

CAROL MARGARET DAVISON (ed.): Gothic Dreams and Nightmares

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The genre of Gothic fiction has had a long relationship with dreams and nightmares. The collected volume *Gothic Dreams and Nightmares* (2024), edited by Carol Margaret Davison, focuses on these developments from the 18th century until present-day Gothic media, whether film, literature, or even video games. Featuring twelve chapters, *Gothic Dreams and Nightmares* is divided into four coherent, historically defined sections. The first of these sections advances the theoretical base and sociocultural investigation of the climate of the 18th and 19th centuries and looks at the theological theories in which dreams are seen as communion with the heavens and hell, on the influence dreams had on Samuel Taylor Coleridge and his own personal writing, and on the way Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels employed dreams in their writing. To Marx and Engels, the working classes had been robbed of sleep and dreams by the advent of industrial lighting, which enabled night shifts in factories. The following sections are all conceptualized historically, starting with the 18th century and Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto: A Gothic Story* (1764), then focusing on the Victorian period and 19th century Gothic, eventually shifting the focus from literature towards film and video games. The closing chapter is an analysis of the role of dreams in the video game *Bloodborne* (2015).

According to Davison, the subject of dreams is under-represented in Gothic scholarship. Her aim, then, is to address this gap “from a variety of critical perspectives and ranging across literary forms and media,

examine the aesthetic, cultural, didactic, and ideological implications of diverse cultural treatments of its subject from the eighteenth century through to the present day” (30). This historical approach can be greatly appreciated by the readership, for the structure of the volume allows the reader to be taken on a journey across time and to gather the necessary context to understand dreams not only as narrative devices, but also as a cultural milieu in which theology, philosophy, and proto-psychology mix to create a truly remarkable experience of the sublime.

One of the re-emerging elements featured in the volume whose importance cannot be overstated is Henry Fuseli's painting *The Nightmare* (1781). It is constantly present and functions as a thread by which the chapters are bound together, a continuation of a tradition and a visual source of inspiration for the Gothic authors to explore the sublime landscape of dreams, demons, and parasomnias. The little imp, or a demon, sitting on the chest of a sleeping woman influenced many authors discussed in the volume, from Walpole through Mary Wollstonecraft to Edgar Allan Poe, and the painting made its way onto the big screen through the poster for the film *The Night Walker* (1964) by William Castle. Despite the fact that many chapters are seemingly separated from one another by time and space, this motif of the imp squatting on a woman's chest appears repeatedly. It showcases the way through which the Gothic worked with the conception of dreams from a number of perspectives, and how the visual arts had a tremendous influence over the Gothic.

But this relationship of influence is not unidirectional. In the same way that the Gothic was influenced by the visual arts, the Gothic in turn influenced other spheres, such as proto-psychological research. This dialectical feedback loop is explored in Alice Vernon's chapter on the Society for Psychological Research, which, between the years 1889 and 1892, aimed to explain the causes of hallucinations and released a census to which the respondents could freely answer. What Vernon's exploration shows is that the answers closely mimic the Gothic elements present in the stories by Poe and other authors. One of the important observations is that the census answers often describe these hallucinations as being accompanied by "enveloping white mist". This white mist might have served as an inspiration for Bram Stoker and his Count Dracula, as Stoker was almost certainly aware of the research. Tied to the previous observation is an aspect highlighted by Vernon, which is that the culture of today parallels the census in the way people often describe their nightmares as being abducted by aliens.

The closing chapter of *Gothic Dreams and Nightmares* is James Aaron Green's analysis of the video game *Bloodborne*. Compared to the rest of the edited volume, this chapter focuses on a medium that has a far shorter tradition than literature and film, yet many video games were influenced by the Gothic in a more direct fashion than it might seem at first glance. Video game series such as *Castlevania* (1986) or the *Resident Evil* series (1996) take inspiration directly from the Gothic aesthetic of cathedrals, castles, and abandoned mansions. Since *Bloodborne* wears its inspiration most proudly on its sleeve, Green examines the myriad ways this inspiration is represented in the video game, helping the reader to understand its dream-like logic. There are many dream-or nightmare-themed locations that are "real" playable locations the player can freely explore and interact with. This analysis can be read alongside one of the earlier chapters on Samuel Coleridge by Kirstin A. Mills. Both of

these analyses stress the importance of reading dreams as a semi-physical space, which can be freely traversed and used as a place of communion with higher powers.

Gothic Dreams and Nightmares is an important exploration of the myriad ways in which dreams and nightmares have entered the Gothic tradition, how they shaped this tradition and how the tradition actually shaped the understanding and representations of dreams in the broader cultural context. Davison's volume opens up a systematic inquiry into one of the most important aspects of the Gothic, yet one that, until now, has not received enough attention from Gothic scholarship. With dreams as the primary focus of the research, the Gothic opens itself up to psychoanalytic readings. Some of the chapters included rely too heavily on this reading, which makes their conclusions somewhat predictable (dreams as the representation of the repressed). This puts these chapters at odds with Davison's stated aim for the edited volume, since they focus only on the representation of dreams through a single lens. As Davison writes in the introduction: "In the case of analysing representations of dreams and nightmares in the Gothic, this includes simultaneously considering such phenomena as implied models of subjectivity in cultural productions alongside those theorised in the mental sciences, particularly as they exist in relation to contemporary and relevant philosophical and medical discourses about dreams and nightmares" (7).

This interdisciplinary approach, when applied to the analysis of dreams and nightmares in the Gothic, is the volume's biggest strength, and it solidifies the volume as one of the most comprehensive and detailed explorations of the multifaceted relationship between dreams, literature, culture, and other media.

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