

Spiritualism, Science and Atavism

In the Victorian era, Gothic fiction had ceased to be a dominant literary genre. However, the Gothic tropes used earlier in the eighteenth century in texts such as Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* were transported and interwoven into many late-nineteenth century narratives. These tropes included psychological and physical terror; mystery and the supernatural; madness, doubling, and heredity curses.

The gloomy atmosphere and persistent melodrama present in Dickens' *Bleak House* and *Oliver Twist*, exemplifies the transference of Gothic components into an urban, modern setting. The Victorian Gothic [1] moves away from the familiar themes of Gothic fiction - ruined castles, helpless heroines, and evil villains - to situate the tropes of the supernatural and the uncanny within a recognisable environment. This brings a sense of verisimilitude to the narrative, and thereby renders the Gothic features of the text all the more disturbing.

Image not found

A couple with a young female spirit  [2]

Photograph created to support Spiritualism

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Spiritualism

'Supernatural' meant many things in the nineteenth century. The difficulty in defining what the term meant exactly is what made it so appealing, as individuals could use the idea of the supernatural in support of different hoaxes that promoted 'unexplained' phenomena. Spiritualism; the belief that the dead can communicate with the living, was one such popular fad that swept throughout Europe and America in the 1850s. Due to its indefinable nature, different interpretations of the supernatural could allow spiritualists to believe in ghostly presences and sceptics to explain the phenomena as psychological. Supernatural events such as table-rapping, automatic writing and full-body materialisation of spirits were construed as new forms of nature which had previously been overlooked.

The Victorian era saw the abandonment of conventional religion. In the search for meaning, people were prepared to suspend reason. Many Victorians, including the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, actively believed in Spiritualism.

The Influence of Science and The Theory of Atavism

Scientific discourses on mental science, anthropology, and human behaviour appeared to merge with the fictional texts of Victorian Gothic literature. In 1859, Darwin published *Origin of Species*. A hugely

influential text, Darwin's theory promoted the idea that all organisms - humans included- had evolved from primitive forms. The insertion of humans beings into this biological continuum meant that, for Darwin, humans were part of nature rather than above it. Many thought Darwin's theory undermined the Christian explanation of human origins, as these claims meant that the world could not have been created in seven days.

The theory of atavism arose alongside the popularisation of evolutionary theory. Providing a counter argument to Darwin's theory, atavism promoted the fear of regression. This was the idea that, if all humans had evolved from primitive forms, then we could potentially return to this basic state, behave like immoral animals, and succumb to primitive urges. Atavistic behaviour was therefore associated with criminality, as it represented transgressions such as violence and murder which shattered the class-conditioned, moral framework governing Victorian standards of behaviour.

The Italian scientist Cesare Lombroso was the central figure in the promotion of the theory of atavism. He endorsed the use of physiognomy, a now defunct scientific theory which claimed that atavistic behaviour was identifiable through the examination of individual features. Lombroso believed in the 'born criminal', claiming that criminals could be identified by their appearance, particularly by the size of their skulls.

Read more

For an example of the components of Gothic fiction at work in a text read Charlotte Barrett's partner essay: 'Gothic Elements in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*' [3]

Go to the library section and find:

- Ann Radcliffe's *Mysteries of Udolpho* [4] to see how eighteenth-century Gothic fiction differs greatly from the Victorian version.
- Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* [5] presents a parody of Gothic fiction and helpless heroines. The text mentions several Gothic novels, including those by Radcliffe.
- Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* [6] transports the Gothic to the desolate Yorkshire Moors and features supernatural occurrences and a Byronic hero in the character of the villainous Heathcliff.
- Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* [7] demonstrates the use of Gothic tropes in Victorian fiction.

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