

*Emily Dickinson's Gothic: Goblin with a Gauge.* By Daneen Wardrop (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1996, xvii + 225 pp., notes, biblio., index)

The gothic has acquired respect among academics in recent years thanks to the rise of genre studies and other critical approaches geared to the particular rhetorical strategies of popular fiction. Yet Wardrop's treatment of Dickinson is original in that she extends the gothic--conventionally defined by prose fiction--to poetry, and the result is surprisingly coherent and convincing. This is something of an achievement since the gothic is a notoriously imprecise genre, though the reason that Wardrop can produce such consistent readings is because she focuses on a conveniently narrow definition of the gothic, i.e., as a genre of "hesitation" written by women and for women. This is perhaps both the strength and the weakness of the book, since the neatness of her argument is paid for by a systematic vagueness about the term "gothic," which she uses synonymously with Todorov's "fantastic" and Freud's "uncanny." Nevertheless, her use of Helène Cixous' reading of Freud to propose a psycholinguistic model of the gothic works well for Dickinson, and she supplements her discussion of themes like entrapment and epistemological hesitation with thoughtful observations about dissociation and gothic syntax.

The chapters are structured according to "female gothic" themes such as the haunted house, the fraught wedding, the threat of rape, doubling (seeing double), and the void (seeing nothing). The most intriguing chapter is the final one, where Wardrop focuses on the linguistic and aesthetic particularities of the gothic. Her argument here is two-fold: that the gothic is the most readerly, and at the same time, the most deconstructive of genres, since it is the most conscious of its textual effects on readers,

while being aware of the fact that the worlds it describes--more than in any other genre--exist only as textual effects. Yet, the strength of Wardrop's approach is that she never allows Dickinson's poetry to evaporate into a gothic phantasmagoria of trace and uncertainty; instead, she insists on the cultural and historical context of Dickinson's use of the gothic as an aesthetic strategy. As women's lives were inscribed in narratives of confinement and marginalization, so their activities as writers and readers registered their recognition of and resistance to the dangers and constraints determining their existence. Wardrop's work represents an important contribution to Dickinson scholarship by bringing together historical issues with generic influences often overlooked by critics.

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