

Bram Stoker and The Gothic: Formations to Transformations

Catherine Wynne (editor)

Emma Somogyi, Queensland University of Technology

London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016

ISBN: 9781137465030, £80

This volume draws together a variety of perspectives on the Gothic with Bram Stoker's work as central to the genre. The reader may be forgiven for assuming this is a book largely focussed on Stoker's most notorious character, Count Dracula. However, refreshingly, in an endeavour to explore 'Stoker's centrality to the Gothic Genre' (13), his other works are drawn upon and compared and contrasted to contemporary works of fiction, thus providing a breadth and depth of an exploration of the Gothic and its central themes. The book commences with Wynne's introduction reminding the reader of the elements central to Gothic narratives – the idea of disease narrative in particular and the associated societal anxieties which arose from the dread of infection, modes of contamination, and the ensuing fear of death. Chapter One, however, takes the reader further back into the origins of the Gothic novel with a comprehensive background to the history of the assumptions and linguistic misinterpretations that occurred around the origins of the Gothic. Largely focussing on linguistic concerns, the author, Martin Arnold, succeeds in situating the background to the emergence of Gothicism as a key presence in English literature, reminding us that 'the Gothic' extends to linguistic considerations, and encompasses historical influences, literary conventions, and the more commonly discussed societal anxieties which became the inspiration for many Gothic novels.

Continuing to set the foundations and formations of the Gothic, Chapter Two by Pedersen draws connections between Gothic fiction and the realism of contemporary women's lives in a comparison of Stoker's women in *Dracula* (1897) and Wollstonecraft's *The Wrongs of Woman* (1796). Both are *fin-de-siècle* novels and explore the position of the New Woman. Pedersen's work highlights the different perspectives of the female, or 'New Woman', between the two Gothic works yet notes that with a century between them, Wollstonecraft's depiction of the strength of the new woman does not bear influence on Stoker's work which 're-inscribes an anti-progressive and paternalistic essentialism at the dawn of the 20th century' (47). Similarly, Stoker's *The Squaw* (1893) presents the female as

submissive and inferior, as discussed by Corstorphine in Chapter Three. However, this chapter focusses more on the ‘mood and themes of what we now refer to as “American Gothic”’ (49). This chapter commences by discussing the close ties Stoker has with the literary greats of the era including American Walt Whitman, and draws comparisons between Stoker’s *The Squaw* and Poe’s *The Black Cat* (1843). Corstorphine explains that both tales combine the hallmarks of the American Gothic including themes of displacement, exclusion, and ‘disruption of the dream world of national myth with the nightmares of history’ (54). The comparisons are valuable, and highlight the influence that American Gothic had on Stoker’s writings.

Chapter Four begins to move the reader from the ‘formations’ of the Gothic to the ‘transformations’ as promised in the book’s title. Crişan analyses some of the features which transform the geographical space of Transylvania into a Gothic construction, revealing that Stoker embeds the Gothic themes of the ‘supernatural, the sublime, transgression, imprisonment, and terror of the spectator’ into the fictional world of Count Dracula (64), and the fictionalised realm of Transylvania. The author raises many weighty and fascinating concepts in this chapter that are not done justice by having to reduce them to one chapter in an edited volume. Crişan introduces the reader to the Transylvania of Stoker’s *Dracula* encompassing both historical time and eternal time, a concept that bears further exploration. The overall examination of how Stoker transformed ‘some referential readings of a geographical space into a Gothic reality’ (77) is fascinating, well-articulated, and worthy of its own volume.

Chapter Five explores the ways in which property, blood and the Szgany are interrelated by the social anxieties around the notion of ‘property’ and its occupation – the occupation or invasion of one’s body and transgression of bodily boundaries, the occupied tomb, the broader notion of property in terms of the invasion and colonisation of England, and the purchase and occupation of houses (think Carfax Abbey). Bardi discusses the influence on Stoker of the late eighteenth century discourse on gypsies who were depicted as generally excessive, superstitious, unruly, and animalistic, and as itinerant were a threat to property (85), and as characters make an appearance throughout *Dracula*. The author argues that *Dracula* ‘conflates the “property” of body, blood, race, and empire to construct an erotic connection between the biology of inheritance and that of national identity’; and claims that ‘all of these elements are embodied in Dracula’s “cargo”’ (90), that is, the boxes which contain the soil of his homeland. Bardi’s argument is convincing, and well-crafted.

These themes of the transgression of personal and property boundaries, and invasion are also explored in Chapter Six in which Senf asserts that the invasion theme ‘is nuanced’ (103), and compares two different types of invasion in Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903). The author explains that Stoker’s novels are ‘a complex response to what he saw going on in his own world’ (103), and in a comparison of *The Squaw* (1893) and *Dracula*’s Quincy Morris, Senf compellingly highlights the thematic parallels of the American frontiersman, the ‘invasion’ by American tourists, and anxieties around the growing power of the USA.

Dust, death, and degeneration are introduced in Chapter Seven as Gothic tropes that arise in Stoker’s work, and Dawson convincingly shows how the role of science began to play an important part in humanity questioning what it means to be human. That is, the boundaries between human life and other organisms was shown to be not as distinct as once thought, and that the human body will degenerate into dust in the same manner as animals and plants. *Dracula* however, explains Dawson, can manipulate the air itself and can become a dust or mist to move from place to place, thus transcending ‘structural and corporeal boundaries’ (112) – another Gothic theme and anxiety of the *fin-de-siècle*.

In keeping with the volume’s goal of exploring Gothic influences on Stoker’s work, Chapter Eight examines the Victorian anxiety that ‘the mother’s sensory experiences and traumas would physically mark the unborn child’ (118). Through an examination of several of Stoker’s works, Williams shows how the trope of the ‘mother’s imprint’ informs plot, and merges with related themes of patriarchal agency, the ‘uncanny womb’, symbology of castration, the vengeful maternal gaze, and, interestingly, the Gothic trope of the severed hand. While Williams’ psychoanalytical reading initially seemed to hinder the flow of this book, it quickly became apparent thanks to Williams’ skilful textual analysis, that Stoker’s work clearly reflects these themes and anxieties, revealing to the reader a layer of complexity that they may not have previously considered in Stoker’s works.

Returning to the *fin-de-siècle* anxiety around death and violence on a global scale, Chapter Nine explores the concepts of imperial domination through aviation. This chapter marks a turn in the book in identifying the direct influences upon Stoker’s work, and Gibbons frames the aviation influence on Stoker’s work by discussing how aerial warfare instilled fear into the populace, in particular, in Stoker’s Ireland. Gibbons maintained that Stoker recognised air as the way of the future, but for Stoker, it also ‘presented its own airborne chamber of horrors’ (154). This very phrase ties together for the reader the Gothic themes that have already been discussed in the book – airborne disease, infection, and dust and

decay. This chapter is history-heavy, tying in to Stoker's work at appropriate junctures, but certainly leaves the door open for a deeper textual analysis of Stoker's work based on the ideas raised by the author.

Chapters Ten and Eleven both explore the influences on Stoker's quotidian life. In Chapter Ten, Cockin examines the influences of Ellen Terry, Pamela Colman Smith, and the somewhat occult atmosphere of the Lyceum Theatre in which Stoker worked as Business Manager. Chapter Eleven explores the relationship of Hall Caine to Stoker, and the role Caine may have played in influencing the character of Count Dracula. Both chapters provide insight for the reader into the way Stoker was perceived by his contemporaries and peers, which illuminates in particular various characterisations in some of Stoker's key stories.

Chapter Twelve is the last of the papers to examine contemporary influences on Stoker's writing and life. Wynne achieves this through drawing parallels between the experiences of both the du Maurier family and the Stoker family in the towns of Whitby and Cornwall. Locations which once were holiday getaways for both families are transformed into Gothic places through the writers drawing on family loss and loneliness, and changing the towns' atmospheres to be threatening, dangerous, and mysterious, as evidenced by, for example, Dracula's stormy arrival to the town of Whitby where Mina and Lucy had been vacationing.

Chapter Twelve segues neatly into Chapter Thirteen in which Hughes discusses the fictionalisation of Bram Stoker himself in an effort to uncover more about his character, the impact of his childhood illness, the concept of gendered submission, and multiple other speculations which abound regarding Stoker, the author. As Hughes points out, Stoker himself has become a fictionalised character, thus 'blurring the boundaries between fiction and history' (212-213), and thus ensuring the longevity of the author and his works.

This book concludes with a chapter dedicated to the art of illustrating the Gothic tale. Jef Murray explains the illustrator's processes in uncovering the essence of characters, locations, artefacts, in order to represent them accurately. Murray identifies that there are important Gothic themes for the illustrator, just as there are for the writer – romance, horror and the grotesque, religious settings, and symbolism. The author uses Stoker's *The Lady of the Shroud* (1909) to describe how his own illustrations captured the essence of the apparition, and the deliberate choices he made to Gothicise the picture by embellishing it with recognisable Gothic elements. This chapter was an interesting way to end *Bram Stoker and the Gothic: Formations to Transformations*, bringing the reader back to the fundamentals of the Gothic – the shared themes, tropes, and social anxieties that run much deeper than the

‘creepy castles and misty graveyards’ frequently associated with the term and literature of the era. This volume elucidates the richness of Gothic society, and the depth and breadth of societal knowledge and concerns, and which are deeply reflected and depicted in Bram Stoker’s body of work.