

Book Review: L. Kerr Dunn, *Mysterious Medicine: The Doctor-Scientist Tales of Hawthorne and Poe*, (Kent, Ohio: Kent State UP, 2016), ISBN-13: 978-1606352724

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L. Kerr Dunn's *Mysterious Medicine: The Doctor-Scientist Tales of Hawthorne and Poe* continues the tradition of the health humanities, specifically the interdisciplinary study of literature and medicine. In this text, the latest title from the Kent State University Press's "Literature and Medicine" series, Dunn presents an anthology of medically-themed tales: nine short stories of Nathaniel Hawthorne's as well as nine short stories and a sonnet by Edgar Allan Poe.

Yet the book is not merely a collection of tales by Hawthorne and Poe: by grouping these authors' doctor-scientist tales and considering them in their historical context, the anthology makes a case for their relevance to ongoing discussions in the medical humanities. Dunn asserts that these works "establish Hawthorne and Poe as precursors to the health humanities movement", as the selected doctor-scientist stories "provide evidence that the arts and humanities offer unique methods of exploring the social, cultural, political, and personal forces that affect the way we suffer and heal" (p. 3). Echoing the larger purposes of the medical humanities, Dunn stresses that "stories remind us that while science can teach us how a disease affects a body, narratives, nonfiction and fiction, can teach us how a person experiences an illness" (p. 9). By situating the selected texts within the larger medical, cultural, and historical backdrops of the nineteenth century, and providing specific prompts for each tale, Dunn largely accomplishes her aim. Overall, *Mysterious Medicine* presents a useful text for Dunn's intended audience of healthcare professionals, medical students and students of the medical humanities.

In arguing that Romanticism, including the works of pessimistic figures such as Hawthorne and Poe, challenged the epistemology and practice of a science seemingly divorced from

humanistic concerns, Dunn allies the goals of nineteenth-century Romanticism and the current movement toward narrative health care. She states:

For the Romantics, truth-seeking required both reason and intuition, science and the imagination. Today, leaders of the health humanities and narrative movements make a similar case, arguing that arts and humanities research, including narrative health care, should be seen as a complement to evidence-based medicine because it can enrich our understanding of patient's needs and improve their outcomes. (p. 3)

By identifying features of American medicine prevalent during the lifetime of Hawthorne and Poe, Dunn reinforces her argument. She describes the evolution of the medical profession, noting the nineteenth-century competition between “regular” trained allopathic doctors and “irregular” folk healers and homeopathic practitioners. Furthermore, she notes the number of pseudosciences that gained popularity during this period, chiefly mesmerism, physiognomy, and phrenology. Acknowledging the fears of premature burial and grave robbing, Dunn stresses the chilling tendency of a number of the period's physicians to prefer dissection to treatment—in effect, to view patients as more valuable dead than alive.

Dunn provides a rationale for the anthology's contents, stating her primary focus on tales that include the character of a doctor-scientist, even when their appearance is brief. In her introduction to each entry, she insightfully contextualizes the piece within the larger historical, cultural, and biomedical context of its publication. This often includes contemporary critical responses to the work in question; for example, Poe's comments on a number of Hawthorne's stories are featured.

Dunn's introduction is bookended by a series of “discussion questions” after each story, illustrating the anthology's intended use as an educational text. Dunn's prompts are broad in scope and encompass a diverse array of topics: medical ethics, abuses of power, aging, epidemics, competing views of illness and medical practice and the nature of healing, among

others. She draws on particular details and aspects of these texts to develop similar themes in healthcare; by identifying textual features such as point of view, narrator reliability, and the presence or absence of clinical (scientific or “objective”) language, she invites deeper textual analysis of the stories themselves. While Poe’s and Hawthorne’s works illuminate the anxieties of their own time, they invite analysis of current issues in clinical practice and biomedical research.

The anthology’s overall portrayal of physicians is varied, ranging from the ridicule of healthcare professionals in “The System of Doctor Tarr and Professor Fether”, the lack of ethics and accountability in “The Haunted Quack”, “The Birthmark”, and “Rappaccini’s Daughter”, to the positively depicted and empathetic physicians found in “Lady Eleanore’s Mantle” and “Mesmeric Revelation”. Other stories display doctor-scientists in a more ambiguous light. In “Bernice”, doctor’s tools become an instrument of harm, while in “The Fall of the House of Usher”, the family physician flees the scene.

Although the collected stories achieve Dunn’s aims, several of the selected texts appear out of place in *Mysterious Medicine*. “Mesmerism: A Revelation” is likely included due to its status as one of Poe’s three mesmerism tales, but its medical features only serve to frame the esoteric philosophical discussion which constitutes the focus of the text. Similarly, “Some Words with a Mummy” may underscore the necessity of cultural competence and criticize historical “mummy unwrapping parties”, but the whimsy of the tale appears to lack translatability into current medical concerns. While the cover description of *Mysterious Medicine* mentions “gothic elements” in many of these stories, any discussion of genre is absent from the text. Provided that Poe and Hawthorne are key authors of the nineteenth-century American Gothic, it is clear that consideration of the anthology as Gothic literature would further understanding of these particular works, as well as potentially expand the role of the Gothic within the medical humanities.

Ultimately, these minor issues do not overshadow Dunn’s primary goal: to establish Hawthorne and Poe as forerunners to the health humanities movement. The uniqueness of this text as a medically themed collection of Gothic tales makes it a useful tool for expanding

discussions of a wide variety of literary, scientific and ethical topics. Throughout *Mysterious Medicine*, L. Kerr Dunn invites consideration of the fantastic consequences of scientific progress that preclude the synthesis of reason and imagination and casts an observant, even critical eye on current trends in scientific research and medical practice.