

Victorian Gothic: An Introduction

In the time of early Victorian technology, steam-trains and the electric telegraph, many writers retreated into a backward-looking world of sentiment, chivalry and terror, often modelled on the Medieval Gothic of Ann Radcliffe and Walter Scott. The results can be seen in Tennyson's fairy poems of the early 1830s, Charlotte Brontë hiding guilty secrets in the Gothic towers of Thornfield in *Jane Eyre* (1847), and the way Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (1842) cruelly reconstructs the torture-chambers of the Spanish Inquisition.

Poe's Gothic world was imported from Europe, but there was by now plenty of past to exploit in America. Nathaniel Hawthorne re-imagines ancestral New England as a place of frowning grey elders, Black Magic and Puritan guilt. In 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835) a young man living in Salem in the 1690s goes out into the forest at midnight to find a Witches' Sabbath in full swing, to which most if not all of his grey-headed respectable neighbours have turned up. Hawthorne shows how admirably Gothic can focus without synthesis the light and dark sides of human nature. This use of the double recurs in many Gothic works, for example Dante Gabriel Rossetti's agonising artwork, 'How They Met Themselves' (1860-64), in which halves of split personalities confront one another. Stevenson uses Gothic doubling in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), where the middle-aged, highly moral Doctor proves no match for his cynical, youthful and violent other self. Oscar Wilde doubled his hero in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), where an immortal young aesthete goes about the dark parts of town with impunity, while his double, in the form of an increasingly grotesque work of art hidden in an attic, does his suffering for him. In Ambrose Bierce's 'An Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge' (1890), the double life of the Confederate saboteur is short and sharp. In his dream world he thinks he escapes the hangman's noose and returns to his family. In our world this is a fantasy, indulged and then abruptly curtailed as he drops through the air to his death.

Stevenson, Wilde and Bierce use realism to ground their stories, but Victorian Gothic likes to mix it with 'impossible things', as in the nonsense writings of Carroll and Lear. A favourite quotation in Victorian ghost-stories is Hamlet's 'There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy.' M. R. James, an accomplished scholar and academic in his day-job, very fond of this quotation, plants half-forgotten demons in cellars and dusty tomes, suggesting that men of learning, like Dr Jekyll, should be careful what they wish for, or at least search for. James is particularly good at coming up with new variants on that staple of popular superstition, the curse, as in his signature story, 'Casting the Runes'.

'The past is not dead, it is not even past.' This familiar quotation from William Faulkner can be applied not just to curses, but to the legion of demons, suicides, zombies and blood-drinkers which writers of Victorian Gothic drag from dusty tombs or lairs. The vampire makes a spectacular come-back. Originally based in Germany, the legend shifts further East to the Balkans, apparently a more plausible domicile for such creatures in the nineteenth century. The vampire is often gender-switched too, as with the eponymous heroine of J. Sheridan Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872) or Mary Elizabeth Braddon's terminally ill but eternally living 'The Good Lady Ducayne' (1896). The point of the vampire is of course to introduce some notion the exchange of bodily fluids, 'slippery blisses' (Keats) that cannot at this time be mentioned in wholesome

fiction. With suggestive blood transfusion come other sexual symbols from the deep past, like the medieval legend of Vlad the Impaler which inspires Dracula, with its body-piercing stakes, or the stone rapists in Edith Nesbit's story 'Man-Size in Marble' (1896), two statues of brutal Norman knights which come alive at Halloween and stomp from the church to their former home in which a young couple are honeymooning. 'Atavism', fear of regression to an earlier, less civilised state ? the knights, we are told, belong back in 'Catholic times' ? was a fear Victorian Gothic regularly played on.

Some of the best Gothic writing, like Nesbit's story, or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's very influential *The Yellow Wallpaper* (1892), deals with violation of domestic space. If women's lives are confined to the home, they are perhaps more likely to tune into sad feminine afterlives still housebound after death. The American writer Mary E. Wilkins, a prolific writer of good ghost stories, has a particularly poignant one, 'The Lost Ghost', in which a confused and shivering wraith-child is looking for her mother ? for any warm, living mother.

About as domestic as you can get is the setting of Madelene Yale Wynne's 'The Little Room' (1895) in which a 'little room' in a New England farmhouse regularly morphs into a china closet. Intriguingly some people see it as one, some as the other, a girl remembers a peacock design all her life that is invisible to others, and family arguments grow out of the uncertainty. Something profound but abstruse is being said by Wynne about the nature of perception and memory, and the story's gentle but firm ambivalence is clearly its point. This is Margaret Oliphant's theme too in her lovely rite-of-passage story, 'The Library Window' (1896). Here the heroine, like Lewis Carroll's Alice, creates dream visions through the looking-glass window she can see across the street. But there is no window. Or so the old people tell her. Oliphant calls it is a tale of 'seen and unseen', of reality and appearance. Just one little boy in the story's long Scottish summer twilight sees what the girl sees: 'yon windy yonder in the library that is nae windy.' He puts it well.

Not all Victorian Gothic packs its ambiguity into phantom rooms, or behind liminal windows and doors. Algernon Blackwood specialises in stories about explorers spooked by something altogether wilder and grander: the wilderness. 'The Willows' (1908) is about the unbearable swishing of trees on a canoe holiday down the Danube, while 'The Wendigo' (1910) takes us to Northern Ontario where an exhausted Kanuck tracker is snapped up by a vengeful Algonquian Demon, twenty-five feet high. The spirits of newly annexed territory in this great age of European colonisation often hit back like this, establishing a late-Victorian sub-form, 'Imperial Gothic.' This gains ground after the occupation of Egypt in 1882, which brought a flood of reanimated mummies and other tomb furniture onto the literary market. Conan Doyle has a wonderful tall story of an Oxford undergraduate who, lacking social skills, makes up for it by keeping a mummy in his room. The mummy is periodically brought to life by its owner, when it does service as a kind of hit-man, persecuting other undergraduates. Such ghostly flotsam of Empire is often seen as a 'reverse colonisation' of the coloniser by the colonised. The extreme example is Ayesha, H. Rider Haggard's *femme fatale*, in *She* (1887), who dreams of taking over the male-dominated British Empire from her fastness in Sub-Saharan Africa.

In an age of increasing religious uncertainty, spiritualistic experiment and imperial fears, Gothic provided a safe space for both ancient demons and modern psychological anxiety. Writers were able to privilege mystery over explanation, ambiguity over what Keats called 'irritable reaching after fact and reason', capturing the dark side of the Victorian soul in all its energetic and self-revealing doubt.

References and further Victorian Gothic texts to explore:

Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835)

E. A. Poe, 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839), 'The Pit and the Pendulum' (1842), 'Annabel Lee', 'For Annie' (poems)

Charles Dickens, 'The Signal-Man' (1861)

J. Sheridan Le Fanu, 'Authentic Narrative of the Ghost of a Hand' in *The House by the Churchyard* (1861), 'Green Tea' (1872), *Carmilla* (1872)

Amelia B. Edwards, 'The Phantom Coach' (1864)
Mary Elizabeth Braddon, 'The Shadow in the Corner' (1879), 'The Good Lady Ducayne' (1896)
H. Rider Haggard, *She* (1885)
Robert Louis Stevenson, 'The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde' (1886)
Oscar Wilde, 'The Canterville Ghost' (1887), *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891)
Thomas Hardy, 'The Withered Arm' (1888), 'Barbara of the House of Grebe' (1893)
Ambrose Bierce, 'Incident at Owl Creek Bridge' (1890), 'The Eyes of the Panther' (1897)
Bram Stoker, 'The Judge's House' (1891)
Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Lot No 249' (1892)
Charlotte Perkins Gilman, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892)
Madelene Yale Wynne, 'The Little Room' (1895)
Margaret Oliphant, 'The Library Window' (1896)
Edith Nesbit, 'Man-Size in Marble' (1896)
Mary E. Wilkins Freeman, 'The Shadows on the Wall' (1903), 'The Lost Ghost' (1903)
M. R. James, 'O Whistle and I'll Come to you, my Lad', 'Casting the Runes', 'Lost Hearts' (all published 1904)
H. G. Wells, 'The Door in the Wall' (1906)
Algernon Blackwood, 'The Willows' (1908) and 'The Wendigo' (1910)

Source URL (modified on 03/25/2019 - 10:40): <http://writersinspire.org/content/victorian-gothic-introduction>