

**The Gothic Psyche: Disintegration and Growth in Nineteenth-Century English Literature.** Matthew Brennan. Columbia, South Carolina: Camden House, 1997, 169 pages. \$55.00 hardcover.

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The notion that there are psychological sub-texts to be found in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847), Robert Louis Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) is unlikely to come as a surprise to most readers, let alone critics, of these classic novels. What's distinctive about Matthew Brennan's lively study of *The Gothic Psyche: Disintegration and Growth in Nineteenth-Century English Literature* is its thorough and systematic attempt to view these fictions through the lens of Jungian theory, in a manner mutually enlightening to both literature and psychology. "Jung's psychological notions about dreams appear especially promising for illuminating symbolic aspects of the Gothic, and in turn the Gothic offers insights that validate Jung's thought," (p. 9) Brennan asserts.

Brennan begins with a chapter briefly surveying gothic elements in the work of British romantic poets Samuel Taylor Coleridge, Percy Shelley, William Wordsworth, Lord Byron, and John Keats, and he ends with a chapter on American writer Edgar Allan's Poe's 1839 story "The Fall of the House of Usher." But *The Gothic Psyche* centers upon extended readings of the four nineteenth-century British novels named above, all of which can be considered "gothic."

According to M.H. Abrams' (1988, p. 75) definition, the gothic "develops a brooding atmosphere of gloom and terror, represents events which are uncanny or macabre or melodramatically violent, and often deals with aberrant psychological states." Gothic fiction is generally considered to have begun in 1764, with British novelist Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto*, an influential outburst of spine-tingling irrationality in the midst of The Age of Reason. As gothicism subsequently evolved throughout the nineteenth century, its castles, dungeons and ghosts became ever more metaphorical. Nineteenth-century Gothic shifted inward, Brennan points out, moving from simple villains to "figures that signify inner demons" (p. 54). In contrast to the level-headed social realism of contemporaneous

writers like Jane Austen and Anthony Trollope, these heirs of "negative Romanticism" (p. 54) explored the haunted castles of the human mind and heart.

But *The Gothic Psyche* suggests that the nightmares and demons which threaten psychic destruction may also serve as guides to self-integration and regeneration. Brennan makes his fundamentally optimistic, therapeutic bias clear on page one: "the road of the unconscious leads to the palace of psychic self-knowledge and wholeness." The literature he discusses may be filled with terrifying parables of shattered identity: resurrected corpses, annihilating passions, monstrous doubles, the living dead; but as a critic who embraces Jung's "psychology of health," Brennan elects to read gothic nightmares as "cautionary tales . . . [which foster] psychic health in [their] readers" (p. 12).

Brennan marries Jungian psychology to gothic fiction in two ways. First, he applies a sequential four-step pattern of Jungian "individuation" (p. 13) to major characters in each of the novels: (1) the "realization of the *shadow*" self; (2) "the integration of the *anima* or *animus*"; (3) the appearance of "uniting symbols" which signify "the restored balance of the ego and the unconscious" (such as the *chymical marriage*, which Jung borrowed from the imagery of alchemy)<sup>1</sup>; and (4) the final phase of individuation, the "appearance of archetypes like the Wise Old Man or Magna Mater," personifying the "wholeness and unity of the psyche" (pp. 15–18). Brennan acknowledges that, in practice, the Jungian critic may "risk reductiveness" (p. 20); he is generally successful at super-imposing his Jungian template with flexibility and respect for the ambiguities and individualities of each writer's work.

In addition to applying this four-step Jungian model of individuation/integration, Brennan extends a second (and to my mind, even more interesting) interpretation: "Gothic literature replicates the situation of Jungian therapy through its narrators, reader-identification figures, and actual readers and critics" (p. 10). Embedded in each novel, Brennan argues, is a character (or characters) who are, in a metaphorical sense, Jungian analysts, telling their own stories and/or listening to the stories of others in replication of a therapeutic process which moves them toward psychic health.

This thesis accounts niftily for the peculiar narrative structure of these fictions. The nightmares of Victor Frankenstein, for example, are framed by the story of a sea captain named Robert Walton, who encounters Frankenstein and his monster en route to the North Pole and writes letters telling their story to his stay-at-home sister. The infamous love affair between Cathy and Heathcliff in *Wuthering Heights* is framed by a rather tedious tenant named Lockwood, who listens to their history of destructive passion in retrospect. Dr. Jekyll's monstrous transformation is mediated through the narration of one Mr. Utterson, a mild-mannered bachelor friend of the divisive doctor; while *Dracula* begins with the tale of a lovely lass named Lucy who succumbs all too readily to the Count's satanic seductions, and a young man named Jonathan Harker who does not.

Brennan argues that each of these frame characters is a "reader-identification figure," in whom we can see "the substratum of our own natures" (p. 57). Each one, implicitly or explicitly, heeds the "cautionary tale" contained in the central plot of

<sup>1</sup>Brennan (and his readers) would enjoy Theodore Roszak's 1995 novel *The Memoirs of Elizabeth Frankenstein* (New York: Random House), a glorious hodge-podge of alchemy and Earth Mothers, which goes to town with mythic archetypes (the "chymical marriage" is a central image in the novel).

the novel: Dr. Frankenstein's creation and rejection of his monster; Cathy and Heathcliff's refusal to grow up and get civilized; Dr. Jekyll's disastrous experiments with self-splicing; Dracula's dangerous attractions for the insufficiently individuated.

Does Brennan's thesis persuade? *The Gothic Psyche* demonstrates impressive familiarity not only with the literature under discussion, but also with secondary critical sources (there's an extensive and useful bibliography), as well as the writings of Jung and Jungians.

Standouts of the book for this critic were a number of close readings of famous fictional scenes: the discussion of a maid's narration of the moonlit (anima symbol) murder of Dr. Carew (Wise Old Man archetype) in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (p. 102), for example; or Jonathan Harker's dream descent into Dracula's castle ("because the anima . . . involves the collective unconscious, it is appropriate that Jonathan remark on the archaic contents of the room" [p. 123]). Here, thoughtful applications of Jungian concepts yield genuine insights and lively new ways of thinking about the texts. I was impressed with the ways in which *Dracula*, in particular, yields itself readily to archetype-hunting.

But the pictures of *Frankenstein*, *Wuthering Heights*, *Dr. Jekyll*, and *Dracula* which emerge from Matthew Brennan's readings — though often illuminating — finally seem to me less than fully true to the novels as I — and, I suspect, many other readers — have experienced them.

As a result of its emphasis on "reader-identification figures," much of Brennan's discussion focuses on the ordinary mortals at the periphery of the plot. We see relatively little, close-up, of Frankenstein's monster, Heathcliff, Mr. Hyde, or Dracula himself. While horror stories may have a therapeutic effect on the psyches of their readers, let's admit it: we enjoy them not as "cautionary tales," but because they scare the bejesus out of us (in the safety of our armchairs, of course).

There's a heart of darkness at the center of gothic fiction, a gravitational pull toward the irrational, that *The Gothic Psyche*, with its optimistic bias toward integration and healing, doesn't fully acknowledge. Heathcliff and Cathy's grand passion may, for example, be "monstrous, regressive . . . socially and psychologically incestuous" (p. 84) — but it has also been found to be incredibly romantic (not to mention sexy!) by generations of readers.

*The Gothic Psyche* offers welcome insights into complex and disturbing works of nineteenth-century literature, the sources of powerful monsters who still roam the byways of today's popular culture. But any wedding of a fundamentally therapeutic model to the mad forces of gothic fiction runs the risk of underestimating the peculiarly pleasurable power of the entropic undertow, the dark fascination, the persistently recurring nightmare.

### Reference

Abrams, M.H. (1988). *A glossary of literary terms* (fifth edition). New York: Holt.