

GOTHIC NATURE



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REVIEWS

BOOK REVIEWS

Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils (eds.) *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*
(London: Routledge, 2018)

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Dawn Keetley and Matthew Wynn Sivils' *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature* (2018) is a timely and welcome addition to the nascent field of ecoGothic studies. The collection is comprised of a substantial introduction from the two co-editors, entitled 'Approaches to the Ecogothic', and thirteen essays from international contributors on a diverse range of areas. These areas include everything from themes of dark and twisted Nature in the writings of such established Gothicists as Charles Brockden Brown, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman to environmental readings of slave narratives, Gothic plants, and haunted animal skins. Each of the essays, importantly, provides some valuable insight into how we might best understand and utilise the new and exciting term 'ecoGothic'. Indeed, it is important to note that Keetley and Sivils' collection is one of the few major works published so far to specifically use and engage with this term and to tackle head on what exactly it 'is' and what exactly it 'does'.

Keetley and Sivils' introduction serves as a useful and informative source for anyone interested in the ecoGothic. In its very first sentence, they offer a clear and workable—if somewhat flexible—definition of the word: 'the ecogothic is a literary mode at the intersection of environmental writing and the gothic, and it typically presupposes some kind of ecocritical lens' (2018: p.1). They usefully provide an overview of the origins and developments of the ecoGothic, briefly summarising and engaging with the main existing scholarship in the field, from Simon C. Estok's introduction of the term 'ecophobia' (meaning our 'fear', 'distrust', or 'hatred' of nonhuman Nature) in 2009 and Andrew Smith and William Hughes' landmark 2013 collection *Ecogothic*, to the guest-edited special themed issue of *Interdisciplinary Studies of Literature and the Environment* devoted to the ecoGothic in 2014. They draw attention to the

fact that the ecoGothic has been differently, if not paradoxically, interpreted in a number of ways (as a genre, repository, mode, terrain, approach, etc.) and subtly, yet persuasively maintain that it is best understood as a ‘literary mode’ (p.1) through which to interrogate the darker underside of our relationship to and representations of the natural world. They highlight some of the angles that might be most valuably assumed when reading culture with an ecoGothic lens, focusing in on three areas: ‘Ecogothic Time and Space’, ‘The Racial Ecogothic’, and ‘The Nonhuman Ecogothic’. In the first, they draw attention to the Gothic’s fixation on both time and space, with its emphasis on the past and on setting, and expand this into the *ecoGothic* by signalling the interesting relationship between our inherited sins of the past, such as slavery, and what we might call that ‘classic’ setting of the American Gothic: the howling wilderness. In the second, they emphasise the ‘predatory ecosystems’ (p.7) of humankind, which are often expressed through racial hierarchy and oppression and argue that the very soil of America has been ‘fed by the blood of violent oppression’ (p.8). In the third, they contextualise the ecoGothic within the nonhuman turn, as a part of a move to decentre humans, view them as merely one of many species, and acknowledge them as intricately enmeshed with the nonhuman world. The choice to concentrate on one period, location, and medium—nineteenth-century American literature—is a definite strength. It invites a greater sense of specificity, which is sometimes lost when discussions of ecohorror and the ecoGothic are overwhelmed by the sheer enormity of the subject of humankind’s propensity to demonise or ‘Gothicise’ Nature, and allows textured layers of an image to build with each essayist’s contribution. The focus on the nineteenth century is significant, too, not only because it is a fascinating time in terms of developing ideas about Nature, but because it dissuades contemporary readers from the common myth that environmentally destructive human avarice is a purely recent phenomenon. As the editors contend, ‘the dominant American relationship with Nature, whatever else it might have been, has *always* been unsettling’ (p.1, emphasis added).

The thirteen essays are quite diverse in focus. In nearly every single case, however, the contributors have devoted careful and considerable thought to how exactly they are interpreting and using the term ‘ecoGothic’ and it is this element—which has been missing from previous collections—that is the real forte of *Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature*, allowing for a wonderful sense of dialogue and debate between the contributors. Each essay includes at least one close reading of a literary text, which further contributes to a sense of cohesion and provides useful examples of ways in which ‘approaches to the ecogothic’ might

be practically applied. The collection is fittingly opened by Tom J. Hillard, who first penned the term ‘Gothic nature’ (2009: p. 685), with an essay on Charles Brockden Brown. He argues that the ecoGothic is useful when deployed as a ‘praxis’ (p. 22)—as a ‘way of examining a text’ rather than as a strictly defined genre—and emphasises the need to examine what he terms ‘Gothic effects’ with ‘an eye toward understanding how they register concerns related to environment or ecology in the broadest senses’ (pp. 22-23). He argues eloquently for the ways in which such approaches, which often involve ‘break[ing] down the human/nature divide’ (p. 23), can expose texts to new and enlightening readings – and goes on to demonstrate this with his engaging analysis of *Edgar Huntley*. It is a strong collection of essays overall, but other particular standouts include Jimmy L. Bryan Jr.’s atmospheric piece on buffalo extinction and the clash of the modern and natural world, Kate Huber’s Derridean reading of Edgar Allan Poe’s animals and the sinister sides of ecophilia, and Jericho Williams’ case study of an American slave narrative as a key illustration of the ways in which societal hierarchies can have frightening and tangible impacts on our visions of the environment. Matthew Wynn Sivils provides an excellent overview of the nineteenth-century vegetal Gothic with his essay on the uncanny mundaneness of plants, Jennifer Schell makes a compelling case for the examination of what she terms ‘ecogothic extinction fiction’, and Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock—in perhaps the most concretely ecocritical entry—makes intriguing connections between Timothy Morton’s so-called ‘hyperobjects’ and the growing penchant in contemporary popular culture for environmentally themed apocalypses.

Perhaps unavoidably in such a milestone collection, there is some slight repetition throughout and there are some inconsistencies between essays on how the ecoGothic is defined. Indeed, switching between the ecoGothic as an ‘approach’, ‘story’, ‘framework’, ‘genre’, ‘mode’, and all-round general descriptor is at times disorienting. However, as the ecoGothic is newly staking its claim in literary studies, such repetition is useful in challenging and nuancing understanding, while the lack of imposed uniformity when it comes to precise definitions is arguably a liberating and provocative acknowledgement of the fact there is still room for debate and discussion as this term evolves in the critical lexicon. The remit of the ecoGothic are perhaps occasionally stretched too far, particularly in the one or two instances where it is appropriated in deconstructions of non-‘natural’, clearly humanmade spaces. Additionally, it would have been interesting to see some discussion of the sometime twin and definite cousin of the ecoGothic, ecohorror, which is a term surprisingly absent throughout.

Ecogothic in Nineteenth-Century American Literature is a highly valuable introduction and contribution to the increasing body of research at the cross-section of environmental and Gothic studies. It illustrates some of the ways in which the ecoGothic can be used, as Liz Hutter states in her essay in the collection, as a means through which we can ‘participate’ and ‘wrestle’ with the question of ‘how to understand our shifting relations to the human and nonhuman environments in which we dwell’ (p. 110). It provides a number of insightful close readings of various literature through an ecoGothic lens, whilst interlacing several arresting comparisons with contemporary narratives. This important intervention in the ecoGothic will no doubt enliven and inspire a wealth of new debates, discussions, and disseminations.

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