

# SGF

STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

## BOOK REVIEW

*The Gothic Condition: Terror, History and the Psyche. By David Punter. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016. 268 pages, \$125.00). ISBN 978-1-78316-821-7*

by Erica McCrystal

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***The Gothic Condition: Terror, History and the Psyche.* By David Punter. (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2016. 268 pages, \$125.00). ISBN 978-1-78316-821-7**

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As a leading specialist in Gothic studies, David Punter's works always contribute great insights and pathways for scholars of the Gothic. *The Gothic Condition: Terror, History and the Psyche* is a well-varied collection of Punter's essays and conference papers about several different areas of the Gothic condition. Throughout, Punter engages with a diverse array of textual examples—from iconic Gothic novels, such as Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, to lesser-known works, such as William Hope Hodgson's *The Night Land*—to discuss a range of topics related to the Gothic. I appreciate the variety, as it allows for consideration of how the Gothic evolves and the ways in which it moves, transcending time and space.

In his introduction, Punter discusses his most current thoughts on the Gothic condition and how "Gothic" is defined today. He assumes the reader is familiar with Gothic tropes and terminology so someone new to the field may need to become grounded in the basics before digging into *The Gothic Condition*. The ideal readers for this text are scholars of the Gothic looking into specialized areas or seeking to expand and diversify their research within Gothic studies.

The book starts with a powerful chapter titled "Spectrality: The Ghosting of Theory." In this chapter, Punter looks to find a discursive place for spectrality in criticism and theory. Punter finds that spectrality is wrapped up in the process of reading itself and theorizing about the written word. He also relates spectrality to the past, absence, and the uncanny and posits that Gothic criticism is a fitting entry point/platform for theorizing spectrality. He finds psychoanalysis, deconstruction, and postcolonialism as important theoretical perspectives with which to speak about ghosts and spectrality further. Punter's theorizing is successful in part due to his application of spectral rhetoric. Words like "crypt," "buried," and "dead" used in discussing psychoanalytic theory facilitate a repurposing of the theory toward a theory of spectrality. He uses "haunts,"

"excavation," "crypt," "apparition," "undead," and "phantom" when discussing the process of reading to effectively transform the act into a spectral encounter. This chapter is incredibly useful for theorizing the Gothic and spectrality and engaging with the language of the Gothic.

Another compelling chapter, "Types of Tyranny," establishes the contrast between liberty and tyranny in Gothic representation. The range of tyranny in different aspects of life—from the extremes of torture to everyday activities—may be found in Gothic literature. Punter also refers to tyrants as "our own monsters...for their very monstrosity can exist only as a distorted refraction of our selves" (57). This chapter turns to the readers' desires and needs and accuses the readers of contributing to, or at the very least, desiring tyranny in their lives. Individuals must then question their own inner demons and monstrosity. Punter also discusses religion, enslavement, and zombies in this chapter as he expands upon ideas of liberty and tyranny and where they exist within an individual. This chapter is useful for thinking about the relationship between tyranny and the self and the ways in which Gothic fiction can expose and exacerbate such connections.

Punter's chapters on science allow for further analysis into early and contemporary Gothic and the ways in which they provide opportunities to theorize the body alongside monstrosity and scientific development. In an engaging chapter titled "Pseudo-Science and the Creation of Monsters," Punter uses Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, and M. John Harrison's *Light* to discuss the ways in which science and monsters coexist in the Gothic novel. Punter argues that the three novels test, expand, threaten, or break down the limits of humans. He examines the different types of science that the authors include in their novels and the ways in which science is simultaneously progressive and threatening. While the Acknowledgements

## Book Reviews

section mentions that this was a symposium lecture, which would account for its brevity, I left this chapter feeling eager to hear more from Punter about the ways in which testing the body's limits can be a Gothic trope.

With another look at the body, "The Abhuman Remains of the Gothic" defines the abhuman and, beginning with Horace Walpole, describes several instances of the abhuman in Gothic fiction. Punter speaks about the abhuman along with abjection in regards to bodies. He concludes that the idea of a complete body is merely a fantasy, one that can only be fulfilled "by the excision of perfectly healthy limbs or organs" (104). This chapter is a great entry point for someone eager to engage in further areas of inquiry about the abhuman. A study that someone, if not Punter, may want to take up in conversation with this chapter would be an analysis of the abhuman in comics, films, and video games in contrast to that in narrative literature. Punter provides great insight on the abhuman in literature, and I feel his piece will be useful for expanded research, as the Gothic functions in completely different ways when a reader imagines it in contrast to how an audience views it or a player manipulates it.

I found the chapter titled "Of Monsters and Animals" one of the most exciting of the book. Punter discusses the space between the human and the animal as unstable and this "abyss" as where monsters are formed (143–4). He looks at the monster as generated from the animal within this space and argues that these spaces are everywhere and inevitable. Punter raises questions regarding power and isolation and what the monster reveals about such topics. In addition to animals, Punter touches upon cyborgs as monsters, drawing parallels between the monster that emerges from the space between the human and the animals and the monster that emerges from the human and the cyborg. He concludes in arguing, "the 'monsters' we place in the outer world are reflections, sometimes distorted, of objects in our inner world" (158). I often find Punter's greatest arguments in his conclusions of each chapter. In this space, he clearly articulates fascinating criticism that I wish would be the crux of each chapter. In the conclusion, these brilliant ideas pass by too quickly.

"Heart Lands: Contemporary Scottish Gothic" is a compelling chapter that finds Gothic tropes in contemporary Scottish literature. Punter argues that these texts employ the Gothic to make particular statements about Scotland's history. In particular, the self is very much involved with Scottish culture and heritage. No matter which trope he discusses, Punter makes a connection to the past, especially regarding oppression, terror, and lamentation. He argues that, through the Gothic, history "sifts itself down to us and provides us with the images against the background of which present action or endurance must be undertaken" (200). This chapter is thorough and illuminating. I

appreciate the focus on contemporary Gothic because it allows for recent works to collectively make a statement about how the Gothic functions in lamenting Scottish culture and history.

The chapter with the most potential for further inquiry is "Cyborgs, Borders and Stories from Virgins: Mexico and the Gothic." It begins by defining the cyborg and uses textual examples to bridge connections to fantasy and desire. Punter then shifts to discuss the United States and Mexican border and Mexican history. This chapter has some brilliant ideas, but structurally, it is quite disjointed. There are loose connections between the cyborg, fantasy, the Mexican border, Mexican history, and the Gothic, but they need to be expanded upon much further to do justice to such a big, varied subject matter. I am fascinated by the idea of these connections and what we can gather from analyzing the cyborg alongside both the current state of the Mexican border and Mexican Gothic literature, but I feel that a single chapter is much too limited. I am eager to hear how Punter would define the Mexican Gothic, and I feel that these ideas should be expanded into a monograph.

In terms of style, the individual chapters do tend to read as conference papers, and I wish that Punter would have added additional research and analysis to some of the gaps that he frequently attributes to space limitations. While the chapters individually are appropriate and ideal for a conference, this can leave the reader wanting more. Punter's frequent use of first person can also be distracting. Perhaps this is due to their original intended audience of conference attendees, but within the monograph, it tends to take away from the flow of his ideas.

Punter raises great rhetorical and analytical questions that are worthy of expanded analysis. He does not answer many of these inquiries but offers them to the reader to think about further. The rhetorical questions allow for scholars to consider further areas of research, but they also leave the manuscript feeling limited in scope. I would rather have seen Punter select fewer essays and expand them beyond their initial content, but perhaps they will encourage scholars to take up the task.

Overall, *The Gothic Condition* provides scholars of the Gothic with a great variety of critical areas of inquiry. It spans time and space to consider the ways in which the Gothic condition exists and evolves in literature, its relationship with history and science, and its usefulness in thinking about the body. Punter is a leading expert in the field, and his insight is valuable to encourage researchers to explore some of these areas to extend and develop the field further.