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STUDIES IN GOTHIC FICTION

The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft.
Ed. Xavier Aldana Reyes.
British Library, 2018. 209pp.

Review by Claire Quigley

Book Review DOI: 10.18573/sgf.56

Acceptance date: 29 June 2021



Cardiff University Press
Gwasg Prifysgol Caerdydd

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ISSN: 2156-2407



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REVIEW BY CLAIRE QUIGLEY

The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft, published last year by the British Library, offers a fresh approach to the celebrated author of Weird tales. In the introduction, editor Xavier Aldana Reyes delivers a brief but comprehensive overview of Lovecraft's work and his influence throughout the twentieth century. Aldana Reyes recognizes Lovecraft's influence on contemporary horror writers and comments with some bemusement on the author's swift rise to the status of pop-culture icon, due in large part to the commercialized success spawned by Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos. With all this attention on Lovecraft's imagined worlds of cosmic horror, Aldana Reyes proposes that the traditional Gothic themes of the writer's work have largely been overlooked. Thus, the editor offers this compilation comprising thirteen of Lovecraft's short stories as a means to rectify this issue.

The first story in the compendium is "The Alchemist" (1916), which is an early example of Gothic motifs in Lovecraft's texts. In his introduction, Aldana Reyes considers this piece to be an example of Lovecraft's juvenilia and it is easy to see why as this story certainly feels like an immature tale written by an inexperienced author. Aldana Reyes makes it clear why this story is included in this collection, as he seeks to present the Gothic influences in Lovecraft's work that will "span the entirety of his career" (xi). Unfortunately, the result is that *The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* starts on a rather weak note. "The Alchemist" is decorated with Gothic embellishments such as an imposing crumbling castle, the dread of a family curse, and the anguish of an isolated protagonist set apart from the rest of society. Yet the narrative lacks the unnerving depths usually on display in Lovecraft's fiction. I understand Aldana Reyes's reasoning for the addition of "The Alchemist," but this collection is intended for the commercial market. If this were the first story of Lovecraft's one was to encounter, I doubt the reader would feel compelled to pursue the author further.

After such a lukewarm beginning, however, the collection picks up with Lovecraft's next eerie tale "The Tomb" (1922). "The Tomb" is laden with impressions of the Gothic such as a chilling apparition in a graveyard and a mind driven to the brink of madness by unchecked obsession. This tale is imbued with a creepy atmosphere, but the narrative lacks the depths of apprehension leading to terror that sparks life into many of Lovecraft's other works; all this is soon to come in the collection.

"The Music of Erich Zann" (1922) is a welcome addition to the anthology. The protagonist opens in distress telling the reader of his time as a student of metaphysics, when boarded in a house

situated in the mysterious Rue d'Auseil. Having since moved from the property, the narrator now not only fails to locate the street on any modern or ancient map, but strangely all who he asks answer that they have never heard of such a place. The narrator then launches his tale, one in which he becomes darkly obsessed with the weird unearthly music performed by a mute violist residing in the narrator's building. This story hits numerous beats typical of Lovecraft, such as an outsider student who stumbles upon an unmentionable and cosmic horror, as well as the maddening fixation of the narrator on some otherworldly entity which eventually reveal an awfulness so incomprehensible it leaves his view of the world forever altered. Well-known for narratives that bombard the reader with an assault on the senses, in this piece Lovecraft balances the uncanniness of the Gothic with hints of another unfathomable world beyond human comprehension, all in an auditory attack of ghastly harmonies.

"The Outsider" (1926) is another worthy story in this compilation and it is within this tale that the blending of the Weird and the Gothic comes to the fore. Like "The Alchemist," "The Outsider" is rife with Gothic tropes from the story's beginning. It is a tale of psychological terror following the protagonist, his all-consuming loneliness and seclusion, who is hidden away in an impossible labyrinthine castle. The mental toll this isolation takes can be felt in the physicality of the narrator's surroundings, such as the boundless forest laden with thick fog, in the bones settled in the crypt below the grounds, and the overpowering darkness of a tower's interior staircase. All these details combine Gothic and Weird elements to produce a tale that is both gripping and haunting.

A further story appropriate for the collection is "Cool Air" (1928) which opens with the intriguing words: "you ask me to explain why I am afraid of a draught of cool air . . ." (123). Such an odd premise cannot help but impulse the reader to continue and uncover the origin of this unusual fear. This tale perfectly displays Lovecraft's uncanny ability to transform what once appeared innocent and innocuous into something sinister and full of menace. What is more, this narrative benefits from being a stand-alone tale of horror and disgust. Many of the works in this anthology are pulled from the Cthulhu Mythos, which is not a drawback by any means, but the inclusion of Lovecraft's independent stories displays the author's expansive range of fiction.

However, the collection ends on a strong text which is not only heavily steeped in Cthulhu lore but was also Lovecraft's last written work: "The Haunter of the Dark" (1936). This tale, more

than any other in the collection, succeeds best in merging Gothic staples such as a daemonic churchyard and a fearful religious cult with the inexplicable monstrous horror of Lovecraft's Weird fiction. From the beginning of this wretched tale the reader is confronted with the death of the protagonist, Robert Blake, and is told that many have tried to explain the circumstances of such a terrible occurrence as an unfortunate accident of nature. At this stage, of course, the reader certainly knows better.

Overall *The Gothic Tales of H.P. Lovecraft* is a useful addition to the vast array of collected Lovecraft fiction in circulation. The compendium is successful in presenting the Gothic influences on the author's Weird tales, yet still recognizes Lovecraft's unique position in the history of horror writing. Importantly, Aldana Reyes stresses in the introduction the fact that Lovecraft does not simply re-hash Gothic tropes wholesale. Rather these tales are presented with all their Gothic trimmings but that Lovecraftian linchpin, of overwhelming paralytic terror in the face of the impenetrable unknown, is still unmistakably present.

About the author:

Claire Quigley is a PhD candidate at the University of Sussex, United Kingdom. Her doctoral thesis examines the transformative possibilities of the Weird in contemporary fiction. She has an MA in Contemporary Literature and Culture from Birkbeck, University of London, United Kingdom, and has a BA in English with History from University College Dublin, Ireland. She was published in the first special edition of *Fantastika Journal* and delivered a variety of papers, including at the annual "Current Research in Speculative Fiction" and the "Memory Studies Association" conferences. Her research interests include the history of Weird fiction, speculative realism and the materiality of memory.