

Is Victorian Speculative Fiction a flight from the real? An analysis beyond Fantasy, Supernatural and the Gothic

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ABSTRACT: Victorian Gothic literature reflects the history and the various changes taking place in the English society. According to Davison (2009), the term “Gothic” is used to describe a particular type of architecture that is characterized as barbaric, obscure and excess. Later the term was applied to literature. It gained momentum in the eighteenth-century England and was used to build “up images of medievalism- of gloomy, labyrinthine castles replete with secret inquisitional chambers and long buried family secrets” and connoting “the Specters of Britain’s primitive, superstitious, corrupt and tyrannical Catholic past.”

Bowen (2008) talks of the sublime in Gothic literature that was meant to “shock [the reader] out of the limits of [their] everyday lives with the possibility of things beyond reason and explanations.” However, this sublime in Gothic literature is metaphorical because there are transgressions in it. It challenges the boundaries of personal and national identity. The contemporary social concerns are explored through the complex nature of human psyche. The setting, the castle, the uncanny, the supernaturalism, death, fear, dreams and nightmares has a deep social meaning that exhibit “anxieties about racial and social degeneration” prevalent in the Victorian society.

This article examines Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, R.L. Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* that demonstrate the Gothic representations in Victorian speculative fiction. These gothic novels scrutinize and critique different social and cultural structures present in the then Victorian society. They question the legitimacy of power vested in aristocratic males and the church. Identity also becomes interrelated to the political and social concerns.

KEYWORDS: *Victorian Gothic, Speculative Fiction, Fantasy, Real, Supernatural, Identity.*

INTRODUCTION

One of the dominant areas of the Victorian speculative fiction is Fantasy, Supernatural and the Gothic. During the Victorian period the idea of "Gothic darkness" was associated with a sense of terror, fear and anxieties about religious obscurantism. This was because of the two great upheavals taking place in European history – the Industrial Revolution and the French Revolution. The impact of these two events on Victorian England was the creation of the working class and the rise of the French power which symbolized foreignness and all that was terrible, wild and irrational. Carlyle's *The French Revolution: A History* (1837) and Hobsbawm's *Industry and Empire: From 1750 to the Present Day* (1969) are eminent works that highlight the influence of the two revolutions on British thought and politics and the socio-economic transformations that took place as a consequence. This in turn affects the themes and tone of Victorian speculative fiction which reflects the anxieties about the degradation of human life and the natural world. Therefore, the idea of the gothic in

Victorian literature is both a reflection on and a reaction to all these historical anxieties.

The Victorian speculative fiction features creatures and beings that embody the societal fears and the consequences of British imperialism. These figures can be seen as representations of the unknown, foreign, or the unchecked scientific progress. It explores the dual nature of human beings reflecting Victorian concerns about identity, morality and the blurred lines between good and evil. This genre is characterized by its emphasis on the supernatural, the mysterious and the grotesque reflecting the darker aspects of Victorian culture and society.

Fred Botting (2014:1-6) comments that the gothic signifies “the writing of excess.” It is that which transgresses “the bounds of reality and possibility.” This paper scrutinizes some significant texts that challenge this viewpoint and show that the gothic representations in Victorian speculative fiction are not essentially subversive and their disorders and transgressions serve to explore the highly constructed order of “national reality” underlying these texts. The gothic novels analyzed in this essay examine and critique different social and cultural structures present in society. They question the legitimacy of power vested in aristocratic males and the church. Identity becomes interrelated to the political and social concerns. The late eighteenth century underwent a transition from the old feudal order to a modern capitalist economy and so identity formation and identity crisis became symbolic of the national crisis that took place because of the French Revolution.

The first text that is analyzed is Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847) which explores the tension between the conflicting ideas and feelings in such a way that it does not become a gothic novel in the conventional sense of the term. The plot is complex and falls into three sections that work out the theme of thwarted passion, revenge and final reconciliation between the

two generations of a family. The presence of gothic elements in the story needs an exploration of three factors – the narrative role of Nelly Dean, the passions shared between Heathcliff and first-generation Catherine and the presence of ghosts. Nelly symbolizes and represents domestic order and rationality. She upholds the bourgeois family virtues and tries to establish a norm that excludes those who threaten the notion of domestic harmony. This explains the fact that a gothic narrative such as *Wuthering Heights* conceals an un-accommodated language of rebellion. This is seen in the character portrayal of Heathcliff as a vampire, a “daemonic figure” who is described by Nelly as “an evil beast” and “a goblin.” She regards him as an outsider and also emphasizes his otherness. This shows her inability to understand the relationship that is shared between Heathcliff and Catherine.

Both Heathcliff and Catherine are rebels. Heathcliff’s character presents a gothic ambivalence as he functions both as a bourgeois and an anti-bourgeois figure. After Catherine’s death, Heathcliff becomes malicious which indicates the viciousness of a materialistic society. The contradiction lies in the difference between the characters of Heathcliff and Nelly. Heathcliff turns into a monstrous figure and represents the cruelty of an economic system which contrasts the bourgeois world that Nelly supports. Hence, he has no fixed place within its biological and economic system.

The story examines the tensions between order and disorder which is dominant to the gothic tradition. The novel concludes with the ghosts of Heathcliff and Catherine haunting the moor signifying a culture’s inability to accept them. The occurrence of supernaturalism underlines the limitations of modern class prejudices and the conventional morality that is used as a tool of oppression. They become timeless spirits who act as a constant reminder of the limitations and drawbacks of the bourgeois culture

of the high Victorian society.

Rena-Dozier (2010: 757-775) explores the gothic elements in the novel and its significance in the context of nineteenth-century literary history. She argues that *Wuthering Heights* is a quintessential gothic novel that challenges traditional notions of love, family and social class. She identifies gothic elements such as the atmospheric setting, complex characters and the themes of love, revenge and morality which contribute to the novel's dark and introspective tone. Dozier applies psychoanalytic criticism to the novel, exploring the character's motivations and emotions that reveal the complex psychological dynamics at play.

Wuthering Heights questions issues on class, gender and money which are pertinent factors that cropped up with the growth and development of the mid-nineteenth century industrial society in Britain. It pictures the impossible reconciliation between agricultural life and capitalism. The story is realistic in setting and visionary in theme as it challenges the materialistic, class-ridden structure of the society of 1847. The narrative also stresses on the need of understanding the role of identity which is essential in realizing the social change. This becomes an issue which is taken up by Charlotte Bronte in her novel *Jane Eyre* which is discussed in the next part of this article.

Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847) deals with the issues of identity, race, class and gender which play a vital role in the novel. It reflects the socio-economic conditions of the time. The text is characterized by an unusual intensity, constantly moving from Jane's progress in life to the inner pilgrimage of her spiritual life and both meeting in the final union with Rochester. Louis James in his book *The Victorian Novel* (2006:160) comments that, "uniting the actual domestic life and trials of a governess with the Byronic figure of Rochester and the mysteries of Thornfield Hall, the novel was the first work of fiction to use Gothic conventions

to give imaginative expression to the emotional needs of a ‘real’ woman.” Ellen Moers in *Literary Women* (1976:90) commented that, *Jane Eyre* became a seminal work in the development of what she called the “Feminine Gothic” which created a basis for the Sensation Novel of the 1860s.

The character of Rochester’s “mad” wife Bertha Mason who is brought back from Jamaica and is kept locked up in the attic is clearly a gothic figure in the story. She represents the repressed identity of women in the middle-class Victorian household. Her identity is also taken to represent the rejection of the racial “other” who is considered as inferior, immoral, savage and uncivilized within the imperial system. She becomes the external embodiment in the narrative that Rochester and Jane hold within them. Thus, the novel’s use of the gothic is far deeper. The text brings out Jane’s struggle for social and economic visibility. Instead of becoming a slave to Rochester, Jane insists on becoming a missionary and preaching liberty to women enslaved in harems. Jane’s fear of oppression is given voice through the language of enslavement. Gambring (2013: 1-11) argues that the gothic elements in the novel are not merely decorative but rather serve to illuminate the protagonist’s experiences and emotions as well as provide a social commentary. It allows for an exploration of Jane’s emotions, desires and fears and Mr. Rochester’s complex and often contradictory nature.

Jane Eyre exhibits the cruel hierarchical class system present in Victorian England. Through the character portrayal of Jane, the novel portrays the cracks in this system. Jane’s ambiguous class status becomes apparent from the opening chapter itself. A poor orphan living with relatives where she feels alienated from the rest of the family. Jane’s dearth of money leaves her at the mercy of the Reed’s for her sustenance. Jane’s secret reading of Bewick’s *History of British Birds* on a window seat and drawing up the

curtain for privacy is her response to the hostile environment that she experiences in the Reed family. It is an attempt on her part to escape the oppressive atmosphere of the house. Even the book that she reads reflects her sense of isolation and unhappiness. Bewick's book is full of gothic illustrations like demons dancing, skeletons and mysterious happenings which show that Jane's imagination is constructed by the gothic and she will later link Bertha with vampirism. Bewick's book contains tales of horror which fascinates Jane and this too reflects her position within the Reed household.

The novel also explores cultural ownership which is based on class and gender factors. The scene in which John Reed takes the book from Jane and throws it hard at her claiming, "I'll teach you to rummage my book-shelves for they are mine" (Chapter I, 9) once again shows Jane's position in the Reed house leading her to become a governess later on in the story. The injustice done and her isolation are further developed when Jane is locked up in the red-room after she attacks Reed. She is dragged away to the red-room resisting her captors like a "rebel-slave." This emphasizes the kind of tyranny she undergoes because of her class status and the corruption and oppression of the upper classes. This is the point where Jane and Bertha become parallel figures. They both experience isolation and are both locked up. Bertha represents a world of rebellion and sexual freedom becoming the other, described as "thick and dark hair", "savage face", "the black eyebrows" and "bloodshot eyes." She is associated with racial otherness, insanity and sexual promiscuity. She represents that which the culture is unwilling to accept and therefore is forced to demonize. Jane too remains an outsider recalling "I was a discord in Gateshead Hall; I was like nobody there" and was looked upon as "a heterogeneous thing, opposed to them in temperament, in capacity, in propensities; a useless thing" (Chapter II, 13).

The novel also interrogates the role and position of governesses in Victorian England. The society cruelly maintained the boundaries between the governesses and the upper-class families by barring marriages between the two groups and trying to desexualize governesses who were often blamed of carrying a dangerous sexuality into the family. They were thought to introduce a kind of moral impurity into the household. This is the situation of Diana and Mary Rivers the well-educated daughters of upper-class parents. Having fallen on hard times they are treated with less regard as the family cook by their employers. Even Jane, before she becomes Rochester's wife has to demonstrate her suitability based on class. This presents the ambiguities of the class system that was widespread at that time.

The novel employs images of race to bring out and develop the tensions between irrationality and rationality that is moral, sexual and cultural. The character of Bertha projects the dangers of female confinement within marriage. Jane approves of her secondary position in comparison to Rochester whom she refers to as "master" and believing that "wealth, caste and custom" separate both of them. Jane becomes anxious when Rochester presents her with new clothes which appeared to her having "a most ghostly shimmer" (Chapter XXV, 240). She becomes aware that her identity will become compromised and she too will become insubstantial and ghost-like. This also reveals the psychological tensions in Jane's mind.

In *Jane Eyre* both dreams and visions along with reason have a validity that provides an access to the inner occurrences of both Jane's and Rochester's psyche. Throughout the story Jane is portrayed as a "fairy" and she describes herself as "a tiny phantom, half fairy and half imp." Her dreams have a prophetic character suggesting her supernatural ability to predict her future with Rochester. Here is witnessed a mixing of realism and fantasy

in the novel.

Both *Wuthering Heights* and *Jane Eyre* provide an avenue for engagement with another strange world conceived of as a reservoir of intensity and irrationality with a kind of foreignness and the binary opposition between domestic and foreign. The inner life and foreignness provide an opening on to history, in this case the European nationalist revolutions of 1848.

The gothic form from 1790 onwards showed a growing concern with the internalization of evil which acquires a close proximity to the self. This takes the form of the double or the divided consciousness. These inner narratives can be explained both psychologically and socially as in the following novels discussed below. For Freud, the double suggests that the self is haunted by the repressed feelings which threaten to disrupt the commonplace notions of everyday reality. The demonization of the particular types of behaviour also made visible the political views of a text. The 1790s was a period in which the fears of and enthusiasm for revolutionary ideas influenced the British gothic. Robert Louis Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) questions the ownership of self. The confusion of typical gothic roles refers to the anxieties concerning possible moral, social and psychological degeneration of the time. The plot focuses on fears raised by the evolutionary theory and questions whether humans have evolved from the savagery of apes and if the cultured Jekyll can return to become the "ape-like" Hyde.

The story opens with a detail of the weekly Sunday-walk taken by Utterson and Enfield. Utterson by profession is a lawyer and belongs to the respectable bourgeois society. A closer look reveals the presence of the gothic mood. Both Utterson and Enfield "looked singularly dull." On their Sunday walks "they said nothing" and only had an appearance of a friend. The opening thus shows a meaningless attachment to the middle-class rituals

symbolizing the emptiness without any experience of pleasure. It is out of this emptiness and vacuum that a character like Hyde is created. There is a particular vitality which is absent in the other characters and thus Hyde becomes the double. Jekyll's first-person narrative becomes a third-person narrative voice, "Henry Jekyll stood at times aghast before the acts of Edward Hyde" (125). Later on, the view that "Jekyll was now my city of refuge" suggests that Hyde is narrating. The sentence, "I bring the life of that unhappy Henry Jekyll to an end" (396) claims that it is ambivalent, in the sense that we as readers cannot be sure if Jekyll has killed Hyde or vice-versa.

The novel however does not lose sight of the social conflict that Jekyll and Hyde represent. Jekyll and Hyde symbolize different social classes and hence dramatize the social tensions that characterized Victorian England at that time. Stevenson anticipates Freud who suggests that in fiction the feelings of uncanny can be produced only within the context of the "real." This formulation by Freud permits us to see that the gothic form almost evolves from within realism itself. *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is a good example of a gothic work whose episodes of uncanny emerges from "the world of common reality." The sense of uncanny experienced by Utterson and Poole is seen in the scene when they notice the cheval glass kept near the tea table which is an object that is out of place and signify the "secret and hidden" truths about Jekyll which is now revealed. The mirror becomes the key to the story as Jekyll uses it to monitor his transformations into Hyde. The mirror image is similarly present in Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* in the episode of the red-room when Jane looks into the mirror and sees a stranger dressed up for a wedding. The mirror helps to create a sense of nightmarish distortion and is a popular gothic device. The door motif becomes increasingly significant as a barrier not only between Jekyll's public and private life but also

between the two modes of existence.

Edward Hyde becomes the bodily form of the Victorian psychology. Jekyll feels an intimate bond with him and so comments on Hyde that he is “closer than a wife, closer than an eye; lay caged in his flesh, where he heard it mutter and felt it struggle to be born” (370) but who is also thoroughly alien. Jekyll had no need to create his monster – the monster was within him. Hyde is not only the fragmented psyche but he also symbolizes the disturbing truth about human beings’ capability of sudden and gradual transformations. Hyde’s physical appearance evokes the picture of a malignant being belonging to the traditional folklore and fairytale. The character of Hyde, his profession, his nationality, his class status and race and the nature of his crimes remain unspecified and cannot be interpreted by any other characters in the story.

The novel explores the mutability of human identity under the deforming pressures of modernity. It dramatizes and brings out the effects of those pressures. It is this recognition that both “evil and good run strong” in him that motivates Jekyll’s efforts to give each its proper sphere. Jekyll is radically both. He becomes a modern figure in his belief that the innate impulses towards evil cannot be eradicated nor can they be repressed for long. This allows Stevenson to portray a damning picture of the Victorian society in England characterized by repression and hypocrisy. The story draws the picture of men for whom respectability acts as a mask to cover their illicit shameful desires. Jekyll’s flight from hypocrisy leads him to another form of hypocrisy. This dualism and duplicity remain closely aligned in the narrative structure. The novel’s indeterminacy, darkness and pessimism lie in the late Victorian society’s uncertainty about the grounds of ethics in “an age of transition.”

The next text examined in this article is Oscar Wilde’s *The*

Picture of Dorian Gray (1891) which is a deeper and a more thoughtful novel than its critics have judged it to be. The story is partly supernatural, in which the characters are not individuals but symbols that move in a shadowy world of wit and terror. Dark desires and forbidden pleasures are at its center. The novel is chiefly a study in the development of Victorian human nature and the main characters are meant to be personifications of the psychological states. The story traces Dorian's development over the span of approximately eighteen years and delves into the dark caverns of his soul. Dorian looks within himself and discovers the presence of not only purity but also evil and corruption. He yields up to the corrupt impulse within him and tries to find joy and beauty in evil. Finally, the vision of evil becomes unbearable to him and he finds himself trapped in a dark underworld from which he cannot escape.

Dorian, as soon as he becomes aware of the evil within himself, sells his soul in a fit of rebellion against the laws of God and nature. This symbolically means that Dorian cannot and never will be able to resist the evil within him. His passion for sin will become the governing factor in his life. He says, "I would give my soul" for the privilege of being young for the rest of his life. He wants to gain absolutism in this way. Later on, when he tries to get back and lead a normal life again, he fails and finally receives his punishment.

Dorian's nature is gray that is good and evil are intertwined in a mortal combat within him. He takes pleasure in recognition and celebration of evil within his soul. This leads him to murder Basil because of an overpowering desire for sin and an insane wish to destroy the man who is praying and asking him to pray too. The murder is an illustration to display how Dorian throttles the voice of goodness in him forever. The murder of Basil is a decisive moment for Dorian. Towards the end, the sight of so much evil

becomes unbearable for him and he finds himself incapable to derive any pleasure from his new sins. Having given himself up to evil he ultimately understands and realizes to his horror that he can no longer derive any enjoyment out of it and the dive into the demon universe has become an irreversible process. He becomes imprisoned into the demonic underworld and has only one way to escape it that is through death. When Dorian sticks the blade into his “monstrous soul” he kills himself, which is his only way out.

There is a supernatural element present in the story when Dorian’s demonic prayer is granted. The devil to whom Dorian sells his soul is Lord Henry Wotton who not only exists externally but also as a voice within Dorian. Wotton’s demonic sermon destroys Dorian’s state of innocence and forces him to plunge into the state of experience. Wotton’s paradoxes were only a means to an end. They were the evil brush he used to refashion Dorian in the light of his own soul. He is a wicked and a malicious man who uses his wisdom to seduce and spoil Dorian with his immoral opinions. He gives Dorian the poisonous yellow book which totally fascinates and influences him badly turning him into a murderer. The picture ages and changes while Dorian himself does not. In the end when Dorian dies and his dead body is old and wrinkled the picture recovers its old state magically.

The last novel analyzed in this context is Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) which represents the fin-de-siecle literature that explored the darkest recesses of the then Victorian society and the often-disturbing private desires that lurked behind acceptable public faces. The text addresses issues of representation of gender, race, class, sexuality, degeneration, doubling and nation during the Victorian period.

Franco Moretti citing from *Signs Taken for Wonders* (1817) written by Homi K. Bhabha reads vampirism as a conceit for the workings of the capitalist system. The Count Dracula has

associations with capitalism. In this novel, money symbolizes different ways of exploring class tensions. The Count's physical appearance looks like that of the "archetypical" criminal – "the mouth... under the heavy moustache was fixed and rather cruel looking with peculiarly sharp white teeth; these protruded over the lips whose remarkable ruddiness showed astonishing vitality in a man of his years." The Count, because he is a criminal type, is beyond any redemption. The story's depiction of the horrors of degeneration is not without ambivalence (Smith 110).

Dracula develops this anxiety through the character of the socially well-to-do young solicitor Jonathan Harker who needs to become a man of action. The novel suggests his adherence to middle-class norms that is implied through Harker's profession and his desire for domestic security by marrying Mina who represents the "new woman" full of ingenuity and enterprise. This generates the grounds under which degeneration could occur because paradoxically it appears that it is these very social values which the Count threatens. This refers to one of the essential ironies present in the story that in order to become more "manly" the vampire hunters need to ape the attributes of the war-like Count because the Count possesses the sort of manliness that they need to emulate in order to defeat him. This becomes an irresolvable ambivalence in the novel. This should be seen as a consequence of the specific historical tensions when such "deviant" behaviour was read as indicating the signs of degeneracy.

In *Dracula* the idea of middle-class degeneracy can be overcome by aping the criminal degeneracy which suggests the presence of a mode of doubling which Freud saw as a key element of the uncanny. For Freud, uncanny is characterized by a return of the dead and so the full and complete title of Bram Stoker's novel is *Dracula* or *The Dead Undead*. This explains the anxiety that the dead are not truly dead but they are merely the demonic

and degenerate versions of our selves. The clearest representation of doubling exists between the Count and the Dutch doctor and polymath Abraham Van Helsing. The Count's foreignness aligns him with Van Helsing. The description of the Count by Van Helsing implies that Dracula is intellectually like an early version of himself. This covert doubling between the Count and Van Helsing softens the differences between the vampire hunters and the vampires.

The blood transfusions of Lucy take on an erotic quality because they refer to the ownership of Lucy's body. It also pertains to and represents hysteria and fear. This constitutes an attempt to contain "abnormal" behaviour within recognizable images of "otherness." One of the major themes in this novel is colonialism in terms of class and national significance. Blood that is donated by Holmwood, Seward, Van Helsing and Morris traces a hierarchy of aristocratic, bourgeois, European and American blood that illustrates how central the revitalization of a threatened Britishness is to the story. This colonial presence is ambivalent and is split between its appearance as original and authoritative which betrays these foundations of authority and empowers the colonized subject with a mode of resistance against colonial oppression. This degeneration suggests national decline which had a specific resonance in Britain. The Count's imperial ambitions reflect Britain's imperialistic endeavour which mirrors a kind of monstrosity. The banishment, pursuit and killing of the Count therefore serve to make visible the forms of violence that were inherent in British colonialism. It also turns the vampire hunters into degenerated violent colonizers. *Dracula* then becomes an impossibility that exists only by battenning upon the real.

Stoker's *Dracula* created a modern myth that could embody the fears of its era. *Dracula* is crowded with people, past histories and new inventions. Citing Karl Marx, Moretti (67-85) sees the

story as a parable of capitalism, as “dead labor which vampire-like lives only by sucking living labor.” It reflects England’s vulnerability in a world she no longer dominated. Brantlinger (30-43) argues that gothic literature played a significant role in shaping science fiction. He contends that the gothic tradition’s emphasis on the irrational, the unknown and the terrifying laid the groundwork for the development of science fiction. He remarks that the gothic’s focus on fear, anxiety and the unknown helped to create a sense of unease and uncertainty which is characteristic of science fiction. He offers a nuanced understanding of the complex relationships between gothic literature, science fiction and the cultural context in which they emerged.

In the five novels that are analyzed in this article, the unreal textual world of haunted sinister castles, ruined abbeys, convents, graveyards, gloomy hallways and secret chambers with lonely windswept landscapes, ineffable horrors, murder, incest, vice, monstrous dukes and viscounts, malevolent aristocrats and mysterious happenings convey the all too real painful modern extra-textual world of oppression and irrationality. The novels portray a society that is divided by race, class and gender. They draw a realistic picture of the nineteenth century Victorian England with growing poverty and restless population of the poor, increasingly crowded cities with labyrinthine passageways, hidden by-lanes and nightmarish pockets of squalor which are the ill-effects of the industrial capitalism. Thus, fantasy, supernatural and the gothic characterizing these Victorian novels were not realistic for the Victorians but they portrayed the fears and anxieties present in the Victorian society relating to class issues, nationalism, racial purity, empire, the evolutionary boundaries between humans and beasts that had real implications and reflected the tensions of an era of moral uncertainty.

The selected texts discussed in this paper bring out the binary

opposition between the domestic inner life and the foreign. This mode of existence of the Gothic genre is a paradox and continues right through till the end of the nineteenth century. It provides one of the ways to present in Victorian speculative fiction not only innovative characteristics of the social and political world but also what was considered as hitherto hidden or inaccessible realities — chiefly among them are psychological displacements, sexual deviance and scientific discoveries.

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