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Telling Stories and Deploying Diegetic Folklore: A Short Incursion into Folk Gothic in Literature and Cinema

Keetley, Dawn. Folk Gothic. of Elements in the Gothic. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2024, pp. 78. ISBN: 9781009467810 (Hardback). https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009160902

Part of Cambridge Elements, a series of books dedicated to exploring different aspects of the Gothic, David Keetley's concise yet complex *Folk Gothic* is a key study in recent Gothic studies and an enjoyable read for anyone interested in Gothic fiction and cinema. Focusing on the delineation of Folk Gothic as a distinct genre, and exploring its various ramifications in literature and cinema, Keetley proposes a theory that defines Folk Gothic not only as a relevant object of academic study but also as a cultural artefact that permeates popular culture and literature alike. The central claim is that Folk Gothic shifts the focus from anthropocentric storytelling to non-human agencies such as objects or landscape. Furthermore, Keetley argues that the temporal and spatial dimensions act as shaping forces, highlighting the non-human enactments of ritual and emerging as core elements of Folk Gothic. Essentially, Keetley provides a critical framework that challenges human-centred narratives and emphasises the importance of *things* as drivers of terror.

The book offers a valuable insight into the storytelling practices associated with the generic category of Folk Gothic and the elements which distinguish these stories from

other genres, such as folk horror. Drawing on narratological studies, Keetley delves into the essence of Folk Gothic and argues that such generic label should be treated as a distinct category. Keetley's study is not only a valuable tool for further critical incursions into the fascinating field of Folk Gothic, but also an enjoyable text for readers of any age interested in learning more about folk horror and Folk Gothic.

The introductory chapter, entitled *Folk Gothic*, is a fascinating foray into the cultural history of the genre, and ultimately aims to analyse both the similarities and the differences between folk horror and Folk Gothic. Such an endeavour is a welcome one, given the conceptual confusion that can arise. Much of the introductory chapter is devoted to exploring the modifier 'folk', emphasising that "Folk horror and Folk Gothic are specifically designed through their *weaving of folklore as anachronism into and as a critical part of the diegesis*" (Keetley 2023, 2). Keetley goes on to establish the figure of the monster as "the definite characteristic of horror" (Keetley 2023, 6), arguing that it functions as the embodiment of transgression, and also mentions "bodily threat, shock and violence" (Keetley 2023, 9) as defining features of this genre. On the other hand, Keetley argues, "Folk Gothic is defined by particular temporal and spatial relations that serve to shape non-human stories; these stories tilt towards land and objects and a consequent loosening of anthropocentrism" (Keetley 2023, 9–10). Keetley goes on to address temporality as another divergent element of Folk Gothic, suggesting that such narratives abandon linearity and are "predicated on recursive time" (Keetley 2023, 10).

Spatiality, Keetley argues, also functions as a differentiating dimension. In Folk Gothic narratives, the presence of non-human spaces and landscapes leads to "the vertiginous realisation of being already trapped—of circling, returning-in a very particular place" (Keetley 2023, 11). Another significant structuring element is the ritual, which "often serves to crystallise the ways in which characters find themselves in a recursive time and an entrapping place, both of which accrue a power that overwhelms human choice and will" (Keetley 2023, 11). A detailed study of Algernon Blackwood's *Ancient Sorceries* (1908) shows how rituals can be a driving force, shaping the story by creating a non-human presence that controls the narrative. Another key element of these narratives is the centrality of objects or things, reanimated and recast "as 'things' that exert an autonomous meaning and power (...) that overwhelms individual human agency and embeds it in less visible forms of non-human agency" (Keetley 2023, 14). If folk horror thrives on gore, repulsion and violence, Folk Gothic embeds fear as its main affect: "agency is immanent in the landscape and in folkloric 'things' and in the uncanny power of interwoven inherited ritual and tradition—all of which foreground inexorably repetitive patterns over human lives and communities" (Keetley 2023, 16).

The next section, *From Horror to Folk Gothic*, is a practical chapter that applies the theoretical issues discussed earlier to six films with the aim of highlighting the differences and similarities between folk horror and Folk gothic, arguing that the main distinguishing factor is "is the gradual displacement of humans and human agency in the Folk Gothic" (Keetley 2023, 17), an idea that echoes earlier assertions about the Folk Gothic and its distancing from anthropocentric plots, a kind of depersonalisation

that relegates human agency to the background, reinforced by an emphasis on objects as the locus of terror. *The Descent*, *The Green Inferno* and *Midsommar* are analysed through the lens of folk horror, focusing on the elements that evoke ontological and spatial transgressions and involve the monstrous, choosing to centralise *Midsommar* as a prime example of folk horror. In a comparative effort, Keetley moves away from 'pure' folk horror to focus on *The Ritual*, which is explored as an exemplary film that blends folk horror and Folk Gothic. The study of Mary Lambert's *Pet Sematary* (1983), adapted from Stephen King's popular novel, is another example of a film production that blends folk horror and Folk Gothic. Of great significance is the emphasis on spatial transgression and the visual representation of boundaries—paths, roads, barriers. At the same time, Keetley aptly argues, the film successfully blends folk horror and Folk Gothic, the latter emphasising how the land functions as a powerful entity. The section concludes with an analysis of a more recent film, *In the Earth* (2021), which Keetley interprets as the epitome of Folk Gothic cinema, arguing that it "it peels away human folklore—the stories we tell, the patterns we seek—and discloses their rootedness in the non-human" (Keetley 2023, 32).

The next chapter, *Folk Gothic Things*, focuses on the things and artefacts that form the skeleton of folk horror and Folk Gothic. Again, Keetley's keen attention to conceptual clarification shines through: he clearly articulates the difference between artefacts and things, "the first marks the human effort to make artefacts of things and the second marks the tendency of things to dodge that effort, to escape their provenance s artefacts, to shake off their artefact-ness" (Keetley 2023, 37).

The following part, *Folk Gothic's Place*, is an incursion into the spatial dimension of Folk Gothic and the importance of geographical location and environment in these stories. In Keetley's words, "In the Folk Gothic, the place of the agentic, determining and entrapping Gothic meets the subordinated place of the folkloric process (…) In Folk Gothic, the impersonal intrudes into the human, exerting its own indifferent, re-iterative agency" (Keetley 2023, 49). Keetley uses close reading strategies to explore Alan Garner's 1967 novel *The Owl Service* and its television adaptation, as well as Lee Haven Jones' film *The Feast* (2021). In this way, Keetley ensures that the reader understands how theories can be applied to texts and films. In addition, Keetley includes numerous references to the ecological Gothic or ecoGothic, with *The Owl Service* and *The Feast* as starting points. Of particular importance is the extensive commentary on the television adaptation of *The Owl Service*, in which Keetley explores in great detail the intricate framing of Folk Gothic through the interweaving of non-human agencies and human presence, even mentioning ideas related to gendered anthropocentrism.

The occasional inclusion of figures and screenshots further enhances the reading process by making it more visually pleasing. The analysis of *The Feast* adds another layer of complexity to the study, with an emphasis on the spatial setting, such as the house, the valley and the land. Keetley includes many references to films and fictional texts to illustrate his point, which ensures that the book has a wider impact and scope. As more film productions and literary texts appear, the relevance of such a study

becomes even more urgent. The book's impact extends beyond its scope, becoming a successful tool for stimulating interest in the Folk Gothic, which inevitably leads to a better understanding of this particular branch of Gothic studies.

Although not a comprehensive study of Folk Gothic, this concise yet complex study is valuable for at least three reasons. Firstly, it sets out to outline the generic category of Folk Gothic as a distinct genre and to clarify confusing terminology. Secondly, it could be a valuable tool for further research into Folk Gothic and its many ramifications and manifestations across interdisciplinary platforms, for example in various literary texts as well as popular culture. Finally, the book is an engaging study of Folk Gothic that will appeal to both specialist and non-specialist readers and will be a fascinating addition to the understanding of a genre that is becoming increasingly popular.