A DOMESTIC servant kills her newborn infant, the fruit of an illicit sexual liaison, and when her crime is discovered, confesses to killing an earlier child by the same man to conceal her fornication. A twelve-year-old girl chokes and batters to death the six-year-old girl who had reported her theft of some strawberries. A wealthy elderly man is bludgeoned and stabbed to death in his bed by a contract killer hired to secure an inheritance. A beautiful young woman is found dead in the Hoboken River, her body injured by either a botched abortion or a violent rape, and her killer is never identified. A seventy-year-old man shoots his twenty-three-year-old wife out of fear that she is a witch, who summons her lover by touching the kitchen sieve, and blows unseen poisons onto her husband's food, shirts, and bedclothes. Accounts of these murders, from the late seventeenth century through the mid-nineteenth, captured the American popular imagination in ways that reflected the changing cultural constructions of the crime.

"Other sins only speak; murder shrieks out," wrote playwright John Webster in 1623, in *The Duchess of Malfi* (IV. ii. 261). The act rends the community in which it takes place, calling all relationships into question—mother and infant, husband and wife, lovers, friends, strangers, and mere acquaintances—and posing troubling questions about the moral nature of humankind. Murder thus demands that a

community come to terms with the crime—confront what has happened and endeavor to explain it, in an effort to restore order to the world. In literate societies, the cultural work of coming to terms with this violent transgression takes crucial form in the crafting and reading of written narratives of the murder, the chief purpose of which is to assign meaning to the incident. As Hayden White has observed, every narrative account, even the purportedly "nonfictional," is an artificial construct, for the world does not just "present itself to perception in the form of well-made stories, with central subjects, proper beginnings, middles, and ends."[1] Any story of murder involves a fictive process, which reveals much about the mental and emotional strategies employed within a given historical culture for responding to serious transgression in its midst.

In American culture, the dominant narrative expressing and shaping the popular response to the crime of murder underwent a major transformation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. For a century after their earliest appearance in late seventeenth-century New England, printed responses to the crime tended to take the form of the execution sermon, preached shortly before the convicted criminal was put to death for his or her offense. The execution sermon was a sacred narrative which focused not on the bloody deed or the judicial process which had brought the murderer to the scaffold, but on the spiritual condition of the condemned criminal. What course of smaller sins had brought this sinner to the terrible transgression for which she or he was about to be hanged? What was her spiritual state now, and where would she spend eternity? These were the central concerns of the execution sermon. But in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries that sacred narrative was gradually replaced by a variety of secular accounts—criminal biographies and autobiographies, journalistic narratives, and, most important, printed transcripts of murder trials—which turned attention to the crime itself and its unfolding within worldly time. What was the nature of the violence; when and where had the crime taken place; what were the murderer's motives; and just how had he or she been brought to worldly justice?

Previous scholars have explained the new genre of criminal narra-

tives as an expression of "sensationalism," a degraded pursuit of the thrill of sensation for its own sake, which accompanied the emergence of a mass readership. The more people read, within this view, the more they flocked to purchase a scamy, pulp literature devoted to scenes of dramatic violence, strong emotions, illicit relationships, and other titillating transgressions. This argument works somewhat like Abraham Lincoln's reported response to a popular work on spiritualism: "Well, for the sort of people who like that sort of thing, that is about the sort of thing they would like." My own premise is that, though salvation history was losing cultural power in the late eighteenth century, the search for meaning in the face of violent transgression did not disappear with that older framework. The new secular accounts of murder endeavored to replace the sacred narrative with a new mode of coming to terms with the crime. And the extreme violence of the new accounts was not "gratuitous" in the meaningless present usage of that term; rather, it represented a significant new strategy for confronting the crime of murder.

The emerging secular literature organized the popular response to murder within a set of narrative conventions that are most usefully characterized as Gothic, the term assigned by literary historians to their contemporaneous fictional expression. The first of these conventions was *horror,* which employed inflated language and graphic treatments of violence and its aftermath in order to shock the reader into an emotional state that mingled fear with hatred and disgust. The new murder stories explicitly instructed readers to experience horror in the face of the crime, and didactically explained the precise nature of that emotional state, which typically rendered the person experiencing it speechless and unable to assign meaning to the event in question. The second convention was *mystery,* which used incomplete, fragmented, and chronologically confused narratives (influenced by murder trial reports) to impress upon readers the impossibility of achieving a full knowledge and understanding of the crime. Well before what literary historians have called the "invention" of detective fiction by Edgar Allan Poe in 1841, the nonfictional literature of murder was presenting the crime of murder as fundamentally a matter of mystery.

It was thus the peculiar nature of the Gothic narrative of murder to try *and fail* to come to terms with the shocking revelation that murder had been committed. For Gothic mystery and Gothic horror affirmed the ultimate incomprehensibility of any given crime of murder, in sharp contrast to the execution sermon's unproblematic acceptance of the nature of the act and the guilt of the condemned murderer. It was a dramatic departure from the execution sermon's formulaic demonstration that all murders were simply natural manifestations of universal depravity, and its tendency to express surprise, not that one sinner had committed this crime, but that everyone else in the community had not.

The Gothic tale of murder repeatedly and ritualistically failed to assign meaning to the crime because it sought to comprehend radical human evil within the larger intellectual context of Enlightenment liberalism, which did not recognize radical human evil. In contrast to the earlier belief in man's innate depravity, Enlightenment liberalism understood human nature as essentially good, rational, and capable of self-government. How then to explain murder? The new secular narratives routinely invoked liberal explanations of the crime: the murderer had been the victim of childhood neglect or abuse; the murderer had misapplied his powers of reason by acting upon an unfortunate "motive"; the murderer had neglected self-government and had permitted his passions (the dangerous emotions) to overwhelm his sentiments (the inborn guarantors of virtue). But again and again, such liberal explanations of the crime failed: some men and women murdered despite their good religious and moral upbringings; some murdered without any discernible motive; and some killed coolly and dispassionately. In the face of such explanatory breakdowns, the new murder narratives had ritual recourse to the Gothic conventions of the fundamental mystery of murder—its intrinsic unknowability—and its fundamental horror—the inhuman nature of the act.

The most important cultural work performed by the Gothic narrative of murder was its reconstruction of the criminal transgressor. From common sinner with whom the larger community of sinners were urged to identify in the service of their own salvation, into

moral monster from whom readers were instructed to shrink, with a sense of *horror* that confirmed their own "normalcy" in the face of the morally alien, and with a sense of *mystery* that testified to their own inability even to conceive of such an aberrant act. The new Gothic murderer—like the villain in Gothic fiction—was first and last a moral monster, between whom and the normal majority yawned an impassable gulf. The Gothic narrative of criminal transgression proved central to the modern liberal construction of the concept of criminal deviance—the view expressed by Charles Dickens that the "criminal intellect" was nothing like "the average intellect of average men" but "a horrible wonder apart." That view was eventually to shape modern social-scientific views of the criminal in such fields as psychology, sociology, criminology, and criminal law.

In its primary concern for the condemned murderer as exemplary sinner, the early New England execution sermon gravitated to murders committed under the influence of the most widely shared sins of the community, such as drunkenness, unchastity, or religious neglect. The nineteenth-century Gothic narrative also tended to focus on certain types of crime, along new lines of selectiveness. Most broadly, the new narrative sought out especially shocking or bloody murders, and cases that proved unusually resistant to full and certain resolution, for representation. In addition, certain categories of story-line lent themselves particularly well to Gothic narration. Tales of domestic murder evoked a powerful sense of horror over the crime's shocking violation of the new sentimental domesticity, and of mystery at the unusually hidden nature of murder in the private sphere. Similarly, tales of sexual murder received a seemingly disproportionate attention in nineteenth-century murder literature, due to the special possibilities they presented for horror and mystery. Each of these story-lines—the domestic and the sexual—put its own particular twist on the Gothic reconstruction of the murderer as monster.

One last category of murder lent itself with peculiar power to Gothic narration. By the early nineteenth century, legal narratives of the crime were crafting an insanity defense that reveals much about the historical relationship between the Gothic imagination and the Enlightenment liberal view of human nature. For the insanity de-

fense attributed the crime to disease, a somatic distortion of the mental faculties, thus effectively denying the evil of the primary identity by laying blame on an alien persona that had somehow invaded it. The Gothic narrative of criminal transgression proved central as well to the dominant liberal disposition of the convicted criminal deviant, namely, segregation in a penitentiary or mental hospital, institutions which hid the horrors of moral monstrosity from the sight of normalcy. For the criminal's moral otherness was deemed to require his or her full separation from normal society, within an institution which, though expressly designed for rehabilitating inmates and restoring them to society, in fact constructed impassable barriers between the normal and the abnormal. Once constructed, such institutions helped perpetuate the central Gothic conventions of evil, socially reinforcing both the horror at the criminal deviant's radical otherness, and the sense of the mysterious, hidden nature of human evil.

This book focuses on the changing cultural construction of criminal transgression, using printed accounts of murder to address the larger question of what happened to the popular understanding of human evil after the doctrine of innate depravity began to weaken in the context of Enlightenment liberalism. My aim is to shed new light on the historical significance of the Gothic imagination in constructing a set of conventions surrounding the collective response to murder—conventions that run so deep in modern liberal culture that they appear to be natural, instinctive, when in fact they are historically contingent. The Gothic imagination has proved a major factor in shaping the modern liberal concept of criminal and mental "deviance" and what should be done about it.