

Justin D. Edwards

Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic

Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2003. Pp. 186. \$34.95

Reviewed by Eric Daffron

Over the last several years, the field of gothic literature has enjoyed a veritable renaissance. Indeed, book-length studies of early gothic literature, new university courses, and even international conferences have made the gothic a fascinating and diverse field of literary study. *Gothic Passages: Racial Ambiguity and the American Gothic* by Justin D. Edwards is a strong addition to this field. Well-written and insightful, *Gothic Passages* traces the cultural connections between the gothic and race in nineteenth-century American literature. According to the preface, "The rhetoric of terror, deformity, degeneration, and monstrosity was used by racial 'scientists' to mark the essential differences between blackness and whiteness to justify white supremacy and to discourage any potential merger of the two races" (xii). Turning from the preface to the introduction, Edwards outlines the stakes of his study and justifies its historical parameters. Particularly illuminating is his discussion of personal identity, including the ambiguity of racial identity, which Edwards puts at the center of the American gothic tradition.

Part One of *Gothic Passages*, "Creating a Self in the Antebellum Gothic Narrative," begins with a chapter on Poe's *Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym*. This chapter demonstrates how contemporary theories of miscegenation and racial degeneration inform Poe's gothic exploration of racial hybridity. For Poe, racial hybridity can subvert oppressive racial distinctions, but it can also incite horror. Edwards extends this discussion of hybridity in a chapter on Melville's "gothic travel narrative," *Benito Cereno*, which unwittingly articulates the very racist rhetoric that it critiques. Making strategic use of Freud's essay on "The Uncanny," this chapter illustrates how the racial hybrid, both familiar and alien, "became a blank page on which to inscribe the gothic fears of racial difference and miscegenation in antebellum America" (25). The themes of passing that permeate Part One of *Gothic Passages* receive fuller treatment in the section's final chapter on William and Ellen Craft's *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom*. Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of performativity and Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection, Edwards explores the benefits of gender and racial fluidity to freedom-bound slaves as well as the anxieties of identity crises engendered by those very performances.

Part Two of *Gothic Passages*, "Exploring Identity in Postbellum Gothic Discourse," begins with Frances E. W. Harper's *Iola Leroy*. Arguing that the novel challenges contemporary Darwinian theories of race, the chapter explains how

the novel's hybrid discursive forms reinforce themes of racial ambiguity and passing that upset normative social structures. The next chapter, on William Dean Howells's *An Imperative Duty*, broadens that discussion of racial ambiguity to consider what constitutes whiteness, an indeterminate and malleable category in 1890s America. Focusing on a character's painful discovery of her African-American bloodlines, the chapter ultimately links the definition of whiteness to issues of national identity. The final chapter, "The Haunted House behind the Cedars," brings together many of the thematic threads of the volume. Invoking such gothic conventions as doubles, haunted houses, and vampires, the chapter investigates the instability of racial identity in the work of Charles W. Chesnutt. According to Edwards, Chesnutt counters racist convictions with "the exceptional body: the body that confounds hermeneutic notions of selfhood and rational conceptions of identity based on binary logic" (109).

Gothic Passages concludes with an epilogue on "Twentieth-Century Gothicism and Racial Ambiguity." Though short, the epilogue suggestively charts the literary history of racial ambiguity in the twentieth century. In a closing meditation on Faulkner's *Light in August*, Edwards reiterates one of the central points of his volume: "identity is not what one is but what one passes for—a vision of identity that has often been articulated in gothic terms" (114). Edwards convincingly proves this point in a volume that, though compact, covers considerable ground. Moreover, Edwards does an admirable job of balancing complex theoretical discussions with detailed literary analysis. All in all, *Gothic Passages* not only encourages us to revisit the gothic themes of nineteenth-century American literature but also inspires us to reevaluate the intertwined literary and cultural histories of gothicism and race.

Monica Borg and R. K. R. Thornton, eds.
Ernest S. Dowson: Collected Shorter Fiction
Birmingham, UK: Birmingham University Press, 2003. Pp. 162. US \$17.50
Reviewed by Arnd Bohm

It will not detract from the care and effort that have gone into this edition to see it as a labor of love. The English author Ernest Dowson (1867–1900) is virtually forgotten today, except for one or two poems in anthologies and bits that linger in the air, notably the haunting verse "They are not long, the days of wine and roses." Indeed they were not for Dowson, who seems to have had many reasons to be unhappy; one biographer laconically notes that he was killed by alcohol. Dowson's main success came through his poetry. He eked out a meager living with translations and with a small body of prose, including the nine short pieces collected here.