

William Hughes, *Key Concepts in the Gothic*
(Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018)

William Hughes's *Key Concepts in the Gothic* is a comprehensive glossary that functions as an introduction to gothic studies and as an indispensable resource for scholars. The work defines complex concepts in accessible ways, whether one is curious about specific elements within the mode or more general critical theories. Non-academics and experts alike will find plenty to explore; unusual terms such as 'Candygothic' (a theory which attempts to position the Gothic in 'a culture of excess', by examining the frequent transgression of social and moral boundaries in a landscape of relatively unmoderated desire and consumption) are listed alongside more widely recognisable academic terms such as 'Postcolonial Gothic', which addresses the impact of imperialism on the mode, and 'Sensibility', an important characteristic in early gothic literature (p. 42). However, even seemingly straightforward concepts gain nuance as their literary functionality, as well as their broader existential implications, are illuminated. Perhaps most notably in terms of the work's goal and methodology, the definitions included in this text are, moreover, designed to encourage deeper exploration and advanced cross referencing. Authoritative definitions fully and comprehensively outline key terms, while also allowing 'connections to be made' between related critical issues, such as the rise of ecocriticism or the politics of gender, and within a broader narrative of gothic scholarship (p. 2).

Key Concepts comprises three sections. The first is an A-Z list of terms, starting with 'Abbey' and ending with 'Zombie', which serves as a vital dictionary of gothic elements. This quick-access section is both educational and entertaining, and perhaps the most useful aspect of this glossary is the extensive cross-referencing resource, which Hughes includes via highlighted key terms within individual entries. For example, the entry for 'Mirror' acknowledges the biblical origins of the word and connects it to parallel concepts such as 'Portraiture', as well as illustrating the socio-historical, psychological, and metaphysical implications of the term in a gothic context, such as those connected with the transitory nature of mirror images. This strategy of emphasising particular words within individual entries encourages the reader to explore connections between terms that might not otherwise be obvious, inviting the reader to see, for example, how the elements of Romanticism that are essential to eco-Gothic intersect with the development of the female Gothic, the use of the sublime in descriptions of landscapes, and our contemporary appreciation of ecological disasters and climate change. While substantial and detailed, however, the work is not overly

dense, and the definitions are as straightforward as they are critically comprehensive and erudite.

The next section of *Key Concepts*, titled ‘Theories of Gothic’, takes a slightly different approach to the topic, and lists major gothic theories and subcategories from ‘Colonial and Postcolonial Gothic’ to ‘Theological and Sectarian Perspectives’. The short essays in this second section – roughly four or five paragraphs each – are not cross referenced with the A-Z glossary but do significantly advance the conversation begun in the previous section. Having established the important terminology in earlier pages, entries in ‘Theories of the Gothic’ unpack critical approaches to the mode, which form the foundational basis for most academic engagements and gothic criticisms. For example, one section examines the application of psychoanalysis (and particularly Sigmund Freud’s and Julia Kristeva’s theories) to gothic literature, incorporating previously discussed definitions into a more expansive view of their critical impact. Providing a nuanced overview of the Gothic’s position as an area of scholarly focus, this section will probably be the most useful for aspiring researchers, as it breaks down and contextualises foundational arguments, while also providing avenues for further exploration, including an in-depth bibliography of suggested secondary readings for each entry.

The final section, ‘Fifteen Key Works of Gothic Fiction’, features the biographical backgrounds and brief plot summaries of a series of representative gothic authors and texts, from Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) to John Ajvide Lindqvist’s *Handling the Undead* (2005). These texts are identified as ‘key’ because of their cultural impact and the comprehensiveness with which they engage the mode, and Hughes undertakes a concise yet pertinent exploration of the ways in which these works have furthered the development of the gothic tradition in foundational and innovative ways. Authors such as Stephen King and Poppy Z. Brite are famous for their myriad contributions to the Gothic, but Hughes analyses *Carrie* (1974) and *Swamp Foetus* (1993) specifically because these texts illuminate key concepts such as heroinism or regional identity, and they further advance the creative range of the genre without being derivative. In this section, readers can see the previous definitions applied in full, and begin their own critical and cultural examination of important gothic texts.

As is true throughout *Key Concepts of the Gothic*, the range of works included reflects the myriad rewards of studying the Gothic. Walpole and Mary Shelley are discussed alongside Angela Carter and Anne Rice, and the scope and complexity of the gothic mode

across time and place is clearly demonstrated. Hughes's *Key Concepts of the Gothic* offers an incredibly useful starting point for advanced research projects, and is also an informative examination of the diverse elements that make up the mode, proving itself a helpful companion for gothic readers of all backgrounds and interests.

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