

occlusion, a darkening, so that our attempts fully to interpret 'Otherness' might be seen as what they are, namely as a series of tries at bringing under control that which continually eludes, that fleeing content which is the subject of the Gothic, the subject of the postcolonial.

David Punter
University of Bristol

The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic: Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature by Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet (Farnham and Burlington: Ashgate, 2010), ISBN 978-1-4094-0056-1, 163 pp, \$89.95 hbk.

As David Punter reminded us recently in his tribute to Allan Lloyd-Smith on the IGA website, Gothic Studies is a new discipline, one that was not inevitable twenty-five years ago. Professor Monnet's book is both an example of the sophistication the discipline has achieved, and an explanation of how it has reached this point.

In 1930, when Grant Wood painted the popular image that is the cover art for Monnet's study, its title, *American Gothic*, seemed a comic, oxymoronic yoking of incompatible terms. Monnet's introductory chapter traces the evolution of the term 'American Gothic' in criticism to the present, then loops back to Woods's painting to show how Gothic theory can, indeed, illuminate this ambiguous painting. She then introduces Gordon Parks's photograph of an African American woman holding a mop and boom, also titled *American Gothic* (1942), which signifies on Wood's painting. The dialog of these two images establishes the importance of race and gender, the twin subjects of her study, in American Gothic.

This opening is witty, stimulating, and informative. A seminar on the American Gothic could spend a profitable first meeting discussing the critical history Monnet provides in her introduction.

Monnet's own contribution to the discourse of Gothic begins by discounting its emotional impact on its audience: no sophisticated reader of Gothic fiction is really badly frightened, and we all become sophisticated very quickly. Monnet's interest, rather, is in the questions of judgment raised by the Gothic, and in the ways 'nineteenth-century American writers adapted the gothic to explore political and cultural dilemmas' (18). Gothic writers often maneuver readers into situations where the judgment is required but forestalled by conflicting values or narratives – a situation Monnet defines through the rhetorical figure of paradiastole and Lyotard's notion of the differend. This frustration of judgment is apparent in Brown's *Wieland*, where every character is handicapped in some way in interpreting the narrative in which she or he acts.

In the fiction of Edgar Allan Poe (subject of Chapter One) the reader is forced to sense moral issues that the usually crazed narrators cannot, in order to make sense of the stories. As Monnet's reading of 'The Masque of the Red Death' and 'William Wilson' demonstrates, *conscience* is the unacknowledged presence that we must recognize. But what moral insight or appeal to conscience does the Southerner Poe offer about slavery, the great political and ethical question of his era? Though Poe sometimes has been seen as a Southern apologist, Monnet's nuanced reading of several tales, including 'Hop Frog' and 'The Fall of the House of Usher' contests this perception. Both stories encode language of slave rebellion, and reveal 'abolitionist assumptions' (50). While Poe may have employed racial stereotypes in

his occasional portrayal of African Americans (as in 'the Gold Bug'), he was an opponent of the institution of slavery, Monnet concludes.

Hawthorne's *The Marble Faun* (in Chapter Two) is a challenging text for a discussion of American racial conflict, for the obvious reasons of its European setting and its notorious introduction, a stumbling block for many readers and critics. Hawthorne's lament that America had 'no deep and gloomy wrong' is outrageous, written when guerilla warfare over slavery in Kansas and Nebraska was sounding the prelude to the great tragedy of the Civil War. But is it Hawthorne's voice we are hearing? Monnet believes that this voice is fictionalized, and like Poe's narrators, not to be trusted. *The Marble Faun* is, in her view, the most Gothic of Hawthorne's work because of the issues of judgment it raises. She turns away from the opposed pair of sensual Miriam and excruciatingly prissy Hilda, subject of unending critical discussion, toward Donatello, who is, after all, referenced in the title. Donatello is described as childlike, innocent, passionate, and so on, exactly the language used by racial apologists to describe slaves. Hawthorne's faun thus becomes a stand-in for the American issues of slavery and race.

In moving from Hawthorne to Melville in her Chapter Three, Monnet shifts from race to gender, and reads *Pierre* through the lens of contemporary queer theory. She applies the same approach to Henry James and Charlotte Perkins Gilman in Chapter Four. (It may strike some readers that the discussion in these chapters could be played backward with similar insight, reading Poe and *The Marble Faun* for gender themes, and *Pierre*, *The Turn of the Screw*, and 'The Yellow Wallpaper' for racial issues.) *Pierre* is a queer novel not because Melville or his hero is (necessarily) homosexual, but because his desire, and that of other characters, is ambiguous. The novel is about this elusiveness, a demonstration that people are incapable of understanding their own desires and motives.

The Turn of the Screw and 'The Yellow Wallpaper' are an unusual pairing, and a challenging task, especially considering the length of the dialogue on James's novella. Monnet sees both works as queer because they encode secret same-sex friendships, and because they both involve ghosts and (as with Poe) unreliable narrators.

Combining elements from both traditions of the classical debate over *The Turn of the Screw*, Monnet sees the governess as unreliable and the ghosts as real. Her emphasis is less on the governess than on the children and their secret relationship with Jessel and Quint, Miles's relationship with his schoolmates, and the narrator's with Douglas. James 'flirts' with the reader, using sexually charged language, to suggest what he never explicitly says, and shifts responsibility for erotic meaning to the reader. Monnet places the charged and evasive language of the novella in the context of the Oscar Wilde scandal and trial.

In a provocative reading of 'The Yellow Wallpaper,' Monnet sees an open possibility that the woman in the wallpaper is a ghost, raising the issue of the room as a place of past imprisonment of women. The story's queer Gothic turn begins when the narrator begins concealing her relationship with the woman in the wallpaper not only from John, but from the reader.

This book displays thorough and impressive knowledge of the texts and of relevant criticism, and cultural background. It is critically sophisticated yet accessible, and a model of elegant clarity. Any scholar of American Gothic should know and will profit from Monnet's fine study.

Charles L. Crow
Bowling Green State University (Emeritus)