
BOOK REVIEWS

Susan J. Navarette. *The Shape of Fear: Horror and the Fin de Siècle Culture of Decadence*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1998. 314p.

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Susan J. Navarette's *The Shape of Fear* is an innovative and engaging work that explores the fascination with both language and the body in Decadent literature and, specifically, in *fin de siècle* horror stories. Not just an analysis of genre, Navarette's study explores society and discourse during the *fin de siècle* in order to contextualize the horror stories as cultural artifacts.

Navarette establishes the discursive concerns with degeneration that typify the *fin de siècle* by examining Decadent literary publications, contemporary artwork, and the writings of mid- to late-nineteenth-century philosophers, linguists, and scientists. Within this context, Navarette discusses the literary content of the horror stories and their use of language—their linguistic and, therefore, physical structure. As she explains in her introduction, “*The Shape of Fear* attempts to construct a poetic based upon underlying structural principles that engender both meaning and horror” (6). Navarette reconstructs a reciprocal relation between structure (linguistic/physical) and culture that influenced Decadent literature in general and the horror stories in particular.

In chapters 2–4, Navarette convincingly constructs a cultural discourse of degeneration and decay by examining “horror stories in which the human body is treated as a deceptive text” (6). In chapter 2, she uses the artwork of Aubrey Beardsley, scientific discussions, and medical representations of the human fetus to contextualize Walter de la Mare's “A. B. O.” The tale, about an aborted male fetus reanimated, creates a sense of instability, enabling Navarette to represent “A.B.O.,” culturally and stylistically, as part of the “*fin de siècle mentalité*” (109). In chapter 3, Navarette examines Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, reading this tale as a subversion of Victorian cultural codes. Navarette supplies cultural evidence—reflecting her painstaking research—to develop the codes of *ars moriendi* and the cult of the child. That Miles at his death is not sentimentalized, but is rather demonized as a child who communes with evil spirits, destroys conventions and becomes a source of horror. James' theme and his “dash-driven” language (131) places *The Turn of the Screw* in the Decadent camp.

Navarette considers Vernon Lee's "The Doll" in chapter 4. Characterizing Lee as an "elitist author" (141) with "self-contradictory attitudes" (145), Navarette undertakes a biographical discussion. However, in promoting Lee beyond the attention given to the male non-canonical writers in her study, Navarette risks appearing to *need* to justify Lee's inclusion. Moreover, her focus on the horror story is lost. Despite this diffuse focus, Navarette presents a thorough analysis of the cultural significance of puppets, statues, effigies, and marionettes. This was the strength of the chapter. Equally successful is Navarette's contention that the burning of the doll is Lee's denunciation of the Mary cult and its influence on the role of the Victorian domestic angel.

Chapters 5 and 6 on Arthur Machen and Joseph Conrad, respectively, constitute the second section of the book, in which language itself is treated as "an organic body poised to revert to a primitive condition" (6). Navarette establishes this context by introducing the scientific discussion of protoplasm, popularized by Huxley as "*the physical basis of life*" (182), and then by placing Machen's "The Great God Pan" within it. As Navarette astutely notes, his "elliptical style" (199) does not so much tell the story as invite the reader to fill in the blanks. She argues that this text embodies the protoplasmic nature of language: it dissolves and decays until "the integrity of the narrative structure" (190) is lost.

In characterizing the reader's struggle to react to the horror of language itself, Navarette discusses the psychological elements of horror. Her very necessary consideration of Kristeva's "abject," Freud's "uncanny," and Todorov's contributions, makes Navarette's reader wonder why these important sources were not previously acknowledged. Admittedly, the fears associated with language in "The Great God Pan" especially develop these psychological aspects, but the language and horror in *all* of the stories invites an earlier discussion.

The final chapter on Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* lacks the extensive focus on cultural context that, to varying degrees, was part of the preceding chapters. At times, this chapter reads a little too much as a separate essay. Nevertheless, Navarette carefully considers this text, with both its assumed "origins" as a Gothic romance and as a *fin de siècle* horror story. Her analysis of Conrad's elliptical style reveals that language "is itself degenerate, devoid of 'any kind of sense'" (217). She contends that Conrad joins his Decadent contemporaries, for the text partakes clearly of their trope that language is inadequate to express meaning (220). Ultimate meaning of "the horror" eludes both Marlow and the reader.

After reading *The Shape of Fear*, one is left with an appreciation of both Navarette's analysis of a complex era and its texts, and her extensive cultural research. Despite the troublesome aspects mentioned above, Navarette's book is a

coherent discussion of fascinating works that reflect on a chaotic literary period.

