse, and the body, Corin Braga's theory of the archetype, Marius Conkan's concept of the portal, and Lavinia Rogojina's affect theory.

The second chapter is dedicated to the female neo-Gothic, established as a direction applicable across the three geographical spaces analyzed: Britain, Australia, and America. The evolution from classical female Gothic to postfeminist Gothic is traced, with emphasis on the zones of tension within the genre and the paradigm shifts produced by each cultural space. The third chapter develops the analysis of neo-Gothic corporeality, proceeding from the premise that writing itself becomes an experience of the Gothic, not merely a medium of representation. The female body appears as a node of convergence between genealogy, history, and trauma: in Diane Setterfield's work, the bodies of female characters are inseparable from family archives and manuscripts that preserve or distort their stories; in Kate Morton's work, the female body is

caught between the demands of the era, the traumas of war, and the ruins of aristocratic spaces; in Lauren Groff's work, the female body shapes a feminist eco-Gothic in which the body becomes the surface of inscription for the intersection of patriarchy, capitalism, and environmental crisis.

Chapters IV, V, and VI carry out the comparative analysis of the three authors, highlighting for each a specifically pulverized Gothic symbolism. In Kate Morton's work, the central symbol is the labyrinth, analyzed as a topos of thought and a narrative purgatory. The motifs of the mysterious house, the jungle-like garden, and the hidden tunnels indicate the primacy of the labyrinth in relation to past, present, and future simultaneously, and its function operates as a threshold, a decentering, and a suspension of history. Each of Morton's novels is analyzed through this interpretive grid, revealing how the protagonists traverse a path from a precarious present towards a past saturated with secrets, and how this traversal becomes decisive for their constitution as autonomous subjects.

In Diane Setterfield's work, the central symbol is anguish, analyzed as the generative principle of writing itself. The psychology of fear, the theory of the dream, the relationship between rebirth and substantialisation, alterity and intersubjectivity, as well as symbols such as water as a portal to the inferno of the senses and the Thames as an anachetype, are all examined.

In Lauren Groff's work, the central symbol is the specter and spectrality, analyzed through the interpretive framework of the neo-Gothic genre across the novels *The Monsters of Templeton*, *Arcadia*, and *Fates and Furies*.

An interpretive thread running through all the analytical chapters is that of the autonomy of female characters. These are no longer directly subordinated to patriarchal rigors, yet remain profoundly marked by the spectres of the past, and their autonomy becomes possible only through the closing of a cycle: genealogical, symbolic, or narrative. This mutation is identified as one of the significant transformations of the neo-Gothic in relation to classical Gothic, and it is sustained by the concept of pulverization: identity is not recomposed by negating fragmentation, but precisely through assuming it.

Methodologically, the research opts for a close reading approach, considered indispensable in the case of authors whose texts operate not only through narrative strategies, but also through a powerful sensory dimension that engages the reader at an affective and perceptual

level. The analysis seeks to capture not only thematic or symbolic structures, but also the way in which these novels are lived as an experience.

The research also pursues a broader aim: to demonstrate that contemporary mainstream literature, including novels with wide readership and notable public success, can be integrated into a rigorous theoretical framework without diminishing their vitality or accessibility. The aim was not to constrain these texts within a restrictive interpretive apparatus, but, on the contrary, to offer an analytical structure that opens them towards future critical readings and recovers their relevance within the field of literary research. The interpretive model built around the concept of pulverization can be extended and applied to other writings from the neo-Gothic spectrum, potentially offering the foundation for a future critical apparatus.

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