The Incredible Nineteenth Century:
Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale

Jeffrey Weinstock   Nathaniel Williams
Central Michigan University   University of California, Davis

About *I19*

The Incredible Nineteenth Century: Science Fiction, Fantasy, and Fairy Tale (*I19*) seeks to publish the finest scholarship on the century that was, in many ways, the time period in which the modern genres of science fiction and fantasy began, and in which the academic study of fairy tale and folklore has its roots. *I19* interprets "the nineteenth century" broadly, using the dates of "The Long Nineteenth Century"—roughly, from the beginning of the French Revolution to the end of World War I—but even these dates are just notable historical markers as they approximately coincide with Romanticism and Modernism, respectively. Scholarship on works from the eighteenth century that anticipated or influenced writers in the nineteenth century or ways in which nineteenth-century literature influenced later authors both fall within the interests of this journal. *I19* also publishes scholarship on Neo-Victorianism, Steam Punk, or any other contemporary genres that react to the time periods contained within The Long Nineteenth Century. Genres such as horror and mystery, though not strictly within the realms of the fantastic, are also welcome, due to their close affinity with science fiction and fantasy. Scholarship on early film is also welcome. Additionally, *I19* is dedicated to maintaining a scope that is both multicultural and global, and we encourages submissions on works from marginalized communities and from around the world.

In addition to literary scholarship, *I19* also publishes works on pedagogy. These pieces may be personal reflections, strategies on course design, innovative assignment sheets with commentary, or anything else that educators teaching nineteenth-century literature may find useful.

Finally, *I19* maintains robust Book Reviews and Media Reviews sections. Book reviews cover a wide array of recent scholarly works, and media reviews cover film, television, video games, and any other form of mass media.

Queries and submissions may be sent to i19@mtsu.edu. We accept submissions on a rolling basis, and there are no author fees. Generative AI may not be used to produce text.

Table of Contents

From the Editor

The Humanities, Democracy, and the Charlatan Who Came Ambling Along

James Hamby

Whenever I consider how best to make an argument for the study of the humanities, the first thing that pops into my mind is Louis Armstrong's response when he was asked what jazz is: "If you have to ask what jazz is, you'll never know." For those of us who love the humanities, it is easy to see the value of disciplines such as art, history, and literature: they shape us, help us navigate the world, give value and meaning to our lives. Yet explaining this to administrators and politicians who weigh "value" only in monetary terms often proves difficult, and they view the humanities only as a superfluous pastime. We have struggled with an assault on the humanities—once widely considered the foundation of the university—for decades now, yet in the past three months the humanities have come under attack in the United States as never before.

It was my intention when I started this journal to never engage in politics, and especially not in partisan politics. I wanted instead to focus on literature and avoid contributing to the hyperpoliticization of *everything* in our society. Furthermore, I am loath to give any additional attention to Donald Trump, who has plagued the world with his presence and has garnered far more attention than he merits for far too long. However, his administration's efforts, led by Elon Musk (an unelected bureaucrat, never confirmed by congress, whom Trump selected to head a pretend agency to execute illegal actions) is systematically attacking the arts by defunding the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), and I feel it would be irresponsible for anyone who teaches or researches in the humanities to remain silent.

The reason for this assault is obvious: Trump, Musk, and their cronies fear the power of an enlightened citizenry. This is nothing new in the annals of authoritarianism. Knowing history,

understanding how political systems work, thinking critically about society, empathizing with others different from ourselves, dreaming of ways society could renew itself—these are all outcomes of a humanities-based education that authoritarians fear. The Trump administration's slashing of the NEH, its hostility towards institutions of higher education such as Harvard University, its defunding of public radio and television, its hostile takeover of the Kennedy Center, and its overall strange obsession with the idea of "wokeness" ruining the teaching of art and history all testify to the anti-intellectual, anti-educational bent of Trump's agenda.

To make matters worse, other politicians across the country have followed Trump in attacking education. Book bans are among the most salient example of this assault. In Rutherford County, Tennessee, where I live, several books in the past year have been banned in the school system, including Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* (1961), a novel that I first read in high school and that had an enormous impact on me. Fittingly, one of the key themes in that story is that systems of corrupt power endanger our freedom. I am enormously saddened by the thought that high school students in my county will not be exposed to this major work of American literature in their school libraries. Another development in my home state of Tennessee is the recent attempt by some members of the state's General Assembly to pass a bill (thankfully, the session ended without it passing) allowing public schools to deny education to children who have immigrated without necessary documentation. The obvious racism of this bill is chilling, and the overt attempt to keep certain populations unempowered by denying education to their children is disgusting. Yet what takes this racism and classism to an even more appalling level is the way the supporters of this bill are attempting to essentially nullify the Fourteenth Amendment. In what has come to be known as the "Equal Protection Clause" of Section One, this amendment guarantees that no state shall "deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of its laws." The Supreme Court, in *Brown*

v. Board of Education, enshrined the idea that this clause applies to children's right to education. The framers of the Fourteenth Amendment (the primary author was Representative John A. Bingham of Ohio) wisely chose the word "person" rather than "citizen" to ensure that everyone, regardless of citizenship status, would be able to enjoy their rights without government interference, and that the government could never again create a category of people who had no rights, as had been done to enslaved African-Americans (though there have been many times when this principle was violated). Our politicians today would do well to remember the betrayal of American values that occurred during slavery and the Jim Crow era. These politicians' and the Trump administration's disregard of constitutional law should shock all Americans.

Trump's attack on learning is not limited to the humanities, however, and it extends to science as well. During the last Trump administration, the president referred to the COVID-19 pandemic as a "hoax." Trump has long denied climate change and often asserts that scientists do not know what they are talking about. Robert Kennedy, Jr., the Secretary of Health and Human services, has expressed skepticism of vaccines and constantly spouts medical misinformation. Trump's budget cuts have included reductions in funding for scientific research, including research for treating Alzheimer's disease. As with the attack on the humanities, what underlies budget cuts for science is not merely a desire to balance the federal budget, but something more sinister. Carl Sagan once observed that

> Science is more than a body of knowledge. It is a way of thinking, a way of skeptically interrogating the universe with a fine understanding of human fallibility. If we are not able to ask skeptical questions, to interrogate those who tell us that something is true, to be skeptical of those in authority, then, we are up for grabs for the next charlatan—political or religious—who comes ambling along.

The Trump administration's contempt for science is yet another attempt to keep the populace ignorant so that he may not be questioned.

As someone who studies the nineteenth century, it is striking to me how much Donald Trump's worldview is shaped by the worst aspects of that century—his white supremacy, his desire for territorial expansion *à la* Manifest Destiny, his obsession in returning to tariffs as an economic policy, his hostility to women's rights, his embrace of violence. Even as I was working on this essay, news broke that he wants to reopen Alcatraz—an institution that began as a military post and later served as an internment camp for Indigenous Americans in the nineteenth century. Trump's worldview relies on the fiction that the nineteenth century was a golden age rather than a gilded age.

The three articles included in this issue wonderfully demonstrate the ways in which the humanities can give us a better world. Justin Rogers's work on Edith Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle* examines the cognitive gains that accompany reading fiction. Leslie de Bont's article explores an example of late nineteenth-century utopic science fiction. Nash Meade's essay shows how the *Dishonored* video game franchise critiques power structures. Additionally, many of the works covered in the media and book reviews sections below also deal with issues of power and society.

It has been interesting to me to hear the joke, frequent on the internet, that we are in "the worst possible timeline"—or something to that effect. People who say this no doubt have some time travel or multiverse science fiction in mind, such as the *Back to the Future* series (1985-1990), *Rick and Morty* (2013-present), or *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018). It is a testament to the way we conceive of our own lives in terms of narratives. The study of literature, of art, of the humanities is not something extraneous; it is an essential part of our human existence.

The right to study ideas is the basis of our freedom in a democratic society, and institutions of higher learning are essential to fostering that study. As my wife, Holly Hamby, once observed in an address at Fisk University, "The humanities are the foundation from which the university rises." Trump's attacks on the humanities, science, and higher education are nothing less than attacks on our freedom.

The humanities are under assault, but we must remember that the best way to preserve the humanities is to practice them. Read, write, go to museums, attend concerts. As I said before, I am not writing this out of a desire to engage in Democratic Party versus Republican Party politics; rather, I am writing to support democracy over authoritarianism, freedom of thought over obedience through fear, and enlightenment over darkness. As many others have observed, history does not typically remember those who ban books or suppress knowledge as "the good guys." While I respect a wide array of political opinions, we should all be able to unite against autocracy, and we should all recognize evil when it stares us in the face. Though the humanities may be under assault, literature has taught us the ways that we can be the heroes of our own stories, and we must remember the importance that even the smallest acts of resistance can bear. No amount of budget cuts or anti-intellectual fervor will ever defeat the human spirit or the desire to learn, and we thwart the autocrat's desire to dominate us simply by thinking our own thoughts.

Articles

Imagination, Reading, and Cognitive Development: Early Insights in Edith Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle*

Justin Rogers

In "Reading Fiction is Good for Children's Cognitive, Emotional, and Social Development," Maria Nikolajeva explains that cognitive theory can contribute much to literary studies and that a fledgling field of study exists that combines cognitive theory and cognitive science with literary criticism to create an approach known as cognitive literary criticism (4). She makes a case for the many useful insights that can be gained from using cognitive literary theory to understand how reading affects young developing minds. Specifically, she focuses on "how fiction stimulates young readers' perception, attention, imagination, memory and other cognitive activity" (1). Literary critics have long asserted that reading helps stimulate the imagination, which is an essential aspect of cognition that starts to develop in childhood. Furthermore, reading allows one to enter situations and conflicts vicariously as a kind of practice. When a situation similar to one they have read about comes up in the readers' lives, they will have some simulated experience with it gathered from reading. However, that literature can improve the cognitive abilities of readers appears to be a new insight for the scientific community. In 2013, the preeminent journal *Science* published "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of Mind," which was considered a provocative title (Nikolajeva 1). While brain scientists might just be coming around to these ideas, Edith Nesbit's early-twentieth-century novel anticipates much of what cognitive theory eventually hypothesized long after her time. A careful reading of her novel *The Enchanted Castle* (1907) suggests that what we might see as current cognitive insights have actually been around for much longer, specifically that children's imaginations are provoked and heightened by literature, that

they can use experiences from reading fiction to understand real life situations, that they develop a theory of mind (that other people have minds of their own) through encountering the minds of fictional protagonists, and that imagination helps children gain access to higher-order cognition. The novel comments on what children's literature should ideally be doing for child readers. This makes *The Enchanted Castle* a meta-literary and metacognitive text that shows how a child's cognition develops not through theorizing but by narrativizing the experience of cognitive development. Edith Nesbit *avant la lettre* was a kind of cognitive theorist using narrative to make her point.

Cognitive theorists and cognitive scientists alike stress the importance of imagination to complex thinking and decision making. Diane Gillespie in *The Mind's We: Contextualism in Cognitive Psychology* (1992) sees imagination as a mode that "provides opportunities for further exploration and reframing" (54). Gillespie argues that imagination itself can create concrete bodily experiences because "imagination centralizes the role of embodiment in cognition" (101). Imagination is the gateway by which many other cognitive functions start to develop, but an individual does not have access to them without having first developed the ability to implement imagination effectively. The 2013 *Science* article on how reading literary fiction improves one's understanding of other people's mental states explains that "little research has investigated what fosters this skill" (377), and after performing five different experiments testing various ways to train a person's theory of the mind,[1] reading fiction was the most effective. A 2024 cognitive study in children directly linked creative imagery (the ability to imagine) with theory of mind (imagining other people's minds), showing a positive correlation suggesting, as Joanna Smogorzewska states, "that creative imagery might serve as a factor that reduces the feeling of loneliness among children

---

[1] "Theory of mind" refers to an individual's cognitive ability to conceive that other people have their own minds and thoughts too.

due to their [theory of mind]" (1). Andrew Shtulman et al report that a study on children's abilities to consider the possibility or permissibility of unpredictable events concluded that a child's ability to imagine unpredictable events is connected to having more mature, more highly developed cognitive abilities (11). Dorota Zdybel reports that in a study on the degree of connection between memory and imagination, the two were found to be inextricably linked, making imagination necessary for learning as it helps children to organize metacognitive knowledge (14-15). The connection between imagination and other feats of cognition is clear, and as Nikolajeva posits, cognitive studies and literary criticism have much to gain from each other because of the connection between reading and imagination (1). In her fantasy novel *The Enchanted Castle*, Edith Nesbit demonstrates that contemporary conversations among cognitive theorists about the importance of reading to the developing imagination were already ongoing during the Edwardian period, a point that suggests Nesbit was already thinking about how imagination is central to higher-order cognition and how reading can improve imaginative ability. Her approach suggests that the divide between fiction and reality is not as large as it might seem. Nikolajeva explains the mind's ability to draw upon fictional events as useful information for real life as "text-to-life projection" when children "learn how to navigate real worlds through reading experience" (5). Nesbit emphasizes in her 1907 novel, over a century in advance of the contemporary conversation, the importance of children's ability to believe that an imagined world could relate to reality.

The Enchanted Castle* is a children's fantasy novel that focuses on the adventures of four curious and well-read children. Siblings Gerald, Kathleen, and Jimmy happen upon a castle and its garden, where they meet a girl named Mabel and discover a magic ring that grants the wishes of its wearer. The comedic adventures start with Mabel accidentally turning herself invisible, which is the start of the many challenges created by the wish-granting power of the ring. Over the

course of the novel, the children learn to better command the ring to suit their needs. To do so, their wishes must become more specific and they have to think through the situation they are in as well as the careful expression of their wishes. The children's adventures with the ring rely on their imagination and their use of it in various situations. Gerald, for instance, proves especially adept because he can more readily imagine what to do to please adults. The small amount of literary scholarship on *The Enchanted Castle* primarily focuses on how Nesbit's portrayal of magic challenges the standard traditions of fantasy. Although imagination takes a prominent place in Nesbit's novel, an analysis of what Nesbit suggests about imagination has yet to be produced.[2]

Nesbit depicts children learning to think in more complex ways through reading. Significantly, then, *The Enchanted Castle* is full of children who are very well-read. Gerald considers himself a kind of protagonist and hero and often goes into soliloquies about his role in the group. Kathleen seemingly knows the plotlines and narratives of any story that comes her way. Jimmy is often inquisitive and always questions everything, as if reading has stimulated his curiosity. Mabel's interest in fairy tales is immediately clear from her reenactment of "Sleeping Beauty" and from the magical qualities that she assigns to the various items in the treasure room of the enchanted castle; later she explains that she "'read[s] the big books in the library'" (61). They each have spent time reading and honing their ability to imagine, allowing them access to higher cognition as a result. Indeed, *The Enchanted Castle* often depicts the children as lightyears beyond the cognition of the adults in the novel—from the children's perspective, anyway. Nesbit makes a similar argument in her children's novel that Radu Bogdan posits about young minds in

---

[2] Nikolajeva and Sarah Gilead, for instance, address Nesbit's use of magic in her novels and the question of what her use of and stipulations for magic imply, while critic U. C. Knoepflmacher argues that Nesbit's fantasy novels change the paradigm of the fantasy genre. For still other approaches, see Susan Anderson and Helen Lansner on Nesbit's contributions modernism, Gloria G. Fromm on moralism in Nesbit's work, and Mervyn Nicholson for a comparison of imagination as a theme running through the work of Nesbit, C. S. Lewis, and Rider Haggard.

Mindvaults: Sociocultural Grounds for Pretending and Imagining (2013)—that children can imagine to a much greater degree than adults and that imagination is the gateway to more complex mental feats. Nesbit puts the characters in a multitude of situations to show how their cognitive ability coincides with the novel's emphasis on the imaginative aspects of cognition.

Both in *The Enchanted Castle* and in today's cognitive theory, imagination is a foundational building block for many mental processes. In *Mindvaults* Bogdan argues that imagination is the key to unlocking more complex mental processes, including "mental playfulness, projective thoughts, metacognitive analysis, coordinating different inputs and representations (images, abstractions, gestures, word meanings), memory recall, thematic connectivity, and an understanding of a possible past or future self" (7-8). He situates imagination as the means by which the mind "vaults" (like pole-vaulting) to higher order cognition (8). People must have imagination as their foundation so they can pursue higher-order levels of cognition. Similarly, in *The Enchanted Castle* Nesbit shows the children's exercising of imagination leading to stronger mental abilities such as empathy, critical thinking, and strategizing. Reading causes one to consider imaginary situations and people and to empathize with what they are reading about. During this process, the reader is involved with not just empathy but also critical thinking about the characters and their situations. By engaging deeply with the text, the child reader involves their imagination as they read by considering an internal world created by their mind in tandem with the linguistic world of the text.

Bogdan argues that the first step to using imagination is through pretending (3), and in *The Enchanted Castle*, Mabel's introduction to the group of children is an excellent portrayal of the difference between pretending and imagining, as well as their capacity to be useful cognitive tools. The difference between the two can sometimes become blurry. Alan R. White makes a clear

distinction in "Imagining and Pretending" by explaining that "One can pretend, but not imagine, to V or be Ving; whereas one can imagine, but not pretend, Ving or someone's, including oneself, Ving. For example, one can imagine, but not pretend, riding a horse, being in an aeroplane, or oneself or another working on a farm or living in Buckingham Palace" (300-01). In short, pretending is external and imagining is internal. Pretending is always a kind of performing but one does not perform imagining. Nesbit shows in *The Enchanted Castle* though that pretending is a necessary means of developing the imagination, but pretending is insufficient at convincing others as well as dealing with issues when they arise. One can use their imagination to think of potential solutions to a problem but one cannot solve issues by pretending. In fact, pretending can sometimes lead one astray, as happens to Mabel in the novel.

Gerald, Kathleen, and Jimmy all stumble upon Mabel, the niece of a maid in town, dressed as a princess and lying in the garden as though asleep. Naturally, the group assumes (or affects to assume for the purposes of the day's entertainment) that she is a princess in need of a kiss to wake her up. However, Jimmy is immediately doubtful of Mabel and notes that she does not properly fit into her dress: "'But look what a little way down her frock her feet come. She wouldn't be any taller than Jerry if she was to stand up'" (22). Thus, Jimmy makes the first observation that the girl pretending to be a sleeping princess is no princess at all, but a child like them. However, Gerald (Jerry) and Kathleen continue to go along with the usual fairy-tale script that a hero must kiss the princess to wake her up. Eventually, Mabel does wake up and she appears unprincesslike despite her claims to royal status (24-6). Nesbit sets up a situation in which everything seems to be playing to fantasy's well-known expectations about sleeping princesses, then she juxtaposes them with the mundane in a subversion through Mabel's behavior versus the figure she insists she is. Mabel is no princess; she pretends to be a princess and gives the other children all the appropriate cues that

she is a princess based on what they know from the books they have read. However, when the

princess wakes up, she is not what she seems. In breaking with the romance of the usual fantasy

script, Nesbit puts her fantasy world in the context of the real world. What one reads and

conceptualizes may be one thing, but the reality of a situation is another. The story's subversion,

at Mabel's expense, both mimics and interrogates the process of how reading stirs children's

imaginations and causes them to project thoughts from books into reality. Here, the children read

about situations and experiences in which fictional characters are involved, then take this

information with them into real-life situations. They discover that fiction both holds and does not

hold their own world: the princess turns out to be merely a housekeeper's niece. In Nesbit's novel,

the real world and the fantasy world have a very thin veil between them so that one can easily

move into the other.

Similarly, the difference between pretending and imagining is also shown in Nesbit's

description of Mabel's cognitive abilities when she is first introduced. Still pretending to be a

princess, Mabel leads the group to a dining hall to eat bread and cheese while claiming this meal

is whatever anyone asks for—green beans, chicken, roast beef, cabbage, and peacock are all

covered by the bread and cheese she slaps down on everyone's plates. Jimmy asks Mabel whether

they are actually playing a game, but Mabel insists that there is no game going on: "'A game? But

it is beef. Look at it,' said the Princess, opening her eyes very wide" (30). Mabel continues with

this façade of being a princess and pretending the bread and cheese is something else and then

moves on to the treasure room for her last bit of pretending before giving up the charade. As

Jimmy's questioning indicates, Mabel demonstrates the game of pretending quite transparently in

this scene. Pretending is "taking some artificial or feigned object or action to symbolize, represent,

or stand for the real thing" (Bogdan 97), which is what Mabel does with the bread and cheese as

well as by donning an elegant dress and playing out the part of the sleeping princess. Bogdan goes on to explain that pretending is the first cognitive step a child takes toward developing their imagining but that it is separate from imagination (98). The difference is that Mabel does not actually believe in what she pretends, which is the divide between pretending and imagination.

Understanding the divide between imagination and pretending is critical because it takes greater mastery of one's imagination beyond the ability to pretend if one is going to tackle adverse experiences. At the beginning of the novel, Mabel has not progressed to harnessing her imagination and is still stuck in the pretending phase. The limit of her cognitive abilities is best exemplified in Mabel's last moment of pretending in the novel. Mabel leads the children to the treasure room where there is an array of accessories and jewels, including a bracelet that she claims makes one tell only the truth, a chain that enhances strength, a spur to increase the speed of one's horse, and finally, a magic ring that supposedly turns the wearer invisible. Mabel is met with derision and told to prove that the ring can turn her invisible, which then begins a game in which she has the rest of the group turn around and count before turning back around to see that she is indeed nowhere to be found, or invisible. Mabel hides behind a wall while they are counting, but she is unaware that she is actually invisible. The children balk at panels moving by themselves and at her disembodied voice as Mabel moves around. Mabel, who believed none of the items to actually be magical and was only pretending for the sake of a game, concludes that the rest of the group is trying to turn her own game against her by pretending that she is invisible. She becomes irate with them, admitting that she did not believe the ring could really turn anyone invisible (40). This confession reveals that all along Mabel never really believed in anything she was proclaiming to be true. She was cognitively aware of her own pretending while trying to deceive everyone else. This moment shows the cognitive difference between pretending and imagining. Pretending is

when the mind is fully aware that the thing they are projecting their imagination onto is not the actual object but a kind of stand-in, and this is the mental rehearsal one has to practice in order to move on to the more complex skill of using imagination. That Nesbit positions pretending as the central cognitive activity of the beginning of the narrative suggests that she understands its role as foundational but lacking in the complexity of the functions that the novel goes on to explore.

Mabel shows that she has not quite developed cognitively from pretending to more developed uses of imagining. Her underdeveloped ability to imagine makes her ill-equipped to handle the wish-granting powers of the ring. To be fair, she is at the disadvantage of being the first person to put on the ring and activate its powers. Everyone else gets the benefit of her blunder, a move that also highlights the difference between imagination and pretending. When Mabel pretends, she is admitting internally that she does not believe in what she says. She is the first to get the magic ring to discover that magic could be real, but she also discovers that her thoughts can become reality. In doing so, the ring spurs Mabel to advance from pretending to using her imagination for the purpose of envisioning. The function of imagination is to propel cognition to where it can, as Bogdan says, "vault itself into fantasized, anticipated, past, future, or possible worlds" (8)—possibilities that Mabel has not, at the point of her blunder, yet figured out. Over the course of the novel, she does learn that skill, and it starts with the discovery of the wish-granting ring.

A foil to Mabel, Gerald displays a greater use of his imagination throughout the novel. For instance, early on in the story, the children ponder how Gerald is so good with adults. He manages to win the affection of the governess by getting up in the morning and gathering pink carnations, which he ties up and lays on her plate (7). Gerald is able to imagine what the governess might appreciate because he considers the world as others experience it. As Kathleen explains, "'if you

want grown-ups to be nice to you the least you can do is be nice to them and think of little things

to please them. I never think of any myself. Jerry does; that's why all the old ladies like him'" (7).

What Kathleen picks up on is that Gerald's ability to imagine nice things to do for adults betokens

empathy, a skill Kathleen has not yet mastered. In other words, Nesbit argues that by developing

imagination a child can also develop empathetic knowledge. Today's cognitive theories, indeed,

agree that imagination and empathy are bound up together. Gerald is also the most avid reader out

of the group, the child with the most experience putting himself in fictional situations as a kind of

rehearsal. Nikolajeva, in *Reading for Learning* (2014), argues that cognitive development and

children's literature go together because "children's fiction challenges its audience cognitively and

effectively, stimulating attention, imagination, memory, inference-making, empathy and all other

elements of mental processes" (227). The children in Nesbit's novel show what reading children's

literature can accomplish. They are starting to learn empathy and its uses, as well as imagination,

and to discover that learning to use one's imagination to understand complex concepts has many

real-world applications. That Gerald has read more than his peers means he has had more time to

be challenged by his readings and is more advanced in his cognitive abilities.

Having harnessed the power of imagination and learned empathy, Gerald is also able to

tackle complex problems when he is invisible and encounters burglars. Initially unsure about how

to handle the problem, he contemplates rousing the sleeping household but decides that a

disembodied voice would not produce the ideal result because they would be more worried about

where the voice is coming from and miss the burglars (90-92). Gerald is able to imagine a future

in which his actions affect others, and this is a combination of imagination and empathy. Gerald

realizes that trying to reason with people while invisible will likely do more harm than good in this

critical moment. He opts to write a letter to inform the homeowners about the burglary going on

because that allows them to deal with something they can better understand than an invisible boy yelling at them. As with Gerald's understanding of how to deal adeptly with adults, the burglary episode poses another example of using what one learns from imagination in the real world. Nikolajeva explains this phenomenon as it occurs with children learning about empathy through reading. She argues in *Reading for Learning* that children learn to connect with characters in what they read, and that connection causes them to feel empathy for the characters (101), which helps young readers with their ability to empathize with people in the real world, a skill shown by Gerald and his ability to connect with others and imagine what to do to gain their support.

Gerald's extensive reading has doubled as cognitive practice for real situations. He often announces himself as a hero while also providing self-aggrandizing motivation to accompany the action of the story: "The deserted hero of our tale, alone and unsupported, urged on his brave followers to pursue the commissariat wagons, he himself remaining at the post of danger and difficulty, because he was born to stand on burning decks whence all but he had fled and to lead forlorn hopes when despaired of by the human race" (255). Gerald reads a lot, as the derivativeness of the comment about standing on the burning deck (a reference to a poem by Felicia Hemans)[3] shows, and he identifies with the heroes of what he reads. Mabel's less-developed imagination causes her to pretend to be a princess, but she is unable to convincingly act like one because she cannot envision what she would need to do to *be* a princess. Put another way, Mabel does not yet realize that it is not enough to don a dress and call herself a princess. She also has to act noble and play the part of a princess to fully embody the role. While no amount of imagination will change Mabel from a housekeeper's daughter to a princess, higher-order cognition would allow Mabel to get as close as what is within her power. She cannot be a princess, but she can be noble if she

---

[3] Gerald is quoting the opening line of Hermans's "Casabianca" (1862): "The boy stood on the burning deck".

imagines what qualities make someone noble. Gerald, in contrast, believes himself to be a hero and acts accordingly. His ability to act is based on the many times he has experienced situations simulated by fiction and has absorbed how the heroes in those stories behave. Gerald needs no symbol to become a hero because he believes that he embodies one through his actions. Gerald is more advanced cognitively than the other children and is already able to think in more complicated ways. He has graduated from pretending to becoming a hero. Reading heavily has allowed him to rehearse actions and ideas in advance so that when he does encounter a similar situation in life, he already has experience to draw on.

In Nesbit's novel, this quality of children who read often equips them to be the heroic protagonists of the story because only they are able to solve conflicts in both the fantasy world and the real world. Bogdan argues that children have a higher ability to imagine than adults because children's developing minds have more "neural plasticity [that] is selected for learning" (25), meaning that children's minds are better able to absorb and consider new information than adult minds are. In *The Intellectual Lives of Children* (2021), Susan Engel concurs with Bogdan when she references a number of cognition studies dealing with children where, as they get older, a lack of open-mindedness results in "intellectual loss" (92). As children grow into adulthood the neural plasticity that Bogdan notes and Engel relates to open-mindedness decreases. Adults have more real-life experiences to draw on for solving real-life issues, but this accumulation of knowledge and experience comes with a loss of mental flexibility. The children's imagination is often juxtaposed with responses from adults who cannot believe what they are saying. Nesbit shows that adults have a strict sense of the difference between what is imagined and what is reality. The novel's unnamed narrator explains, "When you are young so many things are difficult to believe, and yet the dullest people will tell you that they are true . . . that the earth goes round the sun, and

that it is not flat but round. But the things that seem really likely, like fairy-tales and magic, are,

so say the grown-ups, not true at all" (27). Anything that goes beyond the adult understanding of

reality is dismissed as untrue, while the children do not know where this difference lies and are

thus still open to real and imagined worlds intersecting. In a playful way, Nesbit shows that the

accepted belief that the earth goes around the sun, or that Earth is round rather than flat, are

themselves notions that sound just as fantastic as the so-called fantasies children believe in. The

difference assumed between children and adults is that children do not know the liminal point

where reality and fiction split apart, but what Nesbit argues in this narrative section is that there

are elements of fantasy and imagination that are necessary for adult understandings of reality.

Nesbit capitalizes on this difference between child and adult beliefs related to the threshold

separating fiction and reality in her novel by creating a situation in which the real world is

penetrated by magical elements. The two realms are so closely juxtaposed that they affect one

another, and the children stand at that intersection. Nesbit writes of this liminality, saying, "There

is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs for ever between the world

of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the

weak spots in that curtain . . . almost anything may happen" (201). Throughout Nesbit's novel, the

children seem well-equipped to deal with the differences between the real and magical worlds.

When they step into what they believe to be a magical kingdom, they are not at all taken aback by

seeing an enchanted castle, they immediately know what to do when they see a sleeping princess

(kiss her, obviously), and they are not overly put off by a ring that turns someone invisible or

brings inanimate objects to life. In contrast, throughout the novel when the question comes up of

confiding in adults such as Jimmy, Gerald, and Kathleen's governess or Mabel's aunt, the children

always fear that the adults will go "mad" or at least become "vexed" if they are made to confront

magic, implying—echoed by cognitive theorists Bogdan and Engels—that children are more readily able to adapt and accept what requires imagination than many adults are. Cognitive theory suggests that because children are still learning how to use and harness their imaginations, childhood imaginative experiences are more powerful than those in adulthood. As children are still understanding imagination and as they learn to get comfortable with it, they have to deal with the potential of what imagination gains them access to. Nesbit's depiction of even sympathetic adults as less mentally flexible than children meshes with the consensus of contemporary cognitive theory on this point.

The magical ring with its wish-granting function is the major thing that tests the children in terms of imagination. The ring becomes the basis for many of the hijinks that happen throughout the novel. Its function in the plot is to generate the story through creating different situations. The children take turns making use of the ring, and this cooperative imaginative activity divides up the plot of the novel. Over the course of their adventures with the magic ring, the children both create and manage the effects their wishes have. The children learn to control their imaginations because the magical ring grants their wishes so powerfully and specifically. The magical ring makes it so that what a person imagines can become reality, like the holes in the castle wall that turn out to have been magically repaired in the past or the inanimate objects that become the living Ugly-Wuglies. That the narrative models the need to control one's imagination because it relates to physical (thus real-world) manifestations challenges child readers to grow cognitively so that they see a relationship between their imagination and the real world.

In the most revelatory section about how to use the ring, Kathleen and Mabel converse with statues representing various gods. Phoebus instructs them on how to be more specific with

their wishes.[4] The girls wish that the boys would also be able to converse with the statues, and since the only way to converse with other statues is to be a statue, Phoebus explains that they should have wished for the boys to be statues and join them where they are located. He starts his explanation, "'Wish for them that which Mabel wished for herself. Say—'" before he is cut off by Kathleen, who wishes without thinking, Phoebus continues, "'If you hadn't interrupted' said Phoebus 'but there, we can't expect old heads on the shoulders of young marble. You should have wished them *here*'" (234). Phoebus emphasizes strategizing, a cognitive feat that requires specificity and focus of the children. Nesbit uses the Greek god of, among other things, prophecy, to teach Mabel and Kathleen the importance of thinking ahead and anticipating the effects of their wishes before uttering them. Phoebus challenges them to be specific, to plan out a course of events in advance, to rehearse, and strategize. He opens up the way for the girls to start thinking at a higher level. From that point on the children have no more problems using the magic because learning specificity of language while wishing helps them advance their ability to use their imagination in more complex ways. The children have learned to harness their imagination so that they can plan ahead and think about the consequences of their wishes before making them. They have effectively vaulted up into higher order cognition. The magical ring is the ability of one's imagination to manifest in the real world. The ring is a metaphor for the potential of what one imagines to become reality, and learning this lesson helps the children advance cognitively.

Magic is an element of the novel that crosses the threshold between the real and the imagined. Through the use of the magical ring, Nesbit gives magic actual restrictions and ramifications as if it were a real sort of power that, when used, has consequences. In thinking about magic realistically, as Nesbit encourages her readers to do, a child is developing the use of

---

[4] Phoebus is a famous epithet of the god Apollo. In Greek, *phoebus* means "bright."

imagination in a practical way that allows him or her to think about actions and their possible future ramifications. Nikolajeva writes illuminatingly in "Edith Nesbit—The Maker of Modern Fairy Tales" that Nesbit is responsible for creating the modern fairy tale genre as it is today. *The Enchanted Castle* has quite a few restrictions on magic, and the central magical focus is a ring that, as Nikolajeva observes, "is whatever its bearer wants it to be: it may be a wishing-ring, it may make you invisible or four yards high, it may make inanimate objects alive. You cannot take the ring off before the magic wears out. In other words, the magic is irreversible, you cannot unwish" (37). Nikolajeva's greater point is that the children in Nesbit's novel must learn to "control their wishes"—in other words, the children must learn how to utilize their imagination to reach what they desire.

There is a point in the novel that the ring stops operating as a magical wish-granting ring. Specifically, the final wish it fulfills is a wish for it to not be magical any longer. Its traditional magical quality, wish granting, runs out. The eventual loss of the ring's magic is reflective of Nikolajeva's assertion that magic has limits and restrictions in Nesbit's novel. However, I propose that the ring still has a wish-granting function even when it is no longer magical. Its magical ability occurs in a much more mundane but perhaps no less fantastic way that shows adults do still have strong imaginations. At the end of the novel, Mademoiselle (the children's governess) wishes that the ring's magic be undone and that the ring itself loses its magic. Mademoiselle then takes possession of the ring in the real world, where it becomes a wedding ring. That role, in itself, is magical insofar as a ring has no actual ability to bind two people together except through the symbolic power that individuals project onto it. In this way, the magic of the ring never ends because it continues to be an object that grants desired effects. In the real world, people imbue objects with symbolic meaning. Marriage, like magic, means entering into a pact where there are

restrictions, just as Nikolajeva posits is a requirement of magic in Nesbit's novels, namely that a wish is irreversible once made. The pact of marriage is a vow, at least ostensibly unbreakable; just as in Nesbit's novel one cannot take off the magic ring for a stipulated number of hours, the wearer of the wedding ring cannot take it off until the marriage is over, which in 1907 is expected to be "until death do you part." In the end, it is adults who make the ring magical one last time. In perhaps humanity's greatest feat of imagination, they exchange vows and rings, imbuing their devotion to one another as a physical representation of their love.

It is only when the ring is made unmagical that it is revealed how much of the fantasy world was being fabricated by the ring. After Mademoiselle makes the wish to dispel the magic of the ring and have it only be a wedding ring signifying the bond between herself and Lord Yalding, everyone wakes up the next morning to find that the jewels in the treasure room have vanished, the passage to the back of the Temple of Flora (where most of the magic in the novel happens) is gone. Many of the castle statues are nowhere to be found, secret passages and rooms have disappeared, and large chunks of the castle itself are missing. Without its magical power the castle becomes more mundane, with walls that are going to be very costly to patch up now, making the veil between magic and the real world almost nonexistent. There suddenly does not seem to be very much difference between the two at all, and perhaps there never was.

Nesbit effectively uses the ring as a symbol for the power and function of imagination for the imaginer to be both within the world while conceiving of the many potentialities of their world. The experience that the imaginer gets from imagining becomes a kind of rehearsal for more complicated cognition like critical thinking, as Gerald shows when he imagines multiple scenarios in order to figure out the best course of action in a short amount of time. Similarly, if people's imaginations lead to greater understanding and experience, which they then act upon, it is as if

those imaginings have happened in reality, inasmuch as the imaginers are affected by their imagining. Envisioning and planning are higher-order thinking where imagination operates as a foundation for rehearsal before performing actions in the real world. The dual purpose of the narrative within *The Enchanted Castle* is that imagining things can also be done through reading. Thus, Nesbit argues for the importance of reading as well as the power of imagination in her novel. It is no coincidence that the child protagonists are strong readers in addition to having keen imaginations. Reading facilitates imagination, which, in turn, facilitates cognitive development. The test of how well the children will be able to use their newfound critical thinking skills in real-world situations is through their use of the magical ring and its ability to make manifest their imaginings.

Nesbit's use of the children having to think through wish manifestation and its real-world applications shows that imagination is a cognitive skill that continues to be used throughout adulthood. As adults, people use imagination on a daily basis to perform mundane activities from planning events to managing their vacations. Thus, Nesbit's novel makes a claim for the importance of imagination as well as for having command over it. Nesbit seems to say that developing imagination is an intrinsic part of being a child, one that is a necessary skill for the mature mind. She constantly puts her child protagonists in situations where their ability to tap into imagination is their greatest asset that makes them uniquely suited to solve problems. The novel makes further arguments for why imagination is important to everyday life. The first is that it helps children learn empathy, like Gerald, while also showing that imagination relates to a child's ability to problem-solve and think critically as contemporary cognitive theorists contend. These are skills that children need to develop to take into adulthood. However, the continued function of the ring even without its magical power shows that imagination also has a function for adults. The idea of

valuing and attributing qualities to objects to which these qualities are not innate is a practice of imagination. Nesbit implies in *The Enchanted Castle* that while adults approach the use and concept of imagination differently from children, imagination remains incredibly useful in adulthood.

Anita Moss's enlightening work on *The Enchanted Castle*, "Makers of Meaning: A Structuralist Study of Twain's *Tom Sawyer* and Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle*," asks many good questions that she hopes to answer with a structuralist reading of the novel, including "How do readers make sense of texts? How do human beings read and decipher the bewildering universe of signs in which they are immersed? How do conventions shape fictions; how do fictions shape our perceptions of reality?" (39). It makes sense that Moss chose to study this novel of Nesbit's because the short answer to all her questions is imagination—the central concern of the novel as well. Moss argues that Nesbit uses "conventional functions of fairy tales and adventure stories to set up conventional expectations in the reader" and then reverses them, using this reversal to "suggest that reality inside and outside the fiction contains possibilities not yet explored" (42). This suggestion is most pronounced toward the end of the novel when the one thing making the magical world more magical and seemingly different from the real world, the ring, loses its magic and pulls down the barrier between the two. At that point, the distinction between reality and the enchanted castle dissolves. There is only reality then.

At the end of her article, Moss writes that the ending of *The Enchanted Castle* "is sad, for the adults undo all of the magic and force all the meaning finally to reside in their marriage" (44). Still, she suggests, Nesbit makes up for that ending because the ring has given "the children visions of reality as it might be perceived, of life as it might be lived, just as it gives the young couple a vision of the castle as it might through human art be created" (44). Moss's reading makes the ring

both a wish-granter and a form of imagination itself as a window one can look through to see the world manifest as it could be. Put another way, one engages in envisioning via imagination of possibilities. Moss finally argues that in functioning as a lens to see possibilities, the ring also functions the same way that literature does: "In that important way, then, Nesbit suggests, literature takes us into new and previously unimagined realms of meaning and possibility" (44). Moss's insight reminds us that imagination and literature share the core value of giving the reader hitherto unknown concepts to think about, a quality that naturally improves a child's cognitive development.

Nesbit's novel centers on how reading and imagination intertwine to open up new ways for a child to think. Her protagonists exemplify what happens when children are well-read in literature and start to tap into their imagination—they can accomplish any number of tasks in fantastic or mundane situations. Adding contemporary findings from cognitive psychology to the discussion of the importance of imagination provides a richer context for the argument that Nesbit was already making about imagination when she was writing the novel. There is little wonder that cognitive theory has been so interested all this time in understanding imagination. One way to approach childhood cognitive development could be to examine how reading helps improve one's cognitive abilities; thus, the combining of cognitive theory with literary studies should be illuminating, as this reading of *The Enchanted Castle* has shown. Conversely, looking at the assumptions about imagination apparent in this early-twentieth-century text helps to establish the extent to which the insights of cognitive psychology have long been latent in creative works for the young.

Nesbit suggests that the importance of reading fantasy comes from its ability to challenge the mind and to cause the mind to consider perspectives and situations it might otherwise never experience. There are benefits in having rehearsed situations in advance, even simulated situations.

These benefits stem from harnessing the power of imagination and Nesbit's novel is its own simulated situation for the helpfulness of imagination and its potential. That is, *The Enchanted Castle* is a book for children that demonstrates how children use reading to develop higher-order cognitive skills. As such, it comments on what children's literature can (and maybe should) do, and this reading of the novel recognizes and values its metacommentary on the use of children's literature. The fact that Nesbit's novel has already anticipated all these insights long in advance of cognition studies highlights Nikolajeva's argument that cognitive theory, as well as cognitive science, could benefit from engaging more with literary criticism and vice versa. To take her assertion further, Nesbit's theories about imagination—its use in more sophisticated cognitive functions, and reading's contribution to the growth of imagination—are all attributes evident in her novel. Close reading *The Enchanted Castle* suggests that what may seem like current cognitive insights are actually not new as they have been implemented and explored for over one hundred years in children's fantasy literature.

Works Cited

Anderson, Susan. "Time, Subjectivity, and Modernism in E. Nesbit's Children's Fiction."

    Children's Literature Association Quarterly, vol. 32 no. 4, 2007, pp. 308-22. *Project*

    MUSE, doi:10.1353/chq.2007.0046

Bogdan, Radu J. *Mindvaults: Sociocultural Grounds for Pretending and Imagining*. MIT Press,

    2013.

Engel, Susan. *The Intellectual Lives of Children*. Harvard UP, 2021.

Fromm, Gloria G. "E. Nesbit and the Happy Moralist." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 11, no.

    1, 1984, pp. 45–65. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3831153.

Gilead, Sarah. "Magic Abjured: Closure in Children's Fantasy Fiction." *PMLA*, vol. 106, no. 2,

    1991, pp. 277–93. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/462663.

Gillespie, Diane. *The Mind's We: Contextualism in Cognitive Psychology*. Southern Illinois UP,

    1992.

Hemans, Felicia Dorothea. *The Poetical Works of Felicia Dorothea Hemans*. Oxford UP, 1914, p.

    396.

Keen, Suzanne. *Empathy and the Novel*. Oxford UP, 2007.

Kidd, David Comer, and Emanuele Castano. "Reading Literary Fiction Improves Theory of

    Mind." *Science*, vol. 342, no. 6156, Oct. 2013, pp. 377–80. *EBSCOhost*,

    https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1239918.

Knoepflmacher, U. C. "Of Babylands and Babylons: E. Nesbit and the Reclamation of the Fairy

    Tale." *Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature*, vol. 6, no. 2, 1987, pp. 299–325. *JSTOR*,

    www.jstor.org/stable/464274.

Lansner, Helen. "The Genius of E. Nesbit." *Elementary English*, vol. 43, no. 1, 1966, pp. 53–55.

    JSTOR, www.jstor.org/stable/41385939.

Moss, Anita. "Makers of Meaning: A Structuralist Study of Twain's Tom Sawyer and Nesbit's

    The Enchanted Castle." *Children's Literature Association Quarterly*, vol. 7 no. 3, 1982,

    pp. 39-45. *Project MUSE*, doi:10.1353/chq.0.0488.

Nesbit, Edith. *The Enchanted Castle*. 1907. Penguin Putnam, 1994.

Nicholson, Mervyn. "C. S. Lewis and the Scholarship of Imagination in E. Nesbit and Rider

    Haggard." *Renascence*, vol. 51, no. 1, Fall 1998, p. 41.

    EBSCOhost. https://doi.org/10.5840/renascence19985114.

Nikolajeva, Maria. "Edith Nesbit—The Maker of Modern Fairy Tales." *Merveilles et Contes*, vol.

    1, no. 1, 1987, pp. 31–44. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/41389934.

---. "Reading Fiction Is Good for Children's Cognitive, Emotional, and Social Development."

    Álabe, no. 20, July 2019, pp. 1–12. *EBSCOhost*, https://doi.org/10.15645/Alabe2019.20.12.

---. *Reading for Learning: Cognitive Approaches to Children's Literature*. John Benjamins, 2014.

Shtulman, Andrew, et al. "Could it? Should it? Cognitive Reflection Facilitates Children's

    Reasoning about Possibility and Permissibility." *Journal of Experimental Child

    Psychology*, vol. 235, no. 1, 2023, *ScienceDirect*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2023.105727.

Smogorzewska, Joanna, et al. "Creativity, Theory of Mind and Loneliness—The Links Between

    Cognitive and Cocial Abilities of School-Age Children." *Learning and Individual

    Differences*, vol. 115, no. 1, 2024, *ScienceDirect*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2024.102541.

White, Alan. R. "Imagining and Pretending." *Philosophical Investigations*, vol. 11, no.1, 1988, pp.

    300-14. *Wiley Online Library*, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9205.1988.tb00443.

Zdybel, Dorota. "Children's Conceptions of Memory and Imagination—From Conceptual

Knowledge to Metacognition. Phenomenographical Study." *Thinking Skills and Creativity*,

vol. 41, no. 1, 2021, *ScienceDirect*, https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tsc.2021.100855.

Justin Rogers is a PhD Candidate at Texas A&M University and Instructor of English at Tarleton

State University. His dissertation, *Art and Abyss: Aestheticism, Decadence, and the Supernatural

in Late Victorian Literature*, examines the aesthetic writings of Vernon Lee, Arthur Machen, and

Marie Corelli alongside their supernatural fiction. He has publications forthcoming in *Volupté* and

the edited collection *Marie Corelli: Cultural Currency, Popular Fiction and the Literary

Marketplace*. His article in *I19* is his first publication.

"A truly happy woman has, it is said, no history": Relational Utopia in *A Woman of To-*

Morrow*: *A Tale of the Twentieth Century

Leslie de Bont

British novelist and feminist essayist Alice Coralie Glyn is rarely mentioned in studies on Victorian feminism or speculative fiction, despite the distinctive nature of her literary work and biography. Alongside the feminist critical trend exploring the paradigm of the "lost," "forgotten," or "overlooked" female author,[5] this paper argues that the hybridity of Glyn's work may also have further contributed to her marginalization.

If Glyn's first novel, *The Idyll of the Star Flower: An Allegory of Life* (1895), did not particularly impress H. G. Wells (Philmus 181), her second novel, *A Woman of To-Morrow: A Tale of the Twentieth Century*, published in 1896 by The Women's Printing Society, seems to have received wider critical acclaim (see especially Glyn "Nature's Nuns" (422) and *A Drama in Dregs* (213)). The following year, Glyn released a play titled *A Drama in Dregs: A Life Story* before joining early feminist movements, advocating for female workers and for women's education ("Contributions" 221). In 1898, she founded "The Camelot Club" in London that "was intended as a convenient meeting place for working professional women. There was no entrance fee . . . . In 1901, there were 70 members" ("Sunday" (4) cited in Gordon and Doughan (30)). Upon her death in 1928, she bequeathed £25,000 to Lois Twenlow. Following Twenlow's death, and in accordance with Glyn's will, the remainder was given to Welwyn Garden City to create housing for older women, inspired by Ebenezer Howard's work on garden cities (Emily Hamer (1-13) and Colin Wilson).

---

[5] See Talia Schaffer *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late Victorian England* (2000), Katherine Binhammer and Jeanne Wood *Women and Literary History: "For There She Was"* (2003), and Deborah M. Withers *Virago Reprints and Modern Classics: The Timely Business of Feminist Publishing* (2021).

Many of these biographical elements are reflected in *A Woman of To-Morrow*, a satirical and futuristic tale composed of excerpts from the journals of Miss Letitia Primington, who awakens in the family vault in 1996 after a hundred-year coma, wearing nothing but a shroud. Letitia quickly realises that gender equality has become the norm in twentieth-century London and that she will have no choice but to adapt to her new environment. While the novel needs to be read within the tradition of feminist utopias,[6] which in the words of Barnita Bagchi "conjure up an idealized world where active, thoughtful women ameliorate the 'wrongs of women'" (47), Glyn's text distinctly differs from more famous utopian writings from late-Victorian feminist authors, such as *New Amazonia* (1889) by Elizabeth Burgoyne Corbett or *Gloriana; or, The Revolution of 1900* (1890) by Lady Florence Dixie, which rely on their protagonist's adhesion to the utopian world, detailing the workings of the utopian technologies and political system via systematic comparisons with their Victorian background. Similarly, Helen Kingston argues that

> in the great surge of utopian writing that was produced during the fin de siècle, Edward Bellamy, William Morris and H. G. Wells among others . . . made a radical shift in utopian thinking by drawing a historical trajectory between their own time and that of utopia: Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000–1887* (1888) and Morris's *News from Nowhere* (1890) are narrated from an imagined future, and Wells's *A Modern Utopia* (1905), though nominally set on a "distant planet," is nonetheless preoccupied with how to make the transition from this world to that. (58)

By contrast, *A Woman of To-Morrow* humorously emphasizes the subjective and emotional experience, as well as the intellectual journey, of a reluctant middle-aged woman who has no choice but to come to terms with an utterly new *zeitgeist*. While Letitia is indeed initially

---

[6] See Alison Byerly *Are We There Yet?: Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism* (2013) and Ignatius Frederick Clarke, *British Future Fiction, 1700-191, Volume 6: Woman Triumphant* (2017).

unconvinced and generally unimpressed by either gender equality or most technological progress—particularly in urban planning, transportation, and clothing—she eventually partially adapts to twentieth-century habits by forcing herself to propose marriage to the eminent Professor Ambrose Lexicon, a specialist in the Victorian Era who is ironically described as "the greatest antiquarian authority of the day" (15) and whose obsessive fieldwork on Queen Boadicea's remains adds to the novel's tongue-in-cheek revisiting of the marriage plot.

The utopian program, therefore, does not lie so much in the content of the 1996 world imagined by Glyn—a mostly undesirable horizon to Letitia—but rather in the protagonist's ability to reassess Victorian values and norms in light of an ideal of equality that she initially does not approve of. Overall, the text demonstrates the necessity of supporting the acceptance of change and uses the landmarks of speculative and utopian fiction as a means to pursue a textual strategy that highlights the importance of feminine solidarity, as expressed by secondary female characters: Lettice, her brilliant great-grandniece, and to a lesser extent, Madge Speedwell, a "harum-scarum" novelist (16, 68, 156), as well as Sister Monica, a nun who helps underprivileged pensioners in East End. Letitia's gradual and conflicted integration into an egalitarian twentieth century allows Glyn to mock her protagonist's ingrained Victorian traditions in order to explore feminine bonding as a more ambitious and inclusive utopian horizon. She does so by employing an ironic and political writing style that not only revisits the conventions of utopian and speculative fictions that

are part of a broader and feminist renewal of utopian writing,[7] but also of the diary[8] and the

bildungsroman.

The Politics of Female Time Traveling

In *A Woman of To-Morrow*, time traveling is very political; and, as its dedication to

"Madame Sarah Grand" (i) reminds us, the text fully belongs to first-wave feminism, which, in the

UK, notably focused on women's right to vote—starting with the creation of the National Union

of Women Suffrage Societies in 1897 and the founding of the Women's Social and Political Union

(WSPU) by Emmeline Pankhurst in 1903—and also on the rights to own property (Married

Women's Property Act of 1870), to choose a career and go to university (with the foundations of

the first two women's colleges, Girton and Newnham, at the University of Cambridge, in 1869

and 1871, respectively[9]), and to gain custody of their children after a divorce (thanks to the Custody

of Infants Act of 1839, which followed a campaign led by Caroline Norton). These numerous

advances in society were reinforced by the advent of subsequent cultural phenomena, including

the New Woman, heralded by Sarah Grand in her influential essay "The New Aspect of the Woman

---

[7] See Lyman Tower Sargent "Women in Utopia," especially p. 279, and Nicole Anae "Ecofeminist Utopian Speculations in Henrietta Dugdale's *A Few Hours in a Far-off Age* (1883); Catherine Helen Spence's *A Week in the Future* (1888); Mary Anne Moore-Bentley's *A Woman of Mars*; *Or, Australia's Enfranchised Woman* (1901); and Joyce Vincent's *The Celestial Hand: A Sensational Story* (1903)" in *Dystopias and Utopias on Earth and Beyond: Feminist Ecocriticism of Science Fiction*, edited by Douglas A. Vakoch (2021).

[8] Lorna Marten's authoritative study *The Diary Novel* (1985) shows that the fictional genre borrowed from the sea journal and travel diaries and dates back to the late seventeenth century (64). While it is concomitant to the birth of the adventure novel, both Puritan diaries and satire quickly followed, with Thackeray's *Jeame's Diaries* (1845), for example (65-68). Catherine Delafied's study on women's diaries as narratives, *Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century* (2009), prolongs Marten's analysis, and shows how female diary writing transformed the epistolary novel while embracing the tensions between authorship and (male) editing. See especially pp. 157-74.

[9] Lettice mentions these constituent colleges in her speech: "But the remarkable records left by women of their achievements at Girton and at Newnham, even in the face of chilling opposition, seem to prove incontestably that the 'raw material' of brain-force was there" (76).

Question" (1894), which manifested, among other things, a keen enthusiasm for cycling (Katrina Jungnickel) and a need for more practical clothes, leading in turn to the Rational Dress Movement[10]—all of which are prominently featured in Glyn's novel. While Letitia wakes up in an environment both familiar and foreign to her—as in many travel narratives and other canonical utopian stories—the novel, from the very first pages onward, ironically focuses on the protagonist's gradual and painful realization that she has become irrelevant and outdated, and that the social progress she used to disapprove of has now become the norm. Much to Letitia's dismay, the women of 1996 London dress as they please, go to university, have the right to vote, and hold the same jobs as men, thereby outwardly challenging the legitimacy of Victorian feminine and domestic values and ideology.[11]

Lucy Sargisson asserts that utopian literature is characterized by a "wilful transgression of time" (57), to which Anna Gilarek adds that this genre utilizes "a temporal displacement technique which is intended to break with the linear perception of time and, consequently, to challenge accepted modes of thinking" (35). This "willful transgression" induces overwhelming tension and disorientation for Letitia, as in her first meeting with Lettice, where, despite being dressed in a shroud, she criticizes the unladylike—if not androgynous—attire of her great-grandniece:

---

[10] See Sarah Parker "Fashion and Dress Culture" and Diana Crane "Clothing Behaviour as Non-Verbal Resistance: Marginal Women and Alternative Dress in the Nineteenth Century."

[11] In her fascinating study of the social conventions of middle-class and bourgeois domesticity, Elizabeth Langland examines the "mystification of the Angel in the House" (9) and explains that while "the pioneering work of social historians like Leonore Davidoff, Carol Dyhouse, Catherine Hall and Anne Summers has already begun to challenge the historical portrait of the Victorian woman as the passive, idle and dependent creatures of the prevailing ideology" (11), the "discursive formation of domesticity" influentially sustained values of control, responsibility and duty as well as "the mystique of the happy, harmonious Victorian home as a refuge" (14) for women, despite the growing existence of countervailing social forces. Similarly, Kay Boardman's study of the numerous women's magazines shows the ubiquity of the domestic ideology and social paternalism "centred around the concept of separate spheres" (150) and relying on a specifically feminine sense of responsibility.

I glanced at her attire. It consisted of a drab cloth covert-coat made very full and long, a blue

and white checked waistcoat, tweed inexpressibles and very high Russia leather boots. . . .

"Do you mean me to understand . . . that you habitually dress—in this immodest, and I may

add, indecent manner?"

"Look here, great-grand-aunt, if you and I are to be friends (and I'm sure I for one am quite

prepared to be), don't let us begin by calling each other names. . . . It's a great waste of time

for a woman to stand chattering over dress." (8-9)

While Letitia seeks to impart her values of modesty and reserve, the old dress norms hold no

authority for young Lettice, who, on the contrary, is driven by an unflagging curiosity about the

language and objects of the Victorian past:

"But have you no—chaperon?" I enquired with a feeling of dismay for Lettice was young,

and despite her strange attire, quite pretty.

"What's that?" my niece demanded. "Is it an animal, vegetable, or mineral product? Never

heard the name; I suppose it is some early Victorian animal? Was it vertebrate or

invertebrate?"

"A chaperon," I rejoined with some emphasis, "was in my day considered absolutely

indispensable to any well-brought-up young girl who went 'out'!"

"Went out. Oh, I see! The weather was every bit as uncertain in those days as it is now, and

you were never safe without an umbrella!" (10-11)

The satire continues as Lettice explains the uselessness of such a function in her era, which has

gotten rid of the Separate Sphere doctrine, further noting that men and women now wear the same

clothes: "'My suits are just like everybody else's in these days'" (9). As she lends Letitia some

clothing of her own, the conversation shifts to hygiene, ventilation, and comfort:

"Whalebones! and steels!" echoed Lettice. "Why, what a barbarous idea to encase one's frame in such things. . . . Do you not think that a certain knowledge of the laws of hygiene, of heredity, and of sanitation presents a kind of moral responsibility for everyone? . . . All our lives are more or less interdependent. . . . Take, for instance, the laws of sanitation. . . . [T]he picturesque cottages which look so comely to the eye may be very graves of disease, built perhaps over the very brink of cesspools or stagnant wells! . . . [T]he moral point is to awaken their own sense of individual responsibility. . . . The laws of sanitation affect everyone more or less." (44-5)

These exchanges clearly demonstrate that the didactic transmission in this story operates in reverse: it is not Letitia, the ancestress, who teaches the Victorian norms and customs, as she would have wished, but Lettice who imparts the knowledge of her time, eventually providing Letitia with clothing that is equally suited to contemporary tastes and to her great-grandaunt's reservations, thereby initiating an intergenerational bond. And while the "contagion" mentioned by Lettice (which also clearly alludes to Letitia's illness and ensuing coma) reinforces the initial scathing critique of Victorian habits, the debate is eventually resolved when Letitia opts for a kilt (44), supposedly preserving her "dignified reserve" (46) while helping her avoid any option that might evoke the Rational Dress Movement (41), which she deems utterly ridiculous. As Sarah Parker notes, women's clothing became a true strategic issue in the Victorian Era: "During the 19th century, dress was a battleground" (583). Additionally, Hughes reminds us that, in the fiction of the time, clothing was intimately linked to action and power (105). In the novel, however, clothing is more of a locus of constant and intricate negotiation as Letitia eventually marries in white and revels in having her sartorial choice respected (159). While this victory testifies to a persistence of Victorian traditions, it also reveals that Letitia has had her say and that the new century readily

accepts diverse practices. Through its satire of supposedly feminine menial concerns, Glyn's novel represents the nearly systematic search for compromises, while reminding readers of the absurdity of both Victorian constraints and of time traveling.

The dialectic of materiality and values eventually leaves the dressing room, as Letitia is forced to revisit every aspect of her past life as a Victorian woman:

The Adolescent Club [was] a large and beautifully furnished building, very modern in its luxuries, and seemingly furnished with every artistic and practical requisite which the mind could dream of.

"I do not . . . approve of Ladies' Clubs. The idea of women being 'clubbable' seems to me so very unwomanly. Still, I must admit, that this club looks as though it were a success."

(58)

One should note that Letitia's critique of egalitarian society is not without nuance and that she gradually comes to appreciate several advancements in 1996 London. This is particularly evident in the way she experiences various locations that she and Lettice visit. Although most of the novel is set at "Primington Manor, Quietshire," the precise geographical detail vanishes once Letitia awakens in 1996, suggesting a shift into a space and time no longer marked by quiet, thereby mirroring the character's confusion. Primington Manor, the family home isolated from the rest of the world, described as "[a]n ancient high-gabled Elizabethan structure encompassed by a solid stone wall" (5), has changed significantly over a century. In what was once "her mother's sanctum" (5), Letitia is shocked to see a "lounging ottoman freely littered with comic prints and papers, and with a banjo also thrown carelessly across it" (5), philosophy books (including *The Subjection of Women* (1869) by John Stuart Mill), university magazines, pen-and-ink caricatures, and a cigarette case, leading her to initially think that her cousin Tom has taken over the place, while astute readers

may recognize some of these as typical accessories of the "New Woman." Lettice's library also includes numerous fictional essays such as *The Data of Ethics* and *Modern Morality*, written by a secondary character, Madge Speedwell, a novelist who embodies an utterly modern version of femininity that resembles a modernized "New Woman" and opens up Letitia's intimate, cloistered domestic space onto a social and intellectual macrocosm.[12] And while Letitia feels at times trapped (32), bored (53), lonely, and isolated (132), the domestic space in 1996 London is intricately connected with the outside world and plays a key role in the circulation of knowledge and political debates. In Lettice's London apartment, the library mainly consists of intellectual and scientific journals, such as *The Political Review*, *The Legal Times*, *The Philosophical Record*, and *The Scientific Quarterly* (50), which contrast sharply with Letitia's preferred readings: "Miss Yonge and Miss Jane Austen" (14), and "[s]tories . . . about love-affairs, or home-life, or romantic scenes, or rescues from murder or something of that sort: or even papers about parties, or clothes, or hats" (50)[13]—one could add to Letitia's reading list a later literary reference, Charles Kingsley's 1859 historical novel, *Westward Ho!*, whose hero, Amyas Leigh, seems to embody a particularly irresistible type of masculinity for the Victorian protagonist (59).

London itself has also evolved and become structured around a new ideal of communication and exchange, and the description of London with its many networks clearly refers to the great

---

[12] Throughout the text, Madge Speedwell refers to many Victorian authors including Swinburne (67), Lewis Carroll (69), and Thomas Hardy (119), and Letitia says of her that "each fragment that she writes, however slight, is full of that passion and pathos which real genius alone can hold" (57). While Letitia expectedly criticizes Madge's unruly manners (33) and praises her Victorian ancestress, Lady Prudentia Speedwell ("an unusually superior and agreeable woman" (18)), the text does unambiguously take Madge's side.

[13] In response to Letitia's reading list, Lettice remarks "there may be some books of that sort left by one of my small child cousins who was here the other day" (50).

Victorian novels of technological progress.[14] In the London of 1996, the electric train allows for high-speed travel, but it is ultimately the introduction of gardens and balconies in the city—aligning with Ruskinian ideals—that catches Letitia's attention:

> On our arrival in London, so many new and astounding sights met my gaze, that the marvels of the electric railway seemed to sink into comparative insignificance. London, which in the nineteenth century was intersected with a veritable honeycomb of streets and squares, varying certainly in size and pretension, but all uniformly dreary and unlovely—this ancient London had entirely disappeared! Broad, beautiful, tree-shadowed roadways, adorned with fountains, statues, and with open spaces somewhat resembling the best of the Paris boulevards, traversed the city in every direction. The hideous jerry and stucco-built dwellings of the Victorian era had vanished, leaving the landscape ennobled by lines of picturesque red brick houses, . . . each one built with balconies . . . . It was indeed the London dreamed of by Ruskin. (48)

Here, the metaphor of the network ("intersected," "honeycomb," "ennobled by lines") suggesting how urban space is conceived as an actual driver for open and harmonious communication, allows female characters to walk safely through the city. However, and unlike other feminist utopias that propose a similar invention (Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 1905 novella *Sultana's Dream*, for instance), Letitia's amazement does not extend to the "aerial cabs" (54) she sees floating above Piccadilly: "Only this morning I was whisked up to London like a telegram. And now you wish me to go in an aerial cab. No, I am at least a human being—if an old one—and I utterly and emphatically decline to be turned into a bat!" (54). This humorous refusal of modern

---

[14] See Nicholas Daly "Railway Novels: Sensation Fiction and the Modernization of the Senses," Alison Byerly *Are We There Yet?: Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism* (2013), and Charlotte Mathieson *Mobility in the Victorian Novel: Placing the Nation* (2015).

transportation, which she perceives as objectifying ("like a telegram") or dehumanizing (as she refuses "to be turned into a bat"), might amuse nineteenth- and twenty-first-century readers alike and reinforces the construction of Letitia as a conservative and down-to-earth character who resists these modern forms of transportation. Louise Kane argues that futuristic transportation is a distinctly modernist trope: "Flying machines in the work of science-fiction writers like H. G. Wells have been seen to embody 'the Machine Age'" (49) with what John Telotte refers to as this form of transportation's "modernist underpinnings" (3). Paradoxically, Letitia's hedging language ("if an old one," "at least"), along with her clear emphasis ("emphatically") and bombastic lexicon, also harken back to the range of efforts she makes to gradually adapt to 1996. Through Letitia, the text fosters a poetics of reluctance, often laced with irony, that, despite its progressive discourse, reckons that the modern ideal of communication championed by technological progress is not self-evident and may require a lengthy adaptative process.

Ultimately, the novel's speculative premise primarily serves to convey Glyn's elaborate social and political stance, which extends far beyond its initial feminist concerns. When Letitia and Lettice return from visiting a poorhouse in the East End, Letitia marvels at what she sees in a public garden: "Beneath the trees were groups of happy families; the children were playing about on the grass, the elders partaking of the refreshments supplied at the little kiosks . . . . Bands were playing lustily, and the whole scene presented a most festive and animated appearance" (116). This ideal description, set against the backdrop of a sunset, leads to a discussion about the right to leisure:

> "I think," said Lettice, "the indifference which the Victorian authorities seem to have shown towards providing harmless recreations for the poor was simply disgraceful. No wonder the public-houses were always crammed when the working man or woman was provided with

scarcely any counter-attractions . . . . Drinks are to be obtained (together with food) at any

of the kiosks, and . . . dancing, out-of-door minstrels, entertainments, etc. are all permitted

and even encouraged."

"And are the people orderly?"

"Most certainly. Why should they not be? You see, in this century we have at last solved the

problem of how to be good though happy." (117)

Here again, physical and material considerations enable a broader debate on values, emotions,

morality, and happiness, thereby suggesting the affective utopia has more weight than the idealized

political or technological system of 1996. Like many other (feminist) utopian narratives, this is

enabled by a guide or mentor figure (such as Sister Sara in *Sultana's Dream*, Principal Grey in

New Amazonia, or the old man in the ninth dream of *Man's Rights* (1870) by Annie Denton Cridge)

who reassures the protagonist and lessens their disorientation. The second section of this paper

will thus aim to show how Letitia's singular portrayal—that of a time traveler who has left her

Victorian context and initially resisted the utopian framework—contributes to showcasing the

confusing, yet desirable, power of feminine voices and characterization across the political and

temporal spectrum.

The Aporetic Utopia of Feminine Voices

Glyn's novel is built on the tension between an ambitious and elaborate social, affective, and

political discourse and an unsuspectedly complicated character who finds herself in a new

environment she deems hostile but that still enables her to develop her own ideas and to eventually

find her own unique, albeit marginal, voice. While critics like Elizabeth Podnieks have often

claimed that "New Women stories are more innovative in content than in the form" (175), I argue

that Glyn's hybrid work which combines an elusive utopian content with a conflictual character might actually be read as proto-modernist, even if it does not contain any of what Lyn Pykett refers to as a "modernist discourse of rupture" (57), if only because Letitia ends up marrying the slightly conservative Ambrose Lexicon.

I argue that the tensions of proto-modernity and formal experiment are first perceptible in the text's deep hybridity as well as in the unsteady emergence of Letitia's voice. Although Letitia's surprise and ignorance are two pillars of the narrative strategy, the entire text plays on Letitia's hesitation or rejection of twentieth-century England which, as in the more famous speculative novels of Edward Bellamy, for example, enriches or complicates the supposed message. As Richard Toby Widdicombe observes, "the narrator [is] so unreliable that meaning is seriously obscured and the would-be didactic becomes, in reality, markedly impressionist" (94). In other words, Letitia is not simply a one-dimensional foil for supposed Victorian conservatism. She is capable of self-deprecation, like when she says she feels like "a human failure" (133), and can change perspectives, as when she adopts the point of view of the undertaker who sees her rising from her grave: "[W]hat was the good man's amazement on beholding me!" (4).

However, in the preface signed by Coraline Glyn herself, the first portraits of Letitia are not particularly flattering: "Since it has fallen to my lot to 'edit' the Journal of Miss Letitia Primington, it has frequently been borne in upon me that this worthy lady—unlike the immortal Silas Wegg— was not 'a literary character'" (ii). The use of quotation marks, as well as the comparison with Dickens's character, seem particularly noteworthy and introduce a metafictional break with the Victorian canon. Letitia is presented as a bland character, "a guileless and blameless old spinster" (ii) who is paradoxically unlikely to interest the readership for whom she was created. Like the "nameless girl" whose face expresses "[t]he same one meaning, neither more nor less" (line 8) in

Christina Rossetti's "In an Artist's Studio," Letitia is "without history" (160), embodying a nondescript femininity that, in Glyn's text, suggests she has nothing to share but dogmatic references to the social status quo. Several later editorial notes seem to depict her as a rather faulty character, whose lack of education makes her particularly helpless: "Letitia's ignorance of the market value of 'untrained labour' may appear to professional people almost incredible. But the Editor believes that such ignorance is hardly exaggerated" (30). A later note (ironically illustrating Letitia's use of the term "rigmarole" to describe a mortgage) states that "Miss Letitia's knowledge of financial terms seems a little misty" (38).

Glyn's preface is followed by another preface, this time by Letitia, who situates her own point of view:

I, Letitia Primington, desire to preface these remarks by stating that, alike by birth, parentage, and training, I belong emphatically to the nineteenth and not to the twentieth century. As, however, owing to a striking coincidence I have been enabled to extend my experience over two most eventful centuries, I propose to offer a few reminiscences for the benefit of those who are understood to represent what I believe is termed—The Modern Womanhood! (1)

This paragraph—which unlike Glyn's preface is not featured on a separate page—is immediately followed by Letitia's first diary entry, showing from the outset that the diary is not just for privately recollecting thoughts and states of mind. The writing in vignettes and the internal focus show that Letitia is securing herself a voice by putting her experiences down on paper: this is clearly what Catherine Delafield calls a "performance for outsiders" (1) that fully aligns with nineteenth-century experiments with diary fiction, conveying thoughts and ideas the protagonist has not conveyed elsewhere and passing them on to modern women. Letitia's didactic tone initially betrays the contradictions inherent in the heroine's status and desires for upholding the Victorian status

quo with Glyn's feminist agenda that aims to show the relevance of social progress and gender equality despite her conservative character's reticence. As a result, the text develops an aporetic utopia that echoes Widdicombe's analysis of the ambiguity inherent in utopian narratives: "the most enduring Utopian texts . . . are those which highlight textual ambiguity and aporetically retreat from the sort of textual closure which would suggest that the author is entirely satisfied with the Utopian vision he/she has created" (98).

While Letitia's is a particular case that defies the realist framework, she might be productively read with Ronjaunee Chatterjee's theory of "the feminine singularity" as "a model of subjectivity—particularly feminine subjectivity—grounded in what is partial, contingent and in relation rather than what is merely 'alone'" (3). Chatterjee also asserts that "To be singular is usually understood to be one and only one. Yet the grounds of what makes anyone—a subject and an individual—are multiple, fractured, and contested" (2). Early on, Lettice explains that "she was christened after her great-grandaunt 'who died ages ago. She was a sort of family model, I believe, and no doubt they wanted to keep her memory green and so they christened me Letitia. Most people, however, call me Lettice. It is less of a mouthful'" (7). That she and Letitia are "about the same build" (9) further reinforces the reworked *doppelgänger* aesthetic and inscribes Letitia within a wider network or community with which she initially refuses to connect. To quote Chatterjee again, there is an inescapable "form of likeness" that prompts interaction in the two characters and is the culmination of Glyn's relational utopia.

While Letitia refuses interaction and contingency in the first pages, she does come to her senses and the text also borrows from the *bildungsroman* trope of social integration. The protagonist is forced to adapt, be it only to Lettice's kindness and hospitality, and from Chapter II onward, the bulk of Letitia's diary extracts is based on conversations adapting the model of

Platonic dialogues. These dialogues show Letitia's development and dramatize her reactions to the new ideas that confront her. For instance, having discussed Lady Godiva and Griselda with Madge Speedwell (119-20), and having compared their respective readings of the two characters, Letitia becomes aware that there might be another interpretation on the latter character who might not be the paragon of patience and obedience she had always considered her to be: "I felt rather impatient. Grisilda[15] had always been one of the cherished heroines of my youth. But somehow I felt that Madge had artfully made out a very plausible case against her" (120). Madge's own reading, that Griselda's submission was "unreasoning and slavish" (120), prompts Letitia to take a step back and reinterpret both the texts and the wider gendered norms they rely on. This scene revolves around the foundational feminist gesture of reinterpreting tradition and of reconsidering given landmarks,[16] and shows the importance of feminine and communal conversations. On other occasions, notably when Madge talks to her about sexual attraction by quoting Schopenhauer (122), Letitia is much less receptive, saying things like "[Y]our remarks are positively improper" (122). But, if Madge is unable to get her to adopt her more subversive ideas, the offended Letitia still learns from their erudite conversations that notably include quotations from Shakespeare and Tolstoy (63), foreign words (64), and philosophical (64-5) and theological debates (68).

Even if Letitia thoroughly remains sceptical and does not agree with everything her modern counterparts tell her, she gradually emerges from their many conversations as a complex individual who is forced to negotiate and confront her ideas and values to her feelings, experiences, perceptions, and intuitions. Her half-hearted evolution shows precisely that, unlike what she claims, "A truly happy woman has, it is said, no history" (160), she does have a history, one of

---

[15] While Letitia calls her "Grisilda," Glyn spells it "Griselda" in "Nature's Nuns," which suggests her distance with Letitia's erroneous interpretation of the character.

[16] See Tania Modleski "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings."

increased tolerance and adaptation that leads to building her own voice and developing her own ideas. She eventually dares to contradict her interlocutors (156-57), not because of a deep-seated reflex stemming from her conservative values, but because she has become able to formulate playful hypotheses, as when she says "I not unnaturally asked him whether, since he so strongly advocates professions for women, he would like *me* to become an M.P., or lawyer or something of that sort" (168), gradually developing her own way of thinking, bending her heritage here and enriching it there—which might be read as Glyn's adaptation of the *bildungsroman* formula.

Lettice and Letitia subsequently develop a trusting relationship over the course of their many conversations, and a freedom of tone is gradually established, as when Lettice subversively declares "I am sure that many good women find children as wearisome as a Wagner opera" (126). Later, she unambiguously deconstructs the maternal instinct, saying, "you see the natural instincts of one century are quite different to those of another" (130), before finally outlining a family ethic: "The 'monopoly instinct' which speaks of my child, my possession, must be got rid of before we can begin to call ourselves really civilized" (130). While several first-wave feminist utopias restricted reproduction and childbearing to eugenic practices (as in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915) or Corbett's *New Amazonia*), Glyn's discourse differs significantly and introduces a particularly modern sense of relativism that anticipates second-wave feminist debates on reproductive rights, while prolonging many of the thematic concerns that were actually central to New Woman fiction, as Podnieks, drawing from Ellen Rosenman and Claudia Klaver, has shown:

> The maternal paragon was also disputed. . . . Rosenman and Klaver . . . conclude that images of the demonic and aberrant mother created "fraught sites of instability" generating "both anxiety and discursive possibility" (8-9). The reorientation of Victorian studies in the last few decades has dislodged "maternity from its imbrication in conventional formulations of

domestic femininity" (Rosenman and Klaver 11), necessitating the reconceptualizing of

motherhood as well. (178)[17]

Lettice's remarks do more than "defamiliarize maternity" (Rosenman and Klaver 19) by promoting

a dialogue about motherhood's "numerous possibilities" (Podnieks 176) and casually offer what

Bonnie Kime Scott calls "a radical critique of the patriarchal family . . . centred on alternate

familial forms" (14), which favors the excitement of an intergenerational bond with her great-

grandaunt over a normative maternal horizon.

Similarly, and in keeping with many New Woman texts as Ann Heilman[18] and Pykett have

convincingly shown, Glyn uses the futurist scheme to revisit the predominance of marriage in

women's narratives, as when Lettice tries to make her great-grandaunt understand that wedlock is

no longer the primary vocation of every woman: "It is some women's vocation . . . but a special

aptitude for marriage, like a special talent for art, is not granted to us all" (56-57). As Heilman and

Pykett both note, the discourse conveyed here as a 1996 norm is in line with many New Woman

claims, but was nonetheless a rather seditious statement to make in the late Victorian Era. The text

introduces a counter-discourse within the formula of the "marriage plot" that concludes her text,

albeit in an ambiguous manner, as marriage only happens because of a joke played by Madge

Speedwell. As she pretends to educate Letitia on 1996 norms, just as Lettice has done throughout

the novel, Madge playfully explains that it is up to women to propose marriage in the twentieth

century and that Letitia's flirty behaviour may have compromised Ambrose Lexicon's integrity as

per twentieth-century standards. Letitia falls for Madge's joke and sets out to write a love letter to

Lexicon and ask him to marry her—and narrowly avoids being ridiculed thanks to Lettice's

---

[17] Podnieks also draws from Ann Ardis's work, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (1990).

[18] See *The New Woman and Female Independence* (1998) and "Marriage and its Discontents."

thoughtful intervention, but she does not escape unscathed. This misadventure allows her to put her feelings into words and to appropriate emotions she had not previously allowed herself— eventually accepting Lexicon's proposal in the penultimate chapter.

Like her politics that extend the feminist claims upending Victorian patriarchal norms, and like her protagonist's hesitant and reticent integration into the twentieth century, Glyn's depiction of feminine solidarity and bonding is not straightforward. Even if she acknowledges her modern friends' rejection of most of her Victorian values, Letitia tries to expound to them how certain nineteenth-century cultural landmarks work, giving them real history lessons and developing her own thinking in the process. The most eloquent example is probably her attempt to explain the character of Mrs. Grundy (23). Without explicitly referring to Thomas Morton's *Speed the Plough* (1798) or to the line that has made her an icon of a certain form of conservatism, "What will Mrs. Grundy say? What will Mrs. Grundy think?"[19] Letitia explains that Mrs. Grundy's "personality . . . did not exist at all in what you call a human sense. She was a sort of abstract idea of what people ought to do and what they ought not" (23). Mrs. Grundy later reappears in Lettice's speech on women's rights, as a counterexample to be laughed at in 1996: "Such a state of things could merely have existed during the Great Glacial Period dominated by the late Mrs Grundy!" (77), while conversely the quotations from Sarah Grand, George Egerton, and Ella Dixon are widely applauded (82) and sustain the extradiegetic reflection on feminist heritage and unsuspected tradition. Most of what Letitia wishes to pass on constitutes an obstacle to the *bildung* program, which, according to Amanda Auerbach,[20] is equally based on integration into society and on

---

[19] See Anette Wheeler Carafelli "What Will Mrs. Grundy Say? Women and Comedy" for a detailed analysis of the comic issues associated with Mrs. Grundy.

[20] Auerbach expands on the classic works by Georg Lukács and Franco Moretti and defines the plot of the *bildungsroman* as follows: "a plot that foregrounds development in a specific direction— that of self-awareness and self-control" Auerbach (686 n5).

emotional development leading to some degree of autonomy. In contrast, Lettice's speech on women's rights, which deconstructs the arguments against feminist movements and revisits the history of European first-wave feminism, complicates the interplay of Letitia's Victorian views and Lettice's modern perspectives. By confronting Letitia with her great-grandniece's reading of the nineteenth century, the text indirectly shows how the heroine is forced to distance herself from her initial point of view, or to "self-distance"—a climactic *bildung* moment according to Auerbach's study (667).

Unlike Lexicon's talk, which is not reproduced in Letitia's diary,[21] Lettice's discourse runs over twelve pages (73-84) and silences most of Letitia's habitual reticent comments: "'My dear Lettice, I was greatly interested. Of course,' I felt bound to add, 'I do *not* approve of women on platforms. I think our sphere lies elsewhere. Still, on the whole, the lecture interested me not a little'" (84). Lettice's brilliant rhetoric is a turning point in Letitia's integration into the twentieth century as she witnesses feminist ideas puts into practice firsthand. While Letitia's hedging language and usual emphasis are still here, she stops criticizing the habits of the twentieth century after her great-grandniece's speech, only occasionally engaging in more moderate, if not supportive comments, such as:

[T]hey gave me some food for reflection. I thoroughly disapproved of the twentieth century and of most of its proceedings, still I could not feel sure whether perhaps—had I been born in the poorer class of life—I should not have found more sympathy for my needs amidst twentieth century people than would have been the case amidst my nineteenth century contemporaries. (106)

---

[21] She says, "But deeply interesting and profitable as I know it to have been, I do not think that it left a sufficiently definite impression upon my mind for me to reproduce it in these pages" (70).

As Lettice's speech posits contemporary feminist authors as key figures of a widely acclaimed

tradition, this induces a deep sense of estrangement in Letitia akin to "the Novum," which, as

Gilarek explains, is

> a concept introduced by Bloch and later applied to science fiction by Darko Suvin (1998,
>
> 68). In Bloch's understanding the Novum was a "genuinely new thing" (Brown 2003),
>
> something that raises awareness of future prospects and provides new energy to transcend
>
> the present (Csicsery-Ronay 2008, 48). Suvin sees it as a "cognitive innovation," a literary
>
> creation which deviates from "the norms of reality known to [the character] (1998, 68). 36-
>
> 37

Letitia's cognitive distancing or decentering, induced by Lettice's depiction of the new feminist

movements as a milepost of women's history, is part and parcel of her *bildung*, and eventually of

Glyn's utopian program. Letitia is forced to curb her scepticism towards New Woman movements

and to consider their victories and achievements. In other words, through Lettice's speech, Glyn

creates for her contemporary readers a utopian community of women that started with the New

Woman activists of the late nineteenth century that ultimately included the initially resistant voices

that opposed most of their claims.

In addition, the development of a deep, feminine solidarity facilitates Letitia's integration

into the twentieth century. First, Lettice and Sister Monica—through her good works and unfailing

support for the inhabitants of the almshouses of the East End—constantly show her the extent to

which women's lives are inherently linked, as when they tell her "we modern women mean to help

each other" (82) and "all our lives are more or less interdependent" (44). However, in a final ironic

twist, Letitia insists on being officially entrusted or "given away" (158-59) to her husband by an

older man at the wedding ceremony, in order to respect her family's customs ("none of the

women—widows excepted—of my family ever dreamt of marrying without being given away. It would be so unseemly, so indecorous" (158) and to obey what she imagines to be the law ("I am not at all sure if it is legal? If the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Lord Chancellor or someone could not interfere" (158). When she finds that such "transfer" cannot take place, Letitia, reassured by her great-grandniece, concludes "The matter was thus arranged. And if any persons are desirous of further information thereon, I must inform them that Lettice was right in the view which she predicted all the authorities would take of the question" (159). The patriarchal transmission of the female body therefore does not take place, and it is the great-grandniece who steers operations, not with a constant concern for order and respect for the law, but by taking into account the affects and histories of each individual.

*

While the first section of this paper demonstrates how political discourse was bolstered by the protagonist's reluctance to embrace what the diegesis posited as a desirable future, the second part suggests that Glyn's hybrid text plays with the inherent ambivalence of utopian writing through her use of equivocal voices, exploring how feminine solidarity and inclusivity across the political, social, or temporal spectrum is the actual cornerstone of Glyn's utopian program. Gilarek observes that

> Experimenting with the temporal aspect makes the readers realize that the course of history is not predetermined, fixed and inevitable, but that the future can be shaped to fit whatever dreams and ideas people might have about living a better life. Therein lies the reality-altering potential of feminist speculative fiction. (44)

While Gilarek's analysis bears on late-twentieth-century utopian novels, I believe that Glyn's text might have striven to appeal to her readers in a similar way, using her reluctant protagonist as a case in point.

As the text confronts Victorian feminine values with a complex materiality initiated by the futurist narrative, it offers a radical critique of Victorian gendered politics while initiating a feminine and intergenerational dialogue that enables the protagonist to actively negotiate with her Novum and try to find a place within it. As hybrid diary, the text borrows as much from the *bildungsroman* as from the utopian novel, and shows the inadequacy of the two generic categories as soon as the writing focuses on the singularly absurd female experience of time travel. In other words, time travel has a dual political and aesthetic significance in which disorientation and hesitation, alongside the impossibility of value transmission, are part of a narrative strategy that aims to promote social progress and gender equality while allowing the supposedly nondescript and eminently conservative Victorian protagonist to find her voice and her place. Despite the utopian feminist agenda, and despite Letitia's ingrained will to enforce the Victorian status quo, the text's descriptions of conflicting affects and constant play on generic categories, fully illustrates Widdicombe's analysis and deploys a veritable praxis of inclusive transmission, which still resonates today: "[the greatest utopian authors] depart . . . from the world not to a utopia or alibi, but to another created universe . . . whose essential characteristic is to be infinitely transmissible" (98). While Glyn's hybrid text offers a social and relational utopia that differs from two major subgenres of New Woman fiction, the realist and didactic novel chartered by Nathalie Saudo-Welby[22] and Ann Heilmann,[23] and the lesser-known experiments with science fiction that

---

[22] See *Le Courage de Déplaire: Le Roman Féministe à la Fin de l'Ère Victorienne* (2019).

[23] See "Marriage and Its Discontents" *New Woman Fiction* (2000).

Susan Gubar named "femtasias" and "femtopias" (80) almost forty years ago, one cannot but hope

that its wide range of elusive formal experimentations will hopefully garner more critical attention.

Works Cited

"About Alice." *Alice Coralie Glyn Homes*, https://alicecoralieglynhomes.co.uk/about-alice/.

   Accessed 30 June 2024.

Allen, Grant. *The Woman Who Did*. 1895. Edited by Nicholas Ruddick, Broadview, 2004.

Anae, Nicole. "Ecofeminist Utopian Speculations in Henrietta Dugdale's *A Few Hours in a*

   Far-off Age (1883); Catherine Helen Spence's *A Week in the Future* (1888); Mary Anne

   Moore-Bentley's *A Woman of Mars*; *Or, Australia's Enfranchised Woman* (1901); and

   Joyce Vincent's *The Celestial Hand: A Sensational Story* (1903)." *Dystopias and*

   Utopias on Earth and Beyond: Feminist Ecocriticism of Science Fiction (1st ed.), edited

   by Douglas A. Vakoch, Routledge, 2021, pp. 98–113.

Ardis, Ann. *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism*. Rutgers UP, 1990.

Auerbach, Amanda. "Affective Transmission and the Invention of Characters in the Victorian

   Bildungsroman." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 48, no. 4, 2020, pp. 665–91.

Bagchi, Barnita. "Carrying Over: Analysing Female Utopias and Narratives of Female

   Education Cross-Culturally and Cross-Historically." *Culture, Society, and Development*

   in India: Essays for Amiya Kumar edited by Manoj Kumar Sanyal and Arunabha Ghosh,

   Orient Blackswan, 2009, pp. 43–59.

Baruch, Elaine Hoffman. "The Feminine 'Bildungsroman': Education through Marriage." *The*

   Massachusetts Review, vol. 22, no. 2, 1981, pp. 335–57. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25089147.

   Accessed 30 June 2024.

Binhammer, Katherine and Jeanne Wood. *Women and Literary History:* "*For There She*

   Was." U of Delaware P, 2003.

Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope*. Translated by Neville Plaice, Stephen Plaice, and Paul

     Knight, MIT Press, 1986.

Boardman, Kay. "The Ideology of Domesticity: The Regulation of the Household Economy in

     Victorian Women's Magazines." *Victorian Periodicals Review*, vol. 33, no. 2,

     2000, pp. 150–64. https://www.jstor.org/stable/20083724?seq=1. Accessed 28 February

     2025.

Brenan, Teresa. *The Transmission of Affect*. Cornell UP, 2004.

Brown, Judith. "Ernst Bloch and the Utopian Imagination." *Eras Journal*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2003,

     https://www.monash.edu/arts/philosophical-historical-indigenous-studies/eras/past-

     editions/edition-five-2003-november/ernst-bloch-and-the-utopian-imagination. Accessed

     8 April 2025.

Byerly, Alison. *Are We There Yet?: Virtual Travel and Victorian Realism*. U of Michigan P,

     2013.

Carafelli, Annette Wheeler. "What Will Mrs. Grundy Say? Women and Comedy." *Criticism*,

     vol. 38, no. 1, 1996, pp. 69–83. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23118202. Accessed 30 June

     2024.

Chatterjee, Ronjaunee. *Feminine Singularity: The Politics of Subjectivity in Nineteenth-Century

     Literature*. Stanford UP, 2022.

Clarke, Ignatius Frederick, *British Future Fiction, 1700-1914: Woman Triumphant*, vol. 6,

     Routledge, 2017.

"Contributions to the £20,000 Fund." *Votes for Women*, 4 June 1908, p. 221.

Corbett, Elizabeth Burgoyne. *New Amazonia*. London, Tower Publishing, 1889.

Crane, Diana. "Clothing Behaviour as Non-Verbal Resistance: Marginal Women and Alternative

Dress in the Nineteenth Century." *Fashion Theory*, vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 241–68.

Crawford, Elizabeth. "The Woman's Printing Society." British Library, 20 Oct 2020,

https://www.jstor.org/stable/30032080?seq=1. Accessed June 2024.

Csisery-Ronay, Istavan. *The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction*. Wesleyan UP, 2008.

Daly, Nicholas. "Railway Novels: Sensation Fiction and the Modernization of the Senses." *ELH*,

vol. 66, no. 2, 1999, pp. 461–87. https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/30032080.pdf. Accessed

30 June 2024.

Delafield, Catherine. *Women's Diaries as Narrative in the Nineteenth-Century Novel.* Ashgate,

2009.

Denton Cridge, Annie. *Man's Rights, Or How Would You Like It?* Boston, William Denton,

1870.

Dickens, Charles. *Our Mutual Friend*. Edited by Michael Cotsell, Oxford UP, 2009.

Dixie, Florence. *Gloriana; or The Revolution of 1900*. London, Henry, 1890.

Gilarek, Anna. "The Temporal Displacement of Utopia and Dystopia in Feminist Speculative

Fiction." *Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature*, vol. 3, 2015, pp. 34–46.

Gilman, Charlotte Perkins. *Herland*. Pantheon, 1979.

Glyn, Alice Coralie. *A Drama in Dregs: A Life Study.* London, Simpkin Marshall, 1897.

---. *The Idyll of the Star Flower: An Allegory of Life*. London, David Nutt, 1895.

---. "Nature's Nuns (A Reply to Grant Allen)." *Humanitarian*, vol. 9, 1896, pp.

421–26.

---. *A Woman of To-Morrow: A Tale of the Twentieth Century*. London: Women's

Printing Press, 1906.

Gordon, Peter, and David Doughan. *Dictionary of British Women's Organisations: 1825-1960*.

Woburn, 2001.

Grand, Sarah. "The New Aspect of the Woman Question." *The North American Review*, vol. 158,

no. 448, 1894, pp. 270–76.

Gubar, Susan. "Feminism and Utopia." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1986, pp. 79–

83. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239724. Accessed 30 June 2024.

Hamer, Emily. *Britannia's Glory: A History of Twentieth Century Lesbians*. Bloomsbury, 2016.

Heilmann, Ann. "Marriage and Its Discontents." *New Woman Fiction*. Palgrave, Macmillan, 2000,

pp. 77–81.

---, editor. *The New Woman and Female Independence*. Routledge, 1998.

Hossain, Rokeya Sakhawat. *Sultana's Dream and Padmarag*. Edited by Barnita Bagchi,

Penguin, 2005.

Howard, Ebenezer. *Garden City of To-morrow*. London, Swann Sonnenschein, 1898.

Hughes, Clair. *Dressed in Fiction*. Berg, 2005.

Ingram, Angela. "Introduction. On the Contrary, Outside of It." *Women's Writing in Exile*,

edited by Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram. The U of North Carolina P, 1989, pp.

1–15.

Jungnickel, Katrina. "'One needs to be very brave to stand all that': Cycling, Rational Dress

and the Struggle for Citizenship in Late Nineteenth Century Britain" *Geoforum*, vol. 64,

2015, pp. 362–71, https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0016718515001037.

Accessed 28 February 2025.

Kane, Louise. "'Balloonomania': Flying Machines, Periodicals, and the Trajectory of World

Literature." *Re-reading the Age of Innovation: Victorians, Moderns, and Literary

Newness, 1830–1950*, edited by Louise Kane. Routledge, 2022, pp. 48–62.

Kingston, Helen. "A Leap of Faith: Abbott, Bellamy, Morris, Wells and the Fin-de-Siècle Route

to Utopia." *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, vol. 60, no. 1, 2017, pp. 58-77,

https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/74/article/640301/pdf Accessed 28 February 2025.

Kingsley, Charles. *Westward Ho!* Cambridge, Macmillan, 1855.

Langland, Elizabeth. *Nobody's Angels: Middle Class Women and Domestic Ideology in Victorian

Culture.* Cornell UP, 1995.

Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Translated by Anna Bostock, MIT Press, 1971.

Martens, Lorna. *The Diary Novel*. Cambridge UP, 1985.

Mathieson, Charlotte. *Mobility in the Victorian Novel: Placing the Nation*. Palgrave Macmillan,

2015.

Mill, John Stuart. *The Subjection of Women.* London, Longmans, Green, Reader, and Dyer, 1869.

Modleski, Tania. "Feminism and the Power of Interpretation: Some Critical Readings."

Feminist Studies/Critical Studies. Language, Discourse, Society, edited by Teresa de

Lauretis, Palgrave Macmillan, 1986, pp. 121–38.

Moretti, Franco. *The Way of the World: The* Bildungsroman *in European Culture.* Translated

by Albert Sbragia, Verso, 2000.

Morton, Thomas. *Speed the Plough*. Philadelphia, Mathew Carey, 1807.

Parker, Sarah. "Fashion and Dress Culture." *Literature Compass*, vol. 11, 2014, pp. 583–91.

https://doi.org/10.1111/lic3.12160. Accessed 30 June 2024.

Philmus, Robert M. "H. G. Wells as Literary Critic for the Saturday Review." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 4, no. 2, 1977, pp. 166–93. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239112. Accessed 30 June 2024.

Podnieks, Elizabeth. "Disposed to Daring Innovation": New Modernism, New Woman Fiction and New Motherhood." *Re-reading the Age of Innovation: Victorians, Moderns, and Literary Newness, 1830–1950*, edited by Louise Kane, Routledge, 2022, pp. 175–89.

Pykett, Lyn. *Engendering Fictions: The English Novel in the Early Twentieth Century.* Edward Arnold, 1995.

---. *The Improper Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Writing.* Routledge, 1992.

Rodensky, Lisa. *The Oxford Handbook of the Victorian Novel.* Oxford UP, 2013.

Rosenman, Ellen and Claudia Klaver. "Introduction." *Other Mothers: Beyond the Maternal Ideal*, edited by Ellen Rosenman and Claudia Klaver, Ohio State UP, 2008, pp. 1–22.

Rosetti, Christina. "In an Artist's Studio." *New Poems by Christina Rossetti: Hitherto Unpublished or Uncollected*. London, Harvard University, 1896.

Saler, Michael, editor. *The Fin-de-Siècle World*. Routledge, 2015.

Sargent, Lyman Tower. "Themes in Utopian Fiction in English before Wells." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 3, no. 3, 1976, pp. 275–82. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4239043. Accessed 30 June 2024.

---. "Women in Utopia." *Comparative Literature Studies*, vol. 10, no. 4, 1973, pp. 302–16. http://www.jstor.org/stable/40468021. Accessed 30 June 2024.

Sargisson, Lucy. *Contemporary Feminist Utopianism*. Routledge, 1996.

Saudo-Welby, Nathalie. *Le Courage de Déplaire: Le Roman Féministe à la Fin de l'Ère Victorienne.* Classiques Garnier, 2019.

Schaffer, Talia. *The Forgotten Female Aesthetes: Literary Culture in Late Victorian England*. U of Virginia P, 2000.

Scott, Bonnie Kime. "Introduction." *The Gender of Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, edited by Bonnie Kime Scott, Indiana UP, 1990, pp. 1–18.

Shelangoskie, Susan. *Transmitting the Home: Photography, Telegraphy and Victorian Domestic Narratives*. 2005. University of Utah, PhD dissertation.

Stimpson, Catharine R. "Feminisms and Utopia." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 3, 1991, pp. 1–6. http://www.jstor.org/stable/20718919. Accessed 30 June 2024.

"A Sunday Club for Women." *The Westminster Gazette*, 7 Feb. 1898, p. 4.

Suvin, Darko. "The State of the Art in Science Fiction Theory: Determining and Delimiting the Genre." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 6, no. 1, 1979, pp. 32-45.

Telotte, John. *Animating the Science-Fiction Imagination.* Oxford UP, 2018.

Thackeray, William Makepeace. *The Diary of C. Jeames de la Pluche, Esq., With His Letters*. *Punch*, 1845.

Warne, Vanessa, and Colette Colligan. "The Man Who Wrote a New Woman Novel: Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did* and the Gendering of New Woman Authorship." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2005, pp. 21–46. http://www.jstor.org/stable/25058694. Accessed 30 June 2024.

Widdicombe, Richard Toby. "Eutopia, Dystopia, Aporia: The Obstruction of Meaning in Fin-de-Siècle Utopian Texts." *Utopian Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, 1990, pp. 93–102.

Wilson, Colin. "Welwyn Garden City, Alice Coralie Glyn." *Herts Memories* (June 2019).

https://www.hertsmemories.org.uk/content/herts-history/towns

andvillages/welwyn_garden_city/welwyn-garden-city-alice-coralie-glyn.

Accessed 30 June 2024.

Withers, Deborah M. *Virago Reprints and Modern Classics: The Timely Business of Feminist Publishing*. Cambridge UP, 2021.

Leslie de Bont is Professeure Agrégée at Nantes Université where she teaches English for psychology, British literature, and literary translation. She has published various articles on May Sinclair, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Stella Benson, and Sylvia Townsend Warner, as well as a monograph entitled *Le Modernisme singulier de May Sinclair* (Presses de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2019). She is co-editing *May Sinclair in Her Time* with Isabelle Brasme and Florence Marie (PULM 2024,) and her current research interests include intertextuality, place-identity, and gender roles in late-Victorian and modernist fiction by women. Her French translation of Glyn's novel, *Une Femme de Demain* was published by Cambourakis in 2024.

A Class Dishonored: The *Dishonored* Franchise as a Critique of Victorian Idealism

Nash Meade

In "The Steampunk City in Crisis," Catherine Siemann suggests that steampunk fiction is written as "a city in crisis, a place where the imagined, steam-powered technologies create or address social problems and environmental disasters that echo historical ones" (51). In the appropriation of Victorian culture for steampunk, however, one component of that culture is frequently ignored: religion. Unlike other steampunk works, *Dishonored* (2012-2021), a game series by Arkane Studios, develops its central thesis by paying careful attention to the religious culture of Victorian England, bringing their spiritual experimentation to its natural conclusion. By taking this approach, *Dishonored* presents a much darker "city in crisis," one in which the technology and world events of this fictional universe —a regicide, a plague, and a coup—rather than spurring its citizens to action, leave them in a state of paralysis. In this portrayal, *Dishonored* presents a relevant critique of the Victorians in two ways. First, the Victorians are criticized for clinging to Christian virtues while also shedding that religious sentiment. Second, they are criticized for promoting empire, in the void left by the reduction of Christianity, as a bastion against the dangers of a changing global landscape. In this dual criticism, *Dishonored*, particularly through its gameplay, highlights how non-aristocratic Victorians may have coped with a disaster, exemplifying how the idealization of progress in both religious and imperial thought is steeped in privileged interests.

"To tell the story of Victorian Britain and to leave religion out—as was done surprisingly often for several decades and as is done by some historians in our own day—impresses us as an example of blatant disregard of evidence" (Arnstein et al. 149). This is the opening line of a long annotated bibliography—one among many—that describes the importance of religion in the

development and culture of Victorian Britain. Nearly everything, from its music to its literature to

its scientific inquiry, was hedged by, expressed through, or served as a commentary on religion.

While the cultural dominance of Christianity was unparalleled for a time in England, the Victorian

Age saw a revival of the "old gods" as Greco-Roman myths, the mystical arts of the pagans, and

the discovery of Buddhism in the East all heralded the festering of the otherwise tranquil pond of

Anglo-Christian hegemony.

Although religion was clearly of central importance to the Victorians, the most popular

genre that has arisen from interest in Victorian culture—steampunk—rarely interacts with the

religious sphere. Instead, the genre often focuses on the aesthetics of Victorian England and

speculative industrialization, the very act from which it gets its name. Writers often use this

aesthetic and genre to critique both the Victorian Era's myriad political and economic problems

while also bringing to light our own twenty-first century issues that correlate. As Margaret Rose

writes:

> We might look at steampunk as speculative fiction's revenge against such
>
> arguments [about historical accuracy in literature] because steampunk is a fiction
>
> that places a premium on minutely accurate historical detail, within flamboyantly
>
> wrong imagined pasts, in order to explore the ways in which the conventional
>
> historical sensibility sometimes gets it wrong. (319)

Rose continues by noting that steampunk often creates "this interplay between genealogy (the

Victorians are our distant forebears) and analogy (we are very much like the Victorians)" as a

common theme through much of steampunk literature (328). Thus, as Kristin Stimpson observes,

steampunk often extends a social and critical revolution into a battle against the very idea of empire

as a form of ideological power through its combination of aristocratic Victorian fashion melded

with the grease, oil, and metal of its myriad machinations (20). This conjunction gives the astute reader an insight into steampunk's core commentary on the importance of the worker in maintaining the politico-industrial empire despite them also being the target for oppression and discrimination.

The critique of empire typically unfolds in an urban environment, as it is the most prominent backdrop for steampunk fiction. Siemann states that

> Most frequently, the steampunk city presents itself as a sketchily defined backdrop, the generic gaslit surroundings of an alternative historical London or its analogue. However, the steampunk city that comes vividly to life on the page, that transcends the generic, is also a city in crisis, a place where imagined, steam-powered technologies create or address social problems and environmental disasters that echo historical ones. (51)

The vision of a utopic steampunk world being deconstructed into a mechanical dystopia frequents steampunk narrative. And yet, this focus on the purely mechanical and political often leaves out the importance, as stated at the beginning of this introduction, of the religious element of Victorian society, especially as it pertains to the identity and values of the poor and working classes.

It is in the seemingly empty space of religiously oriented steampunk that Arkane Studios' *Dishonored* franchise comes into being. Although it takes place on a fictional set of islands, the similarity to the British Isles is uncanny, and the Victorian influence is impossible to miss—the series even takes place during that world's nineteenth century. In fact, in an interview with Erik Kain of *Forbes*, the creators of *Dishonored* state, "As a team, we started out talking about historical London, the plague, gangs and the whaling industry, and as we added new elements like the supernatural and the 'steampunk' oppression technology, we slowly realized that we were creating

a new universe." Within the steampunk world of *Dishonored*, however, there is no Christian hegemony. Instead, there are only specious, folk-like beliefs with little order, or the secular beliefs of "The Abbey of the Everyman." Darko Suvin writes that most alternative fiction "is used to articulate different possible solutions of societal problems, those problems being of sufficient importance to require an alteration in the overall history of the narrated world" (149). Arkane Studios wanted to create a world where the focus was on the folktales and the traditions of a semi-Victorian age; in doing so, they advanced a treatise on the value of stable beliefs when it comes to the larger stability of an empire, including the belief in empire itself, which was the Victorians' other obsession. After all, the Victorians saw themselves—and perhaps rightly so—as the pinnacle of political and commercial power at the time.

As stated previously, steampunk is frequently framed around the poor and working classes; however, steampunk is also frequently full of idealistic messaging, with an emphasis on hope, progress, and the exceptionalist attitude of the Victorians. *Dishonored*, in contrast, rejects Victorian idealism, criticizing the view for having no firm foundation through applying pressure to that culture in its steampunk setting on both the political and, uniquely, the religious front.[24] Duncan Bell, for example, suggests that one under-studied component of Victorian imperial thought is how it connects to their theology (295). *Dishonored* explicitly makes this connection, suggesting that the British Empire and Christianity are tied together in their emphasis on progress, whereby the Christian message for individual progress and hope forms the bedrock of the imperialistic venture of political and commercial progress. However, the crises presented by the game give the player the opportunity to see how an idealistic outlook formed largely by the

---

[24] *Dishonored* is not necessarily unique in its rejection of Victorian idealism. Other games, such as American McGee's *Alice* (2000), have also tackled this concept. However, this paper does suggest that *Dishonored*'s focus on the shifting landscape of religious thought, and its subsequent impact on both imperial and class thought, is a unique angle from which both games tackle Victorian idealism.

aristocracy has no place in the worldviews of the poor and working classes, suggesting that the vast majority of Victorians, despite the empire's prestige and power, would have cared little about defending it.

Arkane Studios introduces this critique on two fronts. First, as mentioned previously, are the occult and folk beliefs that some denizens of the Empire believe in—including most notably the Outsider, who will be discussed in detail later in this essay—which, while removing Christianity proper, also mimic many of the emerging religious systems of the period. Second, *Dishonored* mimics the sweeping belief of aristocratic Victorian culture that "empire" itself—with such aphoristic statements as "our nation will always prevail" or "the crown will give the people hope" frequenting the dialogue of aristocratic characters in the games—can hold as a bastion against the woes of a broken and fractured populace who fare no better under one crown of an Empire than any other.

This essay explores *Dishonored*'s two-sided critique of Victorian idealism by first exploring the changing religious landscape of Victorian England. Then, this essay explores how this changing landscape maps onto *Dishonored*'s occult and pseudo-religious beliefs. With these two pieces synthesized, it will then look at the major events of the two mainline games that point to the importance of a belief in progress—whether it be manifested through religion or politics—*as a bastion against fear*, relying on the philosophy of Thomas Hobbes as the definitive, though often overlooked in Victorian political studies, commentator on this problem. *Dishonored* thus successfully criticizes the Victorians first for clinging to the ideals of hope and progress while simultaneously shedding their religious undercurrent, and second for the suggestion that "empire" can stand against fear in the absence of that religious undercurrent. While we may think of the Victorians as indomitable, this belief reflects a top-down view of the empire, rather than a bottom-

up one. *Dishonored*, in focusing intimately on the poorest of the poor—contrasting them with the wealthy, who are the impetus for the games' plots in many of its acts—suggests that most of the denizens of its in-game empire, much like the denizens of the Victorian Empire, would almost certainly fall into the Hobbesian "state of everyman against everyman" had they faced a tremendous crisis (76).

The Realm Beyond the Real

During the nineteenth century, with the publication of Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and the arrival of Eastern mysticism and Buddhism through England's imperialist expansions, the otherwise simple Christian orthodoxy that had reigned supreme in England was shaken to its core. According to Jeffrey J. Franklin,

> This period [the Victorian Period] experienced what could be considered the second wave
> of the Protestant Reformation, its individualization of faith, which had been building
> momentum in Europe since the Enlightenment. Thus Protestant individuals, driven by a
> widely perceived crisis of faith in orthodox Christianity, subject to modern science's rise
> to dominance in truth-telling authority, and fully exposed for the first time in history to
> the panoply of world religions, generated an unprecedented proliferation of new and often
> hybrid religions and spiritualities. (1)

Typically speaking, this period is characterized as a battle between materialism—heralded by Darwin's publication—and orthodox Christianity. Franklin asserts, however, that there is a third side of this intellectual scape: the Spirit (2). With the influx of new ideas came an alchemical combination of the spirit, the natural, and the religious, with each new player in the game looking for that magical elixir that would grant its followers eternal life or, at the very least, an

enlightenment. This latter portion of the intellectual and religious landscape is the primary focus

of *Dishonored*, shining through in its occultic systems.

The upheaval in orthodoxy also led to a reconstruction and reinterpretation of the myths

and narratives that had been taken as historical canon, in the case of Christianity, and as moral

fairy tale or grand delusion, as with Greco-Roman myth. The Romantic poets found myths

fascinating, creating a muddling of "religion" and "myth" that found itself being attached to—and

ripped from—other ideological totems of naturalism and materialism. It was during the elongated

period of Romanticism and its lead-up into Victorianism that poets such as Percy Shelley, William

Blake, and Alfred, Lord Tennyson all began to use myth as a mode of poetic writing, especially

towards humanistic ends (Percy Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) serves as a prime

example).

Although the two periods have many stark differences between them, the exploration of

myth and the revival of humanism stands as a thematic throughline. The sudden shift (in historical

context) from myth as the grim reminder of humanity without the one true God to its conception

as a beautiful tale of mankind's own attempts at the divine is startling. Margaret K. Louis states

that "within a generation [of the beginning of the Victorian period] the status of ancient Greek

religion (formerly less admired than ancient Greek literature and art) rose with startling energy in

Victorian England. By the 1860s classical paganism had become vital to authors who had openly

condemned and belittled it earlier in their careers" (338). These new insights into Greco-Roman

myth also poured into a renewed interest in the "Mystery cults," which were ancient occult

rituals—typically secret—performed by the followers of certain deities.

Orthodox Christianity was, unsurprisingly, terrified of the sudden influx of new ideas. By

the end of the Victorian period, the once grandiose Church had become a place of dogmatism and

backwards thinking for the many who were leaving its sanctum. Although Protestantism had also

maligned the Orthodox Church, this new view of the Victorians was not to "reinterpret"

Christianity back to its alleged Biblical roots; instead, it was to cast it out altogether. The Romantic

writers and New Age spiritualists began turning their backs to the Church in some way or another,

either by directly going after Christianity through the metaphor of old myths or outright developing

new religions. As such, Deism, the belief that God started the universe and nothing else, became

widely popular once again, along with other, more occult beliefs (Franklin 11-12).

The fluidity of religion at the time reached all the way from the aristocracy down to the

lower classes. According to Hugh Mcleod's consolidated oral history research on the topic, while

church attendance remained relatively strong even into the late Victorian period, a general lack of

conviction was also quite clear (31-32). Christianity was losing its vice grip as the de facto system

of thought and, while we more readily see the spiritual experimentation common among the

Romantics and the aristocrats, these chimeric movements stretched all the way down the economic

chain. As such, the tumult of spiritual experimentation undoubtedly brokered important questions

relating to humanity's role (or lack thereof) in life which, in conjunction with a rapidly shifting

economic system, was a recipe for a crisis of identity in those most affected, even if many

continued to pilfer a metaphysical safety from Christianity's core tenets (Mcleod 34).

While not explicitly addressing the Victorians (though he did have a particular distaste for

the British), Friedrich Nietzsche, one of Christianity's greatest critics, suggests that much of

Europe was couched in this half-grasping at Christianity. From this observation Nietzsche invokes

his now-infamous "death of God," itself a simple treatise: if one is to remove God from mankind's

beliefs, one must have a legitimate alternative for it; otherwise, one is liable to see individuals—

and perhaps even a society—collapse into nihilism. He characterizes the problem in *Twilight of the Idols* (1889):

> When one gives up the Christian faith, one pulls the right to Christian morality out from under one's feet. This morality is by no means self-evident: this point has to be exhibited again and again, despite the English flatheads. Christianity is a system, a *whole* view of things thought out together. By breaking one main concept out of it, the faith in God, one breaks the whole . . . . (515)

Dishonored takes up the Nietzschian warning about the death of God through removing Christianity from its core. In doing so, *Dishonored* presents an affirming view of Nietzsche's warning by showing how a society built on the ideals of hope and progress begins to collapse when faced with great crises, especially when it cannot make appeals about the nature of the world through a stable religious outlook (this latter point is also emphasized by Hobbes, which will be discussed later). It is through this that Victorian society itself is critiqued for stepping away from convicted religious belief while seemingly hedging its bets against the terrors of a world in crisis. Of course, the Victorians attempted to fill the void left by the loss of Christianity with their political and commercial exceptionalism—that is, through empire—but, as *Dishonored* portrays through its narrative and underlying lore, this replacement falls short. Keeping in mind this religious contextual background, attention can now be turned to the Empire of the Isles.

The Empire of the Isles: Developing A Godless Britain

The *Dishonored* franchise takes place on the Empire of the Isles—a conglomerate of four neighboring islands ruled by a single monarch but managed by individual governors and a parliament. Although there are four, two are the predominant locations for the main games in the

franchise: Gristol and Serkonos. Gristol is the seat of the empire, featuring the capital city of

Dunwall and other landmark cities that the player occasionally visits through the games

("Gristol"). The city of Dunwall, which is humid, mostly gray, and full of ancient architecture even

in an industrially advanced society, is a clear stand-in for London or any of the other industrially

massive cities during the Victorian period. Serkonos is of a more mediterranean design, although

one of the major cities the player visits—Karnaca—has been extensively mined for its silver and

is now the home of sandstorms. The other two islands, although important in the historical context

of the game, do not factor into the overall political or social order within the period when the player

is present.

As one moves through the steampunk cities, steamboats, primitive electricity, and all

manner of clockwork gadgets dot the landscape. Given that the series takes place entirely on small

islands, the citizenry gather the resources for making their electrical equipment by hunting whales,

steeping the great beasts in their culture. Experimentally, there are weapons of steampunk design,

including foldable swords, clockwork explosives and robots, and a "wall of light"—an invisible

electrical fence that vaporizes objects on contact while active. Most of the industrialization of the

series points toward a militaristic end, with the occasional fusion of technology and the occult,

such as a clockwork-enhanced heart possessed by the spirit of the dead empress Kaldwin.

Per the history of the series, the War of the Four Crowns—a conflict between each of the

Isles—took place in the early seventeenth century, ending with Gristol as the head of the empire

("War of Four Crowns"). This conflict is likely a stand-in for Britain's actual Civil War(s), which

occurred between 1642 and 1651. Both wars ended with similar values put in place: a unification

of the kingdoms, a renewed parliament, and a semblance of religious order. Although there are no

active imperialistic endeavors within the Empire during the period of the game, as Stimpson notes,

the clockwork machinations—as with most steampunk—work together to create a sweeping

aesthetic and ideology of "empire" (20). In fact, this aesthetic of empire becomes a sticking point

in the plot as, though The Empire of the Isles is not seeking outward endeavors, the first game

presents an attempt to re-militarize the Empire so that it can spread as an Imperial power farther

afield.

Of course, this peace was not destined to last. The two mainline games in the series subject

this hard-fought empire to the worst political problems imaginable. In the first game, an internal

plot successfully sees the reigning Empress Kaldwin assassinated, her only daughter kidnapped,

and her right-hand protector Corvo—the player's character—framed as the killer. In the second

game, set fifteen years after the events of the first, a usurper from the outside, Delilah

Copperspoon, prodded along by the Duke of Serkonos, takes control of the throne by witchcraft,

claiming her own bloodright to it as the illegitimate daughter of the late emperor ("Delilah

Copperspoon"). The player, as either the now-mature Emily Kaldwin or Corvo, must restore the

throne as they seek revenge on Delilah for her coup. Additionally, as an undercurrent in the first

game, a rat-borne plague—brought there by the game's main antagonist—sweeps the streets of the

bustling city centers the player traverses. While similar in potency to the black plague, it has the

additional quirk of turning the rats it infests into rabid flesh-eaters with a particular taste for

humans. In the second game, a plague of flesh-eating insects ravages the isles, although they are,

overall, less threatening than the rats.

Despite the grand, tragic events, the games are sparsely populated, featuring only a small

handful of characters—most of whom are very wealthy—for the player to interact with. In the first

game, the player interacts with only a dozen or so characters who seem upset by the queen's

assassination, the princess's kidnapping, and the appointment of the lead of the queen's guards. In

the second game, a similar scenario happens where, even though a full-on coup occurs, only a small handful of people seem particularly torn up about the change in command.[25] As such, the "city in crisis" of *Dishonored* is political, tempered by a lack of religious conviction, and is based, rather than on industrialization and its problems, on the lack of volition from the citizenry when faced with major events. Thus, the game focuses on the citizens' seeming inability to be spurred to action in the name of their country.

The Abbey of the Everyman

Core to the world of *Dishonored* is the Abbey of the Everyman, a spiritual order that functions like the Catholic Church, with a full hierarchy and "spiritual" scripture. The description given by the creators on the game's website states the Abbey believes that "the universe is unknowably vast and swarming with all manner of dangerous spirits and forces, most of which are hostile to man's existence" (Bethesda). Additionally, the Abbey has no deity or traditional worship system; instead, its beliefs are based on a secular set of commandments known as "the Seven Strictures," as well as on cosmological events ("The Abbey"). The Strictures themselves are all based on typical moral virtues that stretch beyond the Christian and include the following do-not-haves: Wandering Gaze, Lying Tongue, Restless Hands, Roving Feet, Rampant Hunger, Wanton Flesh, and Errant Mind ("The Seven Strictures"). Instead of a dedication to God or even to the Order itself, the Strictures are simply a guide to good living based on real-world historical understandings of what is typically deemed good behavior.

---

[25] One could look at this as a limitation of the game, but this would be too hasty. Even if the game could not handle hundreds of revolutionaries on-screen at once, they could be mentioned in dialogue with other characters. This effectively never occurs in either game, outside of a few brief mentions of some aristocrats sympathetic to the cause and who provide money for it. In fact, only one ending across the two games implies unrest and civil uprising in the populace at all. Thus, the lack of interest from the poor and working classes is seemingly intentional. Even if the intent is to focus attention on the player's actions and choices, this still provides a backdrop of unwillingness in others to restore order to the empire.

Through the Abbey, Arkane Studios presents a secularized alternative to the typical Christian set of tenets—a not uncommon practice in the liberalizing industrial culture of Victorian Britian (McLeod 35). In fact, the Abbey functions as an enemy of sorts in the first game, due to the player being framed for the murder of the empress, and as an ally in the second due to their personal concerns with the major antagonist of the game being a witch ("The Abbey"). Players thus decide for themselves whether the Abbey is a positive or negative force in the Empire of the Isles.

The Void and the Outsider

Given the stated interest in folk tradition by the creators of *Dishonored*, in the void left by the absence Christianity, the denizens of *Dishonored* also flock to traditional occult tendencies (Kain). If, then, the Abbey of the Everyman is the norm in *Dishonored*, the worship of the Void is the occult. The Void functions as an alternative dimension in *Dishonored* and is likely the plane of the afterlife. What is particularly interesting about the Void is that it is a dimension that seeks a divine entity to represent it on the mortal plane ("The Void"). During the events of the game, the divine inhabitant of the Void is the Outsider, who both aids the player by bestowing them with magical gifts while also discussing some of the morally ambiguous scenarios in which the player often finds themself.

The Outsider functions largely as an omniscient narrator for the player's actions, as he seems to know the futures that come out of any action the player takes. *Dishonored* reinforces these alternative possibilities through the "chaos" system, itself a calculation of the player's actions (e.g. whether they kill guards, are caught during missions, etc.) and their willingness to spare or assassinate key targets. Depending on their rating, the player receives different dialogues and

endings to missions and the games themselves. No matter what the player does nor what type of

ending they receive, however, the Outsider continues with a tone that suggests all the player's

actions mean little in the long term for the Empire of the Isles.

Thus, the Outsider's most important role is as an ambivalent foil to the player's single-

minded pursuit of the restoration of the throne. The Outsider recognizes that the people are

effectively held together only by the shoestrings of a breaking empire and by belief that survival

is worth it. In fact, as explored in other games, the Outsider bestowed his gift on the assassin who

killed the queen as well as other characters that the player would consider antagonists, adding to

the ambivalent nature of the Outsider's desires. As such, the Outsider is a goad for the player, but

not into any particular moral direction. Instead, the Outsider simply implores the player to choose

how they wish to reshape the world through their actions in each scenario.

As should be clear from their descriptions and attitudes, however, both the Abbey of the

Everyman and the Outsider fail to engender the ideals necessary to give people hope against

seemingly insurmountable suffering. The Abbey, at base, is only a simplistic system of rules to

follow to live decently, rather than a bastion against the worst the world can give, while the

Outsider's nonchalance—or perhaps even amusement—at the chaos of the world gives no respite.

In both systems, we also see the titular versions of Victorian belief. In the former, Christianity's

common reduction to a set of rules to follow (e.g. the "Ten Commandments," loving one's

neighbor as oneself, etc.) is brought to its clearest conclusion, while in the latter the new interest

in the esoteric gods and practices of the Greco-Romans are synthesized into a single chaotic entity.

In both the real-world Victorian case and *Dishonored*'s, these systems fall short of

replacing the need for hope found in larger, more metaphysical religious systems. This is, of

course, explicitly reflected in the brutal world of *Dishonored*, where a plague runs rampant, and

the Empire is frequently at risk. Even the new technology, often the only bastion for hope or progress left, is turned toward war and oppression. Without this bastion, the denizens of the Empire find themselves at a loss. They are languid and solemn in their progression through life, with nothing to tie them to a belief that the state of the world might get better.

However, in both Victorian society and the Empire of the Isles, there is a second system of hope: imperial stability and progress. That is, though God may not save them, the power of politics and economy just might, providing an alternative impetus towards action. Empire, though, is not a safety net for every person. Both "mighty empires"— the historical British Empire and the fictional Empire of the Isles—prove(d) incapable of protecting and providing for their poorer classes. Though both empires may look stable from the top, their working-class pillars are cracked and marred from oppression and injustice, ready to break at the onset of a crisis.

The Sociopolitical Isles

Although *Dishonored* outright removes Christianity, the Victorians themselves were also transitioning away from Christianity as their primary hedge against the dangers of the outside world. It had been replaced by notions of empire, notably, according to Bell, through a revival of interest in Greek and Roman political thought, although some attention was also paid to the United States as a newer, more progressive version of those historical empires (737). The cultural zeitgeist surrounding empire during the Victorian period was fraught with existential angst, with fears— and hopes—surrounding Britain's continued trajectory upward or its potential imperial decline. Bell writes, "Since the prevailing assumption underpinning much social and political thought [for the Victorians] was that 'anything that does not progress is doomed to decline', and since empires stood in the political imagination as the most pertinent concrete examples of declension, Greater

Britain had to be yoked to the idea of progress" (738). In both religion and politics, progress was

the *modus operandi.*

While progress does not ultimately have to be towards the better, both Christian orthodoxy

and imperial messaging largely suggest that it will be if one pays careful mind to the tenets and

strictures of those that had come before. However, progress and change are the ideals of the

privileged class—the musings of those with the leisure to pontificate. The poor and working

classes—a rapidly developing majority in the Victorian Empire—had no such luxury. In fact, this

lack of luxury was frequently a point of discrimination between the "moral" aristocracy and the

"immoral" working class. John B. Lamb writes, "In terms of the laboring population, statistical

measurement quantified the poor in terms of moral and material lack, in terms of their inadequately

furnished houses, their lack of religious 'progression,' and their want of education" (41). As Anne

Baltz Rodrick explains, this material discrimination stems from, and is compounded by, an

intellectual one, whereby the impetus for self-improvement played a major role in their moral

value (45-47).

In quantifying the poor in terms of their lack of material as a symptom of moral regression,

the aristocratic Victorians inadvertently also suggested that their own material well-being—that

is, their privilege—is the de facto reason for why they have an upstanding moral quality.

Dishonored picks up on this trait and teases it out through submitting the otherwise privileged

higher classes to the woes of the poor—loss of their home, their source of safety and income, and

their political power—noting how their "moral" activities fall away. After all, the player can, in

Dishonored II, play as empress Emily Kaldwin—the most privileged person in the Empire—and

act as a morally reprehensible monster in pursuit of the return of her material wealth in the form

of retaking the crown.

Additionally, the recognition of the poorer majority lacking in power and interest is a notable problem both for Victorian idealism and the Empire of the Isles, though it is painted much more starkly in the latter. Although some, like Bernard Porter, have argued that this was an epistemic issue—that is, the non-aristocrats simply having no knowledge (or no need of knowledge) of the extent of Britain's imperial expansion—*Dishonored* suggests that an additional condition of their lack of interest in empire is in how the empire was failing them (19, 26-27). Thus, without the Christian bastion—and with no reason to believe in "Empire," given its oppressive effect on the poorer classes' ability to move upward and to stay safe—the denizens of the Empire of the Isles are at a loss as each major event sends the country reeling, threatening the stability that the very same Empire had fought so hard to create. Even though all three major crises across the two main games seem as though they would lead to civilian uprisings, few occur, with only a handful of allies existing in both games—most of whom come from the aristocratic class and therefore have a more vested interest in maintaining the monarch that had treated them so well. Stuck in the fear of death that surrounds them, the general populace is paralyzed, leaning on the only powers they know that can keep them safe: folk traditions and an immediate, unquestioned obedience to whatever new authority exists above them.

It is useful here to bring in the political philosophy of Thomas Hobbes who, while not of the liberal tradition, provides the clearest framework for the potentially off-putting response of the citizens of the Empire of the Isles. Hobbes wrote during the British Civil War and, in his seminal work, *Leviathan* (1651), details a purely materialist account of political society and human nature. Within the text, he lays the groundwork for how and why political power develops, suggesting that the driving motivation for human community is fear—fear of death, fear of others, and fear of insecurity. This motivation then leads individuals to give up their individual liberties to a

sovereign, forming a social contract (80). As such, he ultimately suggests that the most proper

form of government is an authoritarian one, whereby a sovereign can take as much power as

necessary in times of great fear to protect the citizens who have bestowed that power upon them

(127). However, if the social contract is strained to the extent that individuals do not receive their

promised security against fear, that contract dissolves, and those individuals who once upheld the

social order are now striving against it (144, 210-11). While Hobbes envisions this as civil war,

Dishonored views this broken social contract as a crisis of will, in which those who give their

power to the social contract simply do nothing to protect it from further disintegration.

> Importantly, Hobbes also suggests that religion is a bastion against fear. He writes:
>
> This perpetual fear, always accompanying mankind in the ignorance of causes (as it
>
> were in the dark), must needs have for object something. And therefore, when there is
>
> nothing seen, there is nothing to accuse, either of their good or evil fortune, but some
>
> power or agent invisible; in which sense, perhaps, it was that some of the old poets said
>
> that the gods were at first created by human fear . . . . (64)

Per Hobbes, religion is a bastion against fear only when it provides something to condemn

as evil or praise as good. When religion fails to give this scapegoat, it fails as protection

against fear. With *Dishonored*'s world having no such reasonable scapegoat (the Outsider

comes closest, but even he is chaotic and impossible to pin down as good or evil), the only

bastion *is* the regime.

Thus, the player sees these two competing philosophies (Victorian idealism and Hobbesian

fear) in *Dishonored* through the task of restoring the sovereign to the throne. In the first game the

threat is internal, requiring the rooting out of dissidents while also dealing with the plague befalling

the Empire. In the second, the threat is external, leading the player to execute key targets both

within and external to the Empire to destabilize Delilah's grip from the stolen throne. In both cases, the player can receive a good or bad ending related to their "chaos" rating. In the bad ending of either game, Hobbes's politics shine through, with Emily, amidst the chaos of the usurpations, taking firm control over her government, acting in many cases as a tyrant. Only in the most positive endings in either game does a humanistic Emily take the throne, restoring liberty to the citizenry and doing her best to peaceably protect the Empire's interests; however, to what extent such a libertarian outlook would survive is questionable.[26]

In conforming to the Hobbesian idea of human nature, *Dishonored* presents its strongest critique. The Victorian period saw unprecedented stability for Great Britain; Arkane Studios removes that stability. In conjunction with the removal of Christianity—that is, what Victorian society was tending towards anyways—the game portrays how the Victorians may have had to react—or may have simply not reacted at all—if Queen Victoria had been assassinated, if someone had attempted to usurp the throne, or if they had been met with a war on their own soil. There are some steampunk works that *extend* the life of Queen Victoria, which Rose notes as a recurring theme in "petrolpunk" (an offshoot of steampunk), but Arkane Studios does the reverse (321). Neither this nor the loss of the Christian message of hope is to be seen as insignificant; without the message of hope, a tragedy one might have once believed was surmountable is now impossible. The death of a monarch is but the goings-on of a world always on the brink of disaster.

The reason for this, however, as suggested in this section, is more than just religion. One of the key components of the *Dishonored* games is how the player, a member of the privileged

---

[26] *Dishonored II* has significantly more endings than the first game; however, these endings all rely on the player's chaos rating and their general style of play. This includes many endings where Emily does not take the throne, including Corvo acting as tyrant or other characters that the player meets throughout the game operating as regents. In all instances, however, these rulers are unelected, have unchecked power, and are accepted, in the Hobbesian sense of the relinquishing of rights to them, by the population, with only the reigning monarch or board of regents' own goodwill as the deciding factor between beneficence and tyranny.

class as either a royal or the right hand of one, navigates life from the slums to living among the

wealthiest aristocrats. Players interact with the sick and the poor as much as they do with great

scientists and entrepreneurs. The player is thus privy to the disparity between rich and poor, seeing

how the great, stable empire looks when one climbs down from the great towers and castles. While

pride in a great empire might spur some to action, the miserable and downtrodden, faced only with

the task of survival, would see no reason to save an Empire that was not successfully protecting

them against the woes of the world.

Nasty, Brutish, and Short

While we often view the Victorians as an iconoclastic culture, this privilege and title is

built upon our understanding of its most influential members. The poets, philosophers, and

aristocrats make up our image of this period of incredible imperial strength. Left to the wayside in

these analyses are those who lived below the towers: the poor, the sick, and the outsiders cast away

by their own society. Those below the towers were not hedged against the dangers and fears of the

world around them. While the game, much like historical texts, has limitations, the glimpses of the

Empire's darkest streets and greatest palaces, in conjunction with the more existential threats that

drive each game's narrative, establish quite readily the problems that face the citizenry. In each

instance of play, the player can usually help or hinder the persons they are interacting with in the

grand scheme of the plot, thanks to the games' multiple endings via the chaos system. More to the

point, the player, thanks to the Outsider, is given the power to change the trajectory of the world

in front of them. While no ending concludes without a monarch on the throne, some see Emily

moving towards relinquishing her powers and promoting the general welfare—even if, as

previously mentioned, her actions in the moment are likely colored by a materialistic selfishness.

Of course, much of steampunk centers itself on class in the Victorian period, with particular attention paid to the working class and the poor. However, these portrayals, in not attending to the religious history of the Victorians, feature a working class with the impetus to stand against their oppressors or any other trials they might face. In attending to religion, *Dishonored*, while also showing the poor and working classes, suggests that one would find no impetus among them. Faced with a crisis, *Dishonored* proposes that the gilded message of Victorian idealism—steeped in aristocratic privilege and with no place in the hearts and minds of most Victorians—would not have survived. It is perhaps our own retroactive understanding of the Victorians, as those who did not live or face the fears of the unprivileged of that time, that clouds our understanding of what they could have faced at all.

Works Cited

"The Abbey of the Everyman." *Dishonored Wiki*. Fandom,

>   https://dishonored.fandom.com/wiki/Abbey_of_the_Everyman. Accessed 22 Feb. 2025.

Alice. American McGee, 2000. Microsoft Windows game.

Arnstein, Walter, et al. "Recent Studies in Victorian Religion." *Victorian Studies*, vol. 33, no. 1,

>   1989, pp. 149-75. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3827902. Accessed 22 Feb. 2025.

Bell, Duncan S. A. "Empire and International Relations in Victorian Political Thought." *The

>   Historical Journal,* vol. 49, no. 1, 2006, pp. 281-98. *JSTOR*,

>   https://www.jstor.org/stable/4091749. Accessed 8 Feb. 2025.

---. "From Ancient to Modern in Victorian Imperial Thought." *The Historical Journal*, vol. 49, no.

>   3, 2006, pp. 735-59. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4091579. Accessed 1 Feb. 2025.

Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species*. London: John Murray, 1859.

"Delilah Copperspoon." *Dishonored Wiki*. Fandom,

>   https://dishonored.fandom.com/wiki/Delilah_Copperspoon. Accessed 19 Feb. 2025.

Dishonored. Arkane Studios, 2012. PlayStation 3, Microsoft Windows, Xbox 360, PlayStation 4,

>   Xbox One game.

"Dishonored." *Bethesda*, https://bethesda.net/en/game/dishonored-de. Accessed 10 Feb. 2025.

Dishonored 2. Arkane Studios, 2016. PlayStation 4, Microsoft Windows, Xbox One game.

Franklin, Jeffrey J. *Spirit Matters*. Cornell UP, 2018.

"Gristol." *Dishonored Wiki*. Fandom, https://dishonored.fandom.com/wiki/Gristol. Accessed 20

>   Feb. 2025.

Hobbes, Thomas. *Leviathan*. 1651. Hackett, 1994.

Kain, Erik. "An Interview with the Creators of 'Dishonored.'" *Forbes,* October 8, 2012, https://www.forbes.com/sites/erikkain/2012/10/08/arkane-studios-on-the-challenges-and-inspirations-behind-dishonored/?sh=5cae9d8d732a. Accessed 13 Feb. 2025.

Lamb, John B. "Turning the Inside Out: Morals, Modes of Living, and the Condition of the Working Class." *Victorian Literature and Culture*. Cambridge UP, 1997, vol. 25, no. 1, 1997, pp. 39-52. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058372. Accessed 1 Feb. 2025.

Louis, Margaret K. "Gods and Mysteries: The Revival of Paganism and the Remaking of Mythography through the Nineteenth Century." *Victorian Studies*, Indiana UP, vol. 47, no. 3, 2005, pp. 329-61. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/3830219. Accessed 15 Feb. 2025.

McLeod, Hugh. "New Perspectives on Victorian Class Religion: The Oral Evidence." *Oral History*, vol. 14, no. 1, 1986, pp. 31-49. *JSTOR*, http://www.jstor.com/stable/40178888. Accessed 11 Feb. 2025.

Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Twilight of the Idols.* 1889. *The Portable Nietzsche.* Translated and edited by Walter Kaufmann. Penguin, 1982, pp. 463-564.

Porter, Bernard. *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain*. Oxford UP, 2004.

Rodrick, Anne Baltz. "The Importance of Being an Earnest Improver: Class, Caste, and 'Self-Help' in Mid-Victorian England." *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2001, pp. 39-50. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058538. Accessed 16 Feb. 2025.

Rose, Margaret. "Extraordinary Pasts: Steampunk as a Mode of Historical Representation." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, vol. 20, no. 3, 2009 pp. 319-33. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/24352357. Accessed 15 Aug. 2022.

"The Seven Strictures." *Dishonored Wiki*. Fandom,

https://dishonored.fandom.com/wiki/The_Seven_Strictures. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.

Shelley, Percy. *Prometheus Unbound*. London: Charles and James Ollier, 1820.

Siemann, Catherine. "The Steampunk City in Crisis." *Like Clockwork: Steampunk Pasts, Present, and Futures*, edited by Rache A. Bowser and Brian Coxall, U of Minnesota P, 2016, pp. 51-70.

Stimpson, Kristin. "Victorians, Machines, and Exotic Others: Steampunk and the Aesthetic of Empire." *Clockwork Rhetoric: The Language and Style of Steampunk*, edited by Bary Brummett, UP of Mississippi, pp. 19-37.

Suvin, Darko. "Victorian Science Fiction, 1871-85: The Rise of the Alternative History Sub-Genre." *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 10, no. 2, 1983. pp. 148-69. *JSTOR*, https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239546. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.

"The Void." *Dishonored Wiki*. Fandom, https://dishonored.fandom.com/wiki/The_Void. Accessed 22 Feb. 2025.

"War of Four Crowns." *Dishonored Wiki*. Fandom,

https://dishonored.fandom.com/wiki/War_of_Four_Crowns. Accessed 20 Feb. 2025.

Nash Meade completed an MA in philosophy in the spring of 2024 and is now a PhD student in education sciences, with an emphasis on philosophical and cultural inquiry, at the University of Kentucky. He is also a member of the editorial board of MultiPlay, a United Kingdom-based game studies group. His primary research interest concerns how modern students make sense of the world, and learn, through interactive technology. This research leads him to work both on larger

philosophical projects concerning the epistemology of interactive technology as well as case-by-case work on games and their educational value.

Media Reviews

Recreating Mary Shelley's Canon: *Creature* as the Authentic Turkish

Frankenstein

Cenk Tan

Released in October 2023 on Netflix, Çağan Irmak's *Creature* is a miniseries that presents an unusual Turkish adaptation of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Set in late-nineteenth-century Istanbul, in the Ottoman Empire, the story follows Ziya, a young medical student driven to push the boundaries of science to revive the dead. After witnessing the death of his professor İhsan, Ziya becomes obsessed with bringing him back to life. He ultimately succeeds, but not in the way he anticipates. The resurrection of İhsan leads to the creation of a monster, marking a new and unexpected beginning.

Linda Hutcheon defines adaptation as "An announced and extensive transposition of a particular work or works, a creative and an interpretive act of appropriation/salvaging and an extended intertextual engagement with the adapted work" (7-8). Additionally, she suggests the "process of 'transcoding' requires a transfer of medium or genre and thus context to generate a completely distinct interpretation" (8). Hence, each adaptation is a creative reinterpretation of the adapted literary work. As an adaptation, *Creature* embodies a unique amalgamation of Shelley's original masterpiece and Irmak's script.

First and foremost, the series introduces a completely original setting and cast of characters. The setting is late-nineteenth-century Istanbul in the Ottoman Empire (currently Türkiye), and the protagonist is a medical student named Ziya who is an inquisitive and ambitious young man determined to make a difference in this world of limited opportunities. The story mostly takes place around Ziya and his close circle. *Creature* integrates Turkish heritage, history, and folklore,

offering a fresh perspective that blends Western literary tradition with Eastern cultural motifs. This distinct setting not only provides a rich backdrop for the narrative but also influences the characters' motivations and the story's direction, adding layers of complexity and authenticity that are often absent in other adaptations. One of the key differentiators of *Creature* is its deep exploration of character development and motivation. The series delves into the psychological and emotional complexities of Dr. Ziya, who is symbolically analogous to Victor Frankenstein and Prometheus in Greek mythology. This focus on the inner lives of the characters adds nuance to the traditional narrative, presenting the creature with a significant degree of empathy and humanity. By doing so, *Creature* challenges viewers to reconsider the nature of monstrosity and the ethical implications of creation, making the story as much about the creator's moral and ethical dilemmas as about the creature's plight.

Visually, *Creature* boasts high production values with impressive cinematography, set design, and special effects that create a visually stunning representation of the *Frankenstein* mythos. The show maintains a dark, atmospheric tone with gothic aesthetics while incorporating Turkish architecture and landscapes, enhancing its unique visual identity. Additionally, the integration of Turkish folklore and myth adds layers of cultural specificity, enriching the narrative and providing a fresh take on familiar themes. In particular, the clothing provides an extremely realistic outlook of the era, and the Turkish spoken by all the characters accurately conforms to the standards of the period. These details are complemented by the local (Ottoman) architecture, gloomy ambience, depiction of traditional arts/crafts, and superstitious beliefs of this era. By these means, the show's creator and director, Çağan Irmak, has not only adapted *Frankenstein*, but also recreated it. Specifically, Irmak has integrated some authentic Turkish touches to this creative adaptation, embedding symbolic references into the subtext of *Creature*'s storyline. İhsan's death

is a covert reference to the gradual collapse of the so-called "sick man of Europe," the crumbling Ottoman Empire. As a consequence, the revival of İhsan represents the birth of a new republic from the ashes of the old empire. Its coming back to life with a new and original identity and its seeking acceptance are characteristics peculiar to the foundation of the new Turkish Republic.

Additionally, *Creature* captures the core existential and ethical dilemmas present in Shelley's novel. Themes such as the quest for immortality, the nature of the soul, and the consequences of playing God are explored in depth, maintaining fidelity to the philosophical underpinnings of the source material. The series preserves the novel's exploration of what it means to be a monster, presenting the creature with empathy and highlighting the consequences of societal rejection. This nuanced portrayal remains true to Shelley's examination of monstrosity and humanity. Dr. Ziya retains many characteristics of the original scientist—ambition, hubris, and a blind pursuit of scientific achievement without considering the moral implications. The creature, similarly, is depicted with a mix of innocence and tragic awareness, echoing Shelley's complex portrayal of the monster.

The creature follows *Frankenstein*'s monster's course of action, fleeing from its original setting to different locations and experiencing various events until eventually returning to its creator. After fleeing, the creature wanders aimlessly through the streets of Istanbul. As it tries to explore and survive in this new world, it grapples with both the reactions of society and its own internal turmoil. Amidst the atmosphere of late-nineteenth-century Istanbul, the creature begins to gain self-awareness and confront its sense of being an outcast. This figure, who is not accepted by society, struggles with both its loneliness and the responsibilities that come with its creation. After its escape, the creature seeks refuge in a circus, assuming it might accommodate its physical deviations from societal norms. The circus, typically hosting marginalized individuals, appears to

be a venue where the creature might find some semblance of safety. Despite how its distinctive appearance attracts attention, the circus primarily views the creature as an object of spectacle rather than a fully accepted entity. This treatment reinforces themes of exclusion, otherness, and societal fear of the unfamiliar. Its exclusion and public treatment as a freak causes it to abandon the circus in a quest to find its own identity and freedom.

Before returning to its creator, the creature then retreats into solitude, isolating itself in nature. This retreat represents not only a physical but also a spiritual journey in search for its true self-identity. Similar to the source novel, *Creature* maintains the intricate dynamics between the creator and the creation, while focusing on themes of responsibility, guilt, and the quest for understanding. By delving into the psychological and emotional aspects of these relationships, the series stays true to the novel's character-driven narrative.

Thematically, *Creature* transcends the typical horror and gothic elements associated with *Frankenstein* adaptations. It places a strong emphasis on existential and philosophical questions, exploring the quest for immortality, the nature of the soul, and the consequences of playing God. These themes are presented in a contemporary light, making them relevant to modern audiences and prompting reflection on the boundaries of scientific experimentation and the ethical responsibilities that come with it. As Ziya says, "A person is defeated not by science but by arrogance. The human search will never end, nor should it, because if it does, what you call hope will also end." He also says, "Truth is the ugliness of a person's heart. The world is a lie to us. Those who are tossed around find the truth in each other." Finally, he adds, "I will have two hells at once. I will burn with both of their flames." Such lines capture the demanding and difficult existence that Ziya and other outcasts endure.

Where *Creature* introduces new cultural and historical contexts, the core narrative elements of creation, abandonment, and the subsequent quest for acceptance and revenge are preserved. This adherence to the essential plot structure ensures that the adaptation remains recognizably based on Shelley's work. The series takes creative liberties, such as setting the story in late-nineteenth-century Turkey and integrating Turkish folklore. These changes provide a fresh perspective and maintain the essence of the original story, effectively balancing fidelity and innovation. *Creature* retains the dark, atmospheric tone and gothic aesthetics that are central to *Frankenstein*. The visual and thematic elements also create a haunting ambiance that reflects the novel's mood and setting. The series continues Shelley's tradition of prompting viewers to reflect on the moral and philosophical implications of scientific advancement and human ambition, while honoring the intellectual spirit of the original work. In addition, the acting performances are overall satisfying and impressive. Taner Ölmez (Ziya) does a good job in depicting an ambitious but obsessive medical student while Erkan Kolçak Köstendil (İhsan) displays an outstanding performance of Gothic doubling, portraying both professor İhsan and the creature. Engin Benli, Şifanur Gül, Bülent Şakrak, Sema Çeyrekbaşı, and Devrim Yakut also add their original touches to Çağan Irmak's authentic production.

Creature has met a wide and mostly positive reception online. In the review posted on leisurebyte.com, Taniya CJ writes that

> overall the Turkish series is a big win because they made use of a famous story and added their spice to it. It is a joy to watch different ethnicities through the series and this one gave us the bliss. Looking at the Ottoman Empire and the people living back in that time is educational (with regards to knowing another country's history) and creative."

Furthermore, Blair Marnell (digitaltrends.com) describes *Creature* as "a fresh coat of paint on a classic tale" and argues that "surprisingly, it doesn't stray that far from the novel, although at times it seems to be taking more influences from the *Frankenstein* movies than the original book." Lastly, Ruchika Bhat on fugitives.com points out that "the world-building of *Creature* is what makes it entertaining. Perhaps what fails *Creature* is the fact that it is a story that has been adapted so many times." On the whole, *Creature* proves to be not only a successful work of adaptation, but also an unpredictable, genuine, and unconventional tale that blends Shelley's original story with local motives and philosophical nuances.

Works Cited

Bhat, Ruchika. "*Creature* Review: Netflix Turkish Series is a Dramatic Old Tale that Fails To

Make an Impression." Film Fugitives, 21 Oct. 2023, fugitives.com/creature-review-2023-

netflix-turkish-fantasy-series-cagan-irmak/. Accessed 25 Aug. 2024.

Creature. Directed by Çağan Irmak, performances by Taner Ölmez, Erkan Kolçak Köstendil,

Şifanur Gül. 03 Medya, 2023.

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Theory of Adaptation*. Routledge, 2013.

Marnell, Blair. "Creature is Netflix's Most Underrated Horror Series. Here's Why You Should

Watch It." *Digital Trends*, 24 Oct. 2023, www.digitaltrends.com/movies/creature-is-

netflixs-most-underrated-horror-series-heres-why-you-should-watch-it/.Accessed

25 Aug. 2024.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text*. Oxford U P, 1998.

Taniya, CJ. "Creature Review: Turkish Take on the Famous Novel "Frankenstein" Hits and

Wins!" *Leisurebyte*, 20 Oct. 2023, www.leisurebyte.com/creature-review-taner-olmez/.

Accessed 25 Aug. 2024.

Cenk Tan works as an Associate Professor at Pamukkale University in Denizli, Turkey and specializes in topics such as science fiction, ecocriticism, film criticism, gothic fiction, and continental philosophy. He is also the editor of many published and upcoming books including *Science Fantasy: Critical Explorations in Fiction and Film* and *Eco-Concepts: Critical Reflections in Emerging Ecocritical Theory* and *Ecological Thought* published by Lexington Books (Bloomsbury) in 2024.

A Totally Rad Mad Scientist: *Lisa Frankenstein*'s Queer Articulations of Victor

Frankenstein and the Creature

Marian A. Phillips

Screenwriter Diablo Cody's long-awaited return to the horror genre took up the highly influential science fiction novel *Frankenstein* (1818) with a synthy 80s soundtrack, a dynamic cast, and the comedic eye of director Zelda Williams. *Lisa Frankenstein* (2024) does not attempt to adapt Mary Shelley's classic with exact detail. Rather, the film reinvents it through a horror-comedy-romance-monster-mashup and uses the source material to capture the queer essence of Victor Frankenstein's monster. *Lisa Frankenstein*'s premise highlights the ways in which a high school social outcast can locate their confidence and sense of self through monstrosity. In turn, the film indicates that the monster's standing as a figure for selfhood and transformation is stronger than ever in the 2020s.

Lisa Frankenstein follows the titular character, a teenaged mad scientist portrayed by Kathryn Newton, as she navigates high school with her stepsister Taffy (Liza Soberano), a supportive beauty queen. As Lisa's biggest cheerleader, Taffy convinces her to go to a high school party where she is drugged and sexually assaulted, and then frantically runs home during a storm. As lightning strikes and green fog rolls in, much like Victor Frankenstein's monster, Lisa's monster ("The Creature," played by Cole Sprouse) reanimates from the electrical currents coursing through his once-lifeless corpse. The film's faithfulness to its source material ends here—excluding the attainment of body parts—but this is not without a point.

While fans of the true-to-form adaptation of a classic novel may be more in favor of a world where *Lisa Frankenstein* retains more of its source material, others may find that Cody and Williams's film breathes new life into this timeless creature. Predecessors such as Frank

Henenlotter's *Frankenhooker* (1990) and Yorgos Lanthimos's *Poor Things* (2023) have commonly taken up the possibility of Frankenstein's monster, rather than the doctor, being a woman. This subversion is important in and of itself, as it delivers new commentary on the creation of a creature. Rather than themes of patriarchal control and the debates on man versus science prevalent in Shelley's novel and resulting films, *Lisa Frankenstein* takes its time communicating teenage queerness, loneliness, and the confidence that comes with self-discovery through monsters.

The vibrancy of the set dressing as well as the props utilized throughout the film stray from the original source. Some even go so far as nodding toward the importance of queering a classic creature to represent the realities of the time period it represents and the relationality of creatures and queerness. In one particular instance, Lisa walks around her bedroom, and the audience gets the opportunity to see that she has a copy of trans* author Poppy Z. Brite's *Lost Souls* (1992) on her shelf. This discrepancy between the book's publication date and the film's time period (the 1980s) may signal a mistake. However, the book's contents indicate an importance in its presence, as *Lost Souls* follows a social-outcast vampire growing up in a newly formed family, just like Lisa. Furthermore, her bedroom operates as a space where she expresses an exploration of her sexuality with the Creature via a massage wand. The book's anachronistic presence emphasizes this point, especially as it indicates a moment in time where creatures such as vampires had begun to carve out a clear cultural space for representing queerness.

Lisa Frankenstein is nothing if not a very self-aware film. It satirizes the gothic imaginary prevalent in Tim Burton's work with pastel pink and yellow houses, offers an 80s makeover montage, and embraces quippy dialogue familiar to teen flicks such as *Heathers* (1989). As Lisa spruces up her creature's aesthetic to match her own, her stepmother Janet (Carla Gugino)

interrupts with exclamations on the poor state of their home. Gugino's character offers viewers the villain that is driven to snuff out any joy in Lisa's life. She diminishes her trauma with insensitive remarks on Lisa's deceased mother, critiques her clothing choices, and actively attempts to institutionalize her. As such, Lisa and the Creature find their first victim in Janet. Luckily for the Creature, he also gets the opportunity to attain his first new body part—an ear.

The cinematic version of Victor Frankenstein brings his creature to life through volts of electricity caused by a storm. Lisa brilliantly and hilariously brings her creature's new parts to life through Taffy's partially broken tanning bed. The stitching and bringing to life of new parts has been discussed in scholarly circles, especially those focused on transness. In Susan Stryker's "My Words to Victor Frankenstein," the trans studies scholar articulates how hormone treatment and gender-affirming surgeries mirror the endeavors of Shelley's scientist (242). By analyzing her own transness through monstrosity, Stryker finds the monster a destabilizing figure to social, cultural, and political normalcy (238). This destabilization is important in *Lisa Frankenstein*, as the story itself disrupts the beloved classic in its overtly queer tone and setting as well as its use of the monstrous as queer allegory. In terms of Lisa's creature, he presents himself to audiences as male and heterosexual. Therefore, one may find it particularly easy to glaze over his queerness. However, analyzing the film alongside Stryker's essay paints a more nuanced picture of how we may interpret both the Creature and Lisa.

While we can absolutely point to scholarly discourse to discuss these themes in the film, they serve here to bolster the point that *Lisa Frankenstein* is an irrefutably queer film. This is especially true when one considers the attainment of body parts, and the sexual scenes shared between Lisa and the Creature. The film is brilliant in its approach to developing this queer relationship, as it uses the monster to showcase that the teenager's queerness has always been

present. As the film works its way toward the climax, Lisa discovers that her beloved sister has been sleeping with her crush, Michael (Henry Eikenberry), when she walks into his house. The Creature, furious at this discovery, barges into the bedroom and axes Michael's penis off.

Following this incident, Lisa proclaims her love for the Creature, and he confirms that he reciprocates her feelings. As a result, she requests that he have sex with her, but he shows Lisa that he does not have a penis. She tells him, "you don't need one of those to be a man. It's actually, like, the least important part." This scene can be read in two ways: as a statement on the various types of sexual contact and as a confirmation of Lisa's queerness. A queer reading of the scene relies on the subtext provided by the wide-shot scenes of her bedroom. As stated earlier, she has a great deal of queer media decorating her bedroom. Therefore, there is a queer undertone to her character that becomes overt in instances where she expresses sexual desires. Her assertion that the Creature does not need a penis to be a man is an act of gender affirmation that is further articulated by her continued desire for sex with him, in whatever form that may take. The Creature's queerness is elevated in this scene as well, as he requests that Lisa stitch Michael's penis to his body. Through a reading of trans and queer analyses on Frankenstein's monster, the act of suturing and stitching the penis to the Creature's body reflects just one form of gender-affirming surgery.

Lisa Frankenstein provides audiences with a rich and textured retelling of Shelley's classic novel. The vibrancy, dialogue, and queerness of the film offers the genre a fresh take on the undead. The story and its characters are so unique yet familiar that any viewer can approach this monster mashup of genres with assurance that they have never seen anything quite like it and still feel a strong connection to it. *Lisa Frankenstein* has a lush quality that intrigues viewers and provokes scholars to examine its countless themes—such as feminism and queerness, to name a

few. Throughout Diablo Cody and Zelda Williams's film, the queer subtext, themes, and overt text

reinvigorate the genre and highlight queer monstrosity as a point of reference in understanding

loneliness, teenage-hood, and self-discovery.

Works Cited

Brite, Poppy Z. *Lost Souls.* Penguin, 1992.

Frankenhooker. Directed by Frank Henenlotter, Shapiro-Glickenhaus Entertainment, 1990.

Heathers. Directed by Michael Lehmann, New World Pictures, 1989.

Lisa Frankenstein. Directed by Zelda Williams, MXN Entertainment and Lollipop Woods, 2024.

Poor Things. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

Shelley, Mary. *Frankenstein: or, The Modern Prometheus: The 1818 Text*. Oxford U P, 1998.

Stryker, Susan. "My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing

   Transgender Rage." *GLQ*, vol. 1, no. 3, 1994, pp. 237–54.

Marian Phillips (they/she) is a PhD student in Women, Gender, and Sexuality studies at the University of Kansas. Their research focuses on trans* and queer theory in relation to horror and speculative fiction. Phillips's current project delves into queer monstrosity and the location of its discourse within monster theory and history. In addition to their academic pursuits, Phillips works as a freelance writer with bylines in *ScreenRant* and *The Lineup*. Their article "Eat Me, Bones and All: Cannibalistic Depictions of Queer Love and Desire in Horror Films" appeared in *Screen Bodies Journal*'s Winter 2024 issue.

Poor Things and Yorgos Lanthimos: A Film Review Intersecting Various Feminist Debates

Vivienne Tailor

Poor Things (2023), the ninth film by Greek auteur filmmaker Yorgos Lanthimos, continues to present the director's off-kilter vision of humanity, allowing people to view themselves in defamiliarized ways. The works of Lanthimos exude an artistic contemplativeness and often convey an artificial realism where normalcy is presented as both benign and insidious. These cinematic traits are evident in his breakout film, *Dogtooth* (2009). This austere work deconstructs a bizarre suburban family as an autocratic state, showing how easily children can be manipulated to believe in a worldview, but also how people inevitably rebel. Intersecting with *Dogtooth*, Lanthimos's other films, *The Lobster* (2015) and *The Favourite* (2018), explore social microcosms in cloistered, controlled environments, satirizing power dynamics within larger social structures.

In *The Killing of a Sacred Deer* (2017), sex scenes are not warm and charming; they are naked and psychological. This film follows an alcoholic surgeon who errs during a procedure, causing the death of another father. That man's son exacts a powerful revenge of existential, karmic justice. In the film's final scene of impending violence, the elements of chance combined with the guaranteed killing of an innocent family member are inexorable. In all of Lanthimos's films, camera angles are constantly unsettling, and color schemes are muted. The lighting feels natural, and most of the sound is diegetic, fostering an uncanny realism. In *Poor Things*, the director continues to explore dark themes regarding human nature and social behavior, while also playing with color schemes, making the cinematography an integral narrative element.

In this review, the decision to abbreviate the film title to *Things* (as opposed to *Poor*) involves the film's concept in following a male doctor, Godwin (Willem Dafoe)—who does have a God complex—taking the living fetus from the body of a pregnant woman, Victoria Blessington (Emma Stone), who committed suicide. When Godwin transplants the unborn child's brain into the mother, this dead woman's rebirth as "Bella" becomes an extended allegory on the social, physical, and sexual abuse of and rebellion by the female. The film offers dark comedy through Bella's ego-driven navigations of the intellectual, physical, and financial avenues of this neo-Victorian imaginary.

The set design reminds one of a creative iteration of the late 1890s and early 1900s film world, featuring painted photography plates. In Lanthimos's film, they serve as the backdrop to a psychosexual steampunk journey across Europe, indicating movements across time and space. Chronological location changes are conveyed in quaint black-and-white interpanels while flashbacks of Bella's suicide are coded in bilious blue storms. The film fluidly moves between England, Portugal, and France, and back to England, introducing an array of characters who influence Bella's journey of personal awakening. Godwin's English home is visually associated with cold white, blues, and grays, reflecting the surgical world of the doctor's megalomania. In the vibrant pastels of Lisbon, the intensely sexual female Frankenstein explores her pleasure drives with the playboy Duncan (Mark Ruffalo), only to move on to life as a sex worker surrounded by the garish tones of a Parisian brothel.

In this *fin de siècle* nursery world, everything is on the cusp of tradition and modernity. Everything is an experimental hybrid, including Godwin's pig-chickens and Bella, who is her own child-mother. The costume designer Holly Waddington—known for her work on the lustful, murderous neo-Victorian film *Lady Macbeth* (2016) and the retro-modern series *The Great* (2020-

2023)—presents Bella in *Things* as a hybrid being, wearing corseted tops with sheer skirts designed in the silhouette of a Victorian bustle. Bella's mini-lens sunglasses feel perennially in the now. Lanthimos films scenes with a disorienting fisheye lens, enhancing the preternaturally maturing Bella's perspective as an uncoordinated toddler. Yet, she is not innocent. Bella quickly transitions from speaking in disjointed fragments to expressing herself in complete sentences. She becomes a free spirit, a biologically mature woman, demanding more baked treats while cavorting through her sexual awakening.

In *Things*, many points of dramatic irony keep the audience engaged with the quick jokes, often where the male characters and the film audience are aware that Bella is being deceived sexually or financially. Many film reviews praise this work—which won Stone her second Best Actress Oscar—for its bold sexuality, stylized set designs, and innovative cinematography. Other reviewers disliked the overt nudity and the narrative of multiple men taking advantage of the "sexy, born yesterday" character. The *YouTube* video essay from the feminist channel *The Take* asks the question, "Is this film empowering or exploitative?" The film received a "Squashed Tomato" review from Lucía Tebaldi (*EscribiendoCine*), who alleges that the film indulges in every male gaze trope.

Collin Garbarino (*World*) also complains that "Hollywood elites are fawning over this reprehensible film claiming it's about female empowerment, but that supposed empowerment actually disguises the worst sort of exploitation." A verified audience goer, Joshua H., reflects that "The movie is about a bunch of people having sex with a child in the body of a woman. I can't get past that conceit." On the flip side, *Screen Rant*'s Greg MacArthur considers the work a feminist masterpiece, asserting the graphic nudity circumvents the male gaze and that the narrative demonstrates Bella's agency.

At the 2025 Oscars, Bella found a new sister in director Sean Baker's *Anora* (2024), where Stone passed the torch to Mikey Madsen as the year's Best Actress for portraying another "complex sex worker." Bella and Anora, Stone and Madsen, follow a long line of films that portray light-skinned women in these roles, from Donna Reed in *From Here to Eternity* (1953) to Jane Fonda in *Klute* (1971) and Charlize Theron in *Monster* (2003). *Anora*'s writer-director Baker is noted for his staged ethnographic film style where he presents realistic narrative films that offer compassionate views on downtrodden survivors, such as the young, homeless mother who resorts to sex work in *The Florida Project* (2017) and the wonderful friends in *Tangerine* (2015), who can be classified by another sub-trope of "complex Black transgender sex workers."

The bleak, realistic ending of *Anora* asks the questions that were notoriously omitted from the initial tragic script for *Pretty Woman* (1990), which ends with Edward returning to his world of privilege, while Vivienne returns to her precarious life of street sex work. Instead, the bubblegum-produced script became a box office behemoth and Julia Roberts's vehicle relying on the "hooker with a heart of gold" trope. This series of White women winning praise for portraying complex sex workers reminds me of a Black Film studies class conversation regarding *Training Day* (2001) and *Monster's Ball* (2001). The class debates centered on what it meant for Denzel Washington and Halle Berry to be lauded and awarded for portraying those types of Black characters—a corrupt, violent cop and the impoverished wife of an executed man, respectively. What kinds of roles are minoritized persons allowed to play, and what types of roles do minorities get praised for portraying? Even though White women might be considered second in the current racialized and gendered global social hegemonies, they are still not White men at the top. They are not liberated through feminism—they are still essentially sex workers.

Consider Bella in *Poor Things* as she humorously usurps male positions, inherits Godwin's estate, and becomes a medical student. Does *Things* satirize patriarchy or feminism? Is *Things* a situation of "yes, no, and, but also . . . " Who is this composite woman, this Frankenstein? According to various movie posters, Bella is a doll positioned on a travel trunk. She is a Daliesque dream with white surf crashing out of her Victorian-ruffled chest, sweeping up all the men in her wake. Regardless of where decisions fall on *Things* as feminist or anti-feminist, rebellious or exploitative, Lanthimos's engaging film does not disappoint. This blunt allegory fosters nuanced questions on gender dynamics, as Bella's violent first husband ultimately becomes mentally incapacitated, transformed into a pet, and mindlessly roams her estate gardens.

Works Cited

Anora. Directed by Sean Baker, FilmNation Entertainment, 2024.

Dogtooth. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, Boo Productions, 2009.

The Favourite. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, Fox Searchlight Pictures, 2019.

Final Girl Digital. "Frankenstein's Lobotomized Mistress: Dissecting the Poor Things

        Discourse." *YouTube*, uploaded 16 Apr. 2024, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NTRLRpgZtSc.

The Florida Project. Directed by Sean Baker, Cre Film, 2017.

From Here to Eternity. Directed by Fred Zinnemann, Columbia Pictures, 1953.

Garbarino, Collin. "Hollywood's Best Pictures?" *WORLD*, 2024,

        https://wng.org/podcasts/hollywoods-best-pictures-1706217157.

H. Joshua. Review of *Poor Things*. *Rotten Tomatoes*, 25 Dec. 2024,

        https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/poor_things/reviews?type=verified_audience.

The Killing of a Sacred Deer. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, Curzon Film, 2017.

Klute. Directed by Alan J. Pakula, Gus Productions, 1971.

Lady MacBeth. Directed by William Oldroyd, Altitude Film Distribution, 2016.

The Lobster. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, Feelgood Entertainment, 2015.

MacArthur, Greg. "8 Reasons Why Poor Things Is a Feminist Masterpiece." *ScreenRant*, 23

        Dec. 2023, https://screenrant.com/poor-things-feminist-masterpiece-reasons/.

McIntosh, Jonathan. "Born Sexy Yesterday." *YouTube*, uploaded 27 Apr. 2017,

        www.youtube.com/watch?v=0thpEyEwi80.

McNamara, Tony, creator. *The Great*. Thruline Entertainment, 2020.

Monster. Directed by Patty Jenkins, Media 8 Entertainment, 2003.

Monster's Ball. Directed by Marc Forster, Lee Daniels Entertainment, 2001.

Tebaldi, Lucía. "No Me Gustó La Película 'Pobres Criaturas,' de Yorgos Lanthimos

    EscribiendoCine." *EscribiendoCine*, 2024,

    www.escribiendocine.com/noticias/2024/02/09/17050-no-me-gusto-la-pelicula-pobres-

    criaturas-de-yorgos-lanthimos.

Phillips, Zoe G. "14 Actors Who Won Oscars for Playing Sex Workers." *The Hollywood*

    Reporter, 4 Mar. 2025, www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/actors-won-oscars-playing-

    sex-workers/.

Poor Things. Directed by Yorgos Lanthimos, Searchlight Pictures, 2023.

"Poor Things, Explained: Empowering or Exploitative?" *YouTube*, uploaded 30 Jan. 2024,

    www.youtube.com/watch?v=fUCpo601tVY.

Pretty Woman. Directed by Gary Marshall, Touchstone Pictures, 1990.

Tangerine. Directed by Sean Baker, Duplass Brothers Productions, 2015.

Training Day. Directed by Antoine Fuqua, Village Roadshow Pictures, 2001.

Vivienne Tailor earned her Cultural Studies MA from Claremont Graduate University, Creative

Writing MFA from National University, and English BA from the University of Georgia. She

researches dictatorships, healing trauma through art, the reclamation of historical memory, and

re/creation of individual and national identities. Vivienne is lead editing a film studies volume on

Trinh T. Minh-ha (Edinburgh UP) and developing two film and transitional justice monographs,

which are both under interest.

Nosferatu (2024): A Truly Monstrous Monster

Carol Senf

Since writer/director Robert Eggers chooses to follow the same narrative trajectory as previous *Nosferatu* films, people reading this review might well ask, "Why do I need to see this new version? What does it do that previous adaptations did not?" My answer is that the biggest changes are that Eggers focuses on Ellen's motivation to sacrifice herself to a creature so obviously evil and that Eggers also establishes the full extent of Orlok's evil. Not only is he a creature of consummate evil, he is also a moldering dead body to whom Ellen is nonetheless sexually responsive. As a result, *Nosferatu* provides its actors (Lily-Rose Depp as Ellen Hutter, Bill Skarsgard as Count Orlok, and Nicholas Hoult as Thomas Hutter) with rich and complex roles. In addition, masterful cinematography, a haunting musical score, and lavish period costumes make it a pleasure to watch. But don't take my word for it. Though it did not win any of them, the film received Academy Award nominations for production design, best makeup and hairstyle, cinematography, and costume design, not to mention similar nominations by BAFTA.

First, let me confess that I am a total sucker for adaptations of the vampire in fiction and narrative film because there are so many ways to examine a figure of absolute evil who nonetheless proves compelling and seductive. I have also studied vampires of all kinds for fifty-five years though I am particularly interested in Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). While many film adaptations depict a vampire that retains elements of his humanity (among them are the brooding lover played by Gary Oldman in Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992), the even more sympathetic figure played by Frank Langella in *Dracula* (1979), the almost entirely human warlord played by Jack Palance in a 1974 television miniseries), films influenced primarily by Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922) focus almost entirely on the vampire's animal traits, his otherness.

Eggers continues in that vein, emphasizing the vampire's animalistic features yet also suggesting that some humans are drawn to a creature that is objectively both horrifying and disgusting. That ambivalence is worth our attention because it reveals human complexity, especially their attraction to what they know to be evil. While obviously influenced by previous versions of Nosferatu—as well as one scene that I suspect is influenced by Le Fanu's *Carmilla* (1872)—Eggers adds to our understanding of that ambivalence. Moreover, exploring how Eggers differs from his predecessors helps viewers to see and appreciate his unique contributions to this subgenre of *Dracula* adaptations.

The first is *Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror* (1922), a silent film directed by F. W. Murnau with a screenplay by Henrik Galeen. To avoid paying royalties to Stoker's estate, Galeen and Murnau changed the names of the characters (Count Orlok for Count Dracula, Thomas and Ellen Hutter for Jonathan and Mina Harker, and so on) and shifted the location to Germany. Nonetheless, the plot is so close to *Dracula* that when Stoker's widow and literary executor took Prana Films to court for copyright infringement they won the lawsuit, and Prana was ordered to destroy the negatives and all prints of the film. Fortunately for vampire lovers everywhere, a number of prints escaped and were made available from the 1930s on.

In 1979, German filmmaker Werner Herzog recreated *Nosferatu the Vampire* to honor the 1922 silent film that he regarded as the greatest film ever made in Germany. Featuring Klaus Kinski as the vampire and Isabelle Adjani as Lucy Harker, Herzog mostly returns to Stoker's names though he sets the film in Transylvania and Wismar, Germany. In this version, Jonathan Harker travels to Dracula's castle to arrange the sale of property. Encountering villagers who attempt to convince him not to go to the castle, Harker dismisses their fears as superstition and continues to the castle to arrange the sale. Dracula sails to Wisnar, where it appears that the crew

died of plague. Once the rats escape the ship, Wisner succumbs to a plague that scientists and physicians cannot control until Lucy, reading a book that Jonathan brings with him, learns that the sacrifice of a virtuous young woman is the only way to destroy a vampire. She vows to save Wisnar by holding him in her bedroom until the morning sun destroys him. What makes this film different from Murnau's original (as well as from *Dracula*) is that Jonathan becomes a vampire and rides away in the final scene of the film, revealing that evil triumphs.

Another film that might have influenced Eggers is *Shadow of the Vampire* (2000), directed by E. Elias Merhige and written by Steven Katz. The film depicts the filming of Murnau's version and features Willem Dafoe as Max Schreck (the actor who played Count Orlock in Murnau's film and John Malkovich as a very obsessed and drug-addled Murnau). While members of the crew begin to worry that their lead actor is actually a vampire, the film is most interesting in its depiction of obsession and in its borrowing of silent film techniques.

The *Nosferatu* films that influenced Eggers share certain characteristics. Whether the vampire is named Count Dracula or Count Orlok, he is presented as a supernatural threat whose residence in a desolate castle suggests he is a being from some dark and primitive past who wishes to enter the modern world. Moreover, his connection to the animal world is reinforced by ratlike teeth and ears as well as the plague he brings with him. Despite his animalistic appearance, however, he is also presented as a sexual threat that arrives to intrude in the lives of the newlywed Hutters, a threat that the Mina character accepts because accepting his sexual advances will save her entire community.

Indeed, all the *Nosferatu* films distinguish themselves from *Dracula* by having the Mina Harker figure embrace the vampire whereas Stoker's character never chooses to have a relationship with the vampire. In fact, Stoker reveals her revulsion: "I was bewildered, and strangely enough,

I did not want to hinder him. I suppose it is a part of the horrible curse that such is, when his touch is on his victim" (266). As a result, the *Nosferatu* adaptations bring Mina to the forefront and reveal her courageous decision to accept the vampire's fatal embrace.

Although all the versions of *Nosferatu* ultimately destroy the vampire at the conclusion, they also reveal his power over others, usually the agents of modernity, including the lawyers, scientists, and real estate agents who introduce him to the modern world. As such, *Nosfereatu* films are very much unlike Stoker's novel (as well as many of its film adaptations), which emphasizes the power of modernity over the primitive past.

Eggers makes some significant changes, first by introducing Ellen as a teenager who experiences an orgiastic dream encounter with a dark and predatory figure. This scene very much resembles the beginning of *Carmilla* when Laura is visited by a young woman who curls up in bed with her. While the sexual component is latent in Le Fanu's tale, Eggers emphasizes the explosive physicality of the encounter. Ellen feels guilty about the encounter, but it continues to haunt her. (Frankly, I could have done with a bit less of Ellen's orgiastic writhing, as the clear sexual component needs no exaggeration.) Nonetheless, she grows up, marries the perfectly conventional Thomas Hutter, and strives for normalcy in her life.

Both their honeymoon and their desire for normalcy are interrupted when Hutter's boss sends him to Transylvania to negotiate a sale of property. The employer, Herr Knock, displays the same irrational behavior evident in earlier versions of *Nosferatu*. His irrationality—like that of Stoker's Renfield—is manifested in his insatiable appetite. It appeared to me, however, that Eggers entertained the idea of conflating his appetite for food with financial greed but chose not to pursue it. Herr Knock thus becomes less complex and interesting than the Renfield character on which he is based.

Eggers is more successful with his depiction of Thomas Hutter, and I note here that almost none of the film adaptations of *Dracula* or *Nosferatu* make the Jonathan Harker character as interesting or complex as he is in Stoker's novel. Eggers also succeeds in making Hutter a stand-in for the viewing audience. Bitten by Orlok when he visits his home, Hutter escapes from the castle and returns to Germany where he does what he can to support his increasingly hysterical (and I mean that word in the nineteenth-century clinical sense) wife. Nonetheless, because he seems to share her fascination with the monster, Ellen chooses to distract him while she seduces Orlok to his destruction. It is a clear gender reversal as Eggers focuses on Ellen's heroic sacrifice and on Hutter's intense blue eyes and look of bewilderment. His is the face of the ordinary human who is both fascinated and repelled by the presence of such absolute evil.

Meanwhile, the *tour de force* performance is Bill Skarsgard's as Count Orlok. Whereas earlier versions depict Orlok as wooden but also animalistic and vaguely menacing, the stiff movements detract from his power over the human characters. Skarsgard, on the other hand, evokes a kind of raw power over everything. And the power of his otherness is reinforced by the prosthetic body suit (there is a good reason the Academy nominated the film for makeup) that reveals he really is a decaying corpse. That otherness is also reinforced by his voice. Not only does he speak a dead language (a reconstructed form of Dacian, the language of the people who once lived in what is now Romania and Moldova), he also studied with an Icelandic opera singer to learn to lower his voice to sound menacing. Everything about him thus evokes evil, but it also suggests the kind of power and dominance that can be seductive. As a result, Ellen's response is not just her desire to protect her family and her community. It is also the highly sexualized response to his powerful presence. Even though I wish Eggers had spent more time exploring all the reasons humans respond so positively to Orlok, I appreciate his desire to examine their ambivalent

responses and attempt to depict why evil is so compelling. *Nosferatu* was not exactly the Christmas

gift I had hoped for, but it is an intelligent retelling of the *Dracula* story. If you are interested in

vampires, you should see it.

Works Cited

Bram Stoker's Dracula. Directed by Dan Curtis, Latglen, 1974.

Bram Stoker's Dracula. Directed by Francis Ford Coppola, American Zoetrope, 1992.

Dracula. Directed by John Badham, Universal Pictures, 1979.

Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan. *Carmilla: A Critical Edition*. Edited by Kathleen Costello-Sullivan,

Syracuse UP, 2013.

Nosferatu. Directed by Robert Eggers, Universal Pictures, 2024.

Nosferatu: A Symphony of Horror. Directed by F. W. Murnau, Prana Films, 1922.

Nosferatu the Vampyre. Directed by Werner Herzog, 20th Century Fox, 1979.

Shadow of the Vampire. Directed by E. Elias Merhige, BBC Films, 2000.

Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*, edited by John Edgar Browning and David Skal, Norton Critical Edition,

2nd ed., W. W. Norton, 2021.

Carol Senf is Professor in Literature, Media, and Communication at Georgia Tech, and she has been interested in vampires since childhood, resulting in her book, *The Vampire in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction* (1988). She has also published books and articles on *Dracula* and Stoker, including "Dracula: Stoker's Response to the New Woman," *Victorian Studies* (1982), "Blue Books, Baedekers, Cookbooks, and the Monsters in the Mirror: Bram Stoker's *Dracula*," *Food for Monsters: Popular Culture and Our Basic Food Taboo* (2019), and "Dracula and Women," *The Cambridge Companion to Dracula* (2017). In addition to vampires, Senf has also written on the Brontës, George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Sarah Grand. As evidenced from this review, she also ventures into the present, looking at popular fiction and film.

Lies of P: Envisioning Automata in the Belle Époque

Bogdan Groza

Lies of P is a 2023 Korean action role-playing game developed by Neowiz Games and Round8 Studio. It is a free adaptation of Carlo Collodi's *The Adventures of Pinocchio* (1883), envisioning the main character as an automaton rather than a puppet. It is also set in the fictitious city of Krat and uses the Belle Époque for aesthetic inspiration. The architecture, for instance, reflects a variety of styles, lavish and rich with details, such as Neo-Gothic and Art Nouveau, which were predominant during that period.

In spite of how various cinematographic interpretations have shaped *The Adventures of Pinocchio* in the modern-day imagination, the original story was initially grimmer and darker in nature. This, to an extent, transposes into the game. One of the grounding elements of Collodi's work is not so much the importance of telling the truth as it is the role of education and obedience. *Lies of P* freely adapts and borrows elements from a universally renowned story, working on the original themes while also adding a novel dimension to them. In an interview for *Unreal Engine*, Round8 Studio stated that their intention was to take a globally-recognized story and give it a "fresh and unique twist" in order to resonate with the player base: "Although it may come as a surprise that we chose a fairy tale, the original *Pinocchio* story actually encompasses elements of black comedy, cruelty, and captivating characters" (Williams). This statement demonstrates that the developing team was fully aware of Collodi's work and its many layers and nuances. Their effort is not limited to the narratological dimension, however, because it is reflected in the aesthetic elements as well. The game world features scenery and settings reminiscent of the end of the nineteenth century with the addition of several steampunk elements, such as greater emphases on industrialization, autonomous machines, and clockwork mechanisms. This world-building also

adds minor Lovecraftian hues to the narrative with cosmic entities and unexplained phenomena that cohabit the city of Krat.

Round8 Studio furthermore stated that the Belle Époque was used as a basis for the aesthetics of the game, putting emphasis on lighting and technology: "We carefully calibrated the color temperatures of the lights to match the aesthetic of nineteenth-century gas lamps, prevalent during the period that serves as a backdrop for the game" (Williams). The contrast between light and dark, as well as this attention to the color of the illumination used in the game, gives *Lies of P* its uniqueness.

The development team also reflected on life during those days: "People living in the La Belle Époque witnessed vibrant and diverse improvements in both culture and technology such as the construction of the Eiffel Tower and the World's Expo" (Williams). It was, in fact, during the Great Exhibitions that automata—anthropomorphic mechanical devices—became more accessible to the general public.[27] While these "robot precursors" were already present during the eighteenth century (*The Writer*, *The Artist*, and *The Musician*, all produced by Pierre Jaquet-Droz and his son, are still preserved in Neuchâtel's Musée d'Art et d'Histoire), they were usually manufactured for the highest ranks of nobility. *Lies of P* uses the novelty of automata produced during the nineteenth century as part of its world-building. The fictitious city of Krat, in fact, gains its importance for being the first to harness a new form of energy and using it to fuel automated machines that supposedly pave the way toward the future. As the narrative progresses, however, this energy source is revealed to have a grave flaw that leads to the androids rebelling. The plot mirrors the

---

[27] For a more in-depth analysis, both on the historical existence of automata as well as how they functioned from a practical standpoint, see Nicholas Faulkes, *Automata: A Brief History of the Automata from Ancient Times to the Fée Ondine* (2017) and Alfred Chapuis and Edmond Droz, *Automata: A Historical and Technological Study* (1958).

original *Pinocchio* not only in that the protagonist, as an automaton, is a puppet of sorts, but also in that he confronts ontological dilemmas and the exploration of what it means to be human.

It is finally worth mentioning that other than through cinematics and interactions with the various secondary characters, much of the lore in *Lies of P* and its world-building can be discovered within what is commonly referred to as "flavor text," and what this review will call "paratextual elements." Similar to the function of the paratext in literature, these fragments are not meant to be the main focus of the game but rather exist to give a deeper dimension to the world-building itself. In *Lies of P*, the paratextual elements are diary entries, fragments of journals, item descriptions, and other such minor components. As such, delving deeper into the lore and world of the game is left entirely to the player's own desire.

As previously stated, the game does not moralize on lying as being inherently evil or on honesty as always being the correct choice. At various times the narrative purposefully blurs these lines and requires the player to ponder the meaning of morality. For example, Lady Antonia is an old woman who appears as a non-player character (NPC) who interacts with the protagonist. Afflicted by a disease that will petrify her body, she is found looking at a painting of herself in her youth. She asks the protagonist if she still maintains part of her beauty or if she has lost the last shred of her human appearance. The player can choose between telling what may be referred to as a "white lie" and reassuring Lady Antonia, indicating compassion, or being bluntly honest, yet insensitive. In other words, *Lies of P* ponders the meaning of humanity by a means of subversion. The main character initially is no more than a puppet but slowly becomes more and more human through the player's choices. The game does not simply preach on the righteousness of telling the truth as opposed to lying; rather, it focuses on how these decisions influence one's growth—not in age, but in mentality, life, and wisdom. By purposefully blurring these lines, *Lies of P* inquires

into the ontological condition of human beings with an apt late-nineteenth-century setting that

evokes the oneiric and fantastical imagery of the Belle Époque.

Works Cited

Chapuis, Alfred and Edmond Droz. *Automata: A Historical and Technological Study*, Editions

     du Griffon, 1958.

Collodi, Carlo. *The Adventures of Pinocchio*. Translated and edited by John Hooper and Anna

     Kraczyna, Penguin, 2021.

Faulkes, Nicholas. *Automata: A Brief History of the Automata from Ancient Times to the Fée

     Ondine*, Editions Xavier Barral, 2017.

Lies of P, directed by Choi Ji-won, developed by Neowiz and Round8 Studio, Microsoft

     Windows game, 2023.

Williams, Mike. "*Lies of P* Takes Inspiration from *Pinocchio*, French History, and Marries Them

     with Soulslike Combat." *Unreal Engine*, 29 Aug. 2023,

     https://www.unrealengine.com/en-US/developer-interviews/lies-of-p-takes-inspiration-

     from-pinocchio-french-history-and-marries-them-with-soulslike-combat.

Bogdan Groza finished his Master's Degree in European, American and Postcolonial Language
and Literature at the faculty of Padua with a thesis entitled *Knighthood and Anti-heroic Behaviour
in the Figures of Falstaff and Don Quixote*. He is currently completing a PhD project at the faculty
of Siena on the Anthropocene in science fiction literature; the main writers he is working on are
Philip K. Dick, Frank Herbert, and Ayn Rand.

Adapting *The War of the Worlds* for Television

Mehdi Achouche

In 2019, two TV adaptations of H. G. Wells's classic *The War of the Worlds* (1898) were simultaneously released. The two shows make very different choices in the way they adapt the original novel, each trying in its own way to modernize the source material for contemporary tastes. One is a period drama set in Edwardian England while the other is a contemporary update set in both France and England. Both shows foreground female characters as their leads, although both fail to convincingly empower their protagonists and completely move beyond stereotypes. Similarly, the original anti-imperialist content from the novel is maintained by one but not by the other. Instead, it draws from Wells's novel to reimagine it as a post-apocalyptic narrative about human cooperation and competition. Both productions exploit contemporary anxieties over societal collapse. They ultimately focus on the novel's original interest in the limited first-person perspective of its protagonist and narrator, while concentrating on the family as the locus of their narratives and themes.

The War of the Worlds has proven one of Wells's most enduring stories since the novel's original release. Each one of its adaptations has been the object of fascinating studies on how it reflects its own context of production. Wells's story was published against the backdrop of increasing tensions with Germany, as speculative war narratives of futuristic warfare had been popular since the consolidation of the German Empire and its military forces under Bismarck. Sir George Chesney's *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer*, which launched the Future War subgenre, was published the very same month as the German forces' actual victory over France: May 1871. This novella imagined a surprise attack on Great Britain by an unnamed

adversary equipped with "fatal engines" that wipes out the Royal Navy, and the following novels and novellas similarly envisioned scientific and technological advances put to devastating uses.

Wells's great contribution to the burgeoning science fiction genre (then still called "scientific romances") was to make aliens the invading enemy while shaking further the smug Victorian sense of self-satisfaction. It also incorporated several key themes of the era, leading I. F. Clarke to call *The War of the Worlds* "the perfect nineteenth-century myth of the imaginary war" (84). Each of the successive adaptations was in turn able to use the extraterrestrial invasion as a metaphor for its own era's anxieties and fears. Orson Welles's 1938 radio drama famously triggered a panic (of disputed proportions) among its listeners, as fears of another world war were headlining the news. The 1953 movie adaptation was part of a cycle of alien invasion narratives that took place in the context of the early Cold War. It also drew on fears over "the terrible weapons of superscience" developed during World War II, as made explicit in the opening of that film. As for Steven Spielberg's 2005 adaptation, it was clearly meant to evoke the 9/11 attacks and their immediate aftermath. This makes the release in 2019 of no less than two television series adapted from *The War of the Worlds* (only the second and third such live-action TV adaptations) all the more interesting.

The first is a three-episode British miniseries produced for BBC One and broadcast in November and December 2019, while the second is a three-season, twenty-four-episode international coproduction between the Fox Network Group and French broadcaster Canal+ that aired between 2019 and 2022. The most obvious difference between the two is that the former is set in Edwardian England while the latter takes place in modern-day France and England. This means that both shows quickly diverge and provide differing reinterpretations of Wells's classic, and both are meant to echo contemporary times.

On the one hand, the miniseries hews closely enough to Wells's narrative, being set in rural England and telling the story of the invasion through the limited perspective of a childless couple. But whereas in the novel the wife is quickly left behind to focus on the husband's misadventures in the midst of the invasion, the BBC miniseries makes her the central character. From the very beginning the famous voiceover remarking on humanity's "infinite complacency," which until then had always been narrated by a somber male voice, is now spoken by the female protagonist, Amy (played by Eleanor May Tomlinson). It quickly becomes clear in the first episode that the series will adopt a feminist perspective to comment on the situation of women at the time.

We learn, for example, that Amy cannot apply to a women's college for a master's degree without letters of recommendation. No one will write her one, however, because Amy and George live together out of wedlock, as George (played by Rafe Spall) already has a wife but has left her for Amy. While he can still work and pay for the couple's expenses, Amy is stuck as a housewife in their rural cottage, even though, as she pointedly remarks, "I don't need to be kept." When she complains about this state of affairs in the obligatory exposition scene, George is rather dismissive of her plight and remarks instead on how their chicken has just laid an egg—implicitly reminding Amy and audiences of women's primary role in Edwardian England (it will soon be revealed that Amy is, in fact, pregnant).

This is certainly an interesting perspective to take on Wells's material, although the series is not entirely successful in that regard. In fact, the relationship between the two lead characters is not well integrated within the overall invasion story. The characters flee the oncoming Martians and their destruction but still find the time, between two attacks, to discuss how George is trying to get his wife to sign the divorce papers. The home they have created together is central to the first episode but leads the writer, Craig Viveiros, to rely on the worst disaster film clichés, such as

one character having to go back to fetch the dog who has been left behind. Such scenes betray the limited creativity behind the show throughout its short run.

The Fox/Canal+ TV series also gives female characters significantly more dramatic space, with one of its leads played by Léa Drucker. She plays Catherine Durand, a French astronomer who is the lead scientific voice in the series (her counterpart in the BBC miniseries is played by Robert Carlyle, but he is only a supporting character). This is an interesting choice given that the genre has historically done a poor job of representing women as protagonists and hard-headed scientists. Yet there is little commentary here on the condition of being a woman: although the family and family relationships are the central narrative dynamic and theme of the show, no specific role emerges for women. Both Catherine and her British counterpart, male professor Bill Ward (played by Gabriel Byrne), must deal with problematic family issues, as do most other characters. It is true, however, that Catherine fits rather well the stereotype of the childless "sad spinster" who has a maternal obsession with protecting her younger, drug-addicted sister. She will eventually help her fix her life and protect her child, and the last scene of the series sees Catherine, who has given up on her own lover, finally broadly smiling as she holds her sister's baby in her arms. The miniseries' penultimate scene also focuses on its female protagonist putting her own child to bed, again associating its female character with motherhood (which in both productions is a symbol for human resilience).

The British miniseries also remembers to honor Wells's anti-colonialist, anti-imperialist theme. The narrator of the original novel remarks in the opening chapter that before we

judge [the Martians] too harshly, we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its own inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness,

were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European

immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy as to complain if the

Martians warred in the same spirit? (4-5)

In the miniseries' first episode, a cabinet minister makes a speech in front of journalists remarking

on the superiority of "the Anglo-Saxon race, the best, most human, most honorable race the world

possesses," adding, "And any challenge will be faced and defeated. We are an empire on which

the sun never sets." This is shot while the camera films Westminster Palace and the minister

himself (standing on the top of stairs) in low angles to stress their authority and to highlight the

same kind of arrogance Wells was set on countering. In the second episode, parallel editing

contrasts another triumphant speech by the same Minister with images of the destruction wrought

by the aliens: "we are the masters of warfare . . . our cavalry, our cannon, are the best in the world"

is heard while British soldiers are depicted being decimated by the aliens' superior technology (an

outraged officer is heard exclaiming, "You are in Great Britain!" just before being zapped out of

existence). When the Minister remarks that there cannot be more than two of their fighting

machines, audiences can in fact see three of them, while another shot soon visualizes dozens of

new ships approaching Earth from space. The British Empire seems on its way to being colonized

out of existence.

The Fox/Canal+ series, on the other hand, has nothing to say about colonialism,

imperialism, or technological hubris. Instead, the initial attack is soon left behind as the show

reimagines Wells's story as a post-apocalyptic narrative, echoing the many such series that have

been produced over the past few years. This makes it very much a show attuned to contemporary

times, as Western societies have been haunted, on and off the screen, by the possibility of imminent

societal collapse. In terms of post-apocalyptic TV series, 2019 alone witnessed the release of *To*

the Lake (2019-2022), *Black Summer* (2019-2021)*, Daybreak* (2019)*, See* (2019-2022)*,* and the

terrifying French production, *The Collapse* (2019-2020), and the trend was only given renewed

momentum by the COVID-19 pandemic. Mark R. Hillegas noted the connection audiences feel to

Wells's apocalyptic vision as early as 1967 when he wrote that "the Wellsian story of the end of

civilization brought about by a disastrous war . . . is the most influential ancestor of the nuclear

holocaust novels so popular in recent years" (60-61). The popularity of the post-apocalyptic

subgenre in the face of contemporary challenges arguably explains the renewed popularity of

Wells's novel.

The Fox/Canal+ production is full of wide shots of empty buildings and ruins, car wrecks

and dead bodies littering the streets while its characters wander through the rural and urban

wasteland—surely some of the most iconic images of contemporary science fiction. Some early

episodes raise the question of cooperation versus competition among the survivors, the typical

theme of post-apocalyptic narratives that question human nature and the potential for savagery

once civilization has collapsed. This element was already outlined in Wells's novel when the

protagonist is trapped under the ruins of a house and has to share his limited food supplies with

another character (the most memorable scene in the Spielberg adaptation is perhaps when the

father, played by Tom Cruise, decides to murder a similar character to protect his family). When

it is revealed that the aliens are in fact time-traveling humans, the series seems to be elaborating

on that theme—humanity devouring itself—although later seasons in fact do little with it.

The miniseries also likes to film British civilians clogging the streets and roads as they are

explicitly referred to as "refugees." Again, the show draws directly from Wells, as the novel

describes "a stampede—a stampede gigantic and terrible—without order and without a goal, six

million people, unarmed and unprovisioned, driving headlong. It was the beginning of the rout of

civilization, of the massacre of mankind" (175). Such passages and their interest in the civilians'

plight when order implodes also explain modern interest in the novel. This is perhaps why the

miniseries also intercuts each of its three episodes with scenes set in a future, post-apocalyptic

London, as the survivors try to make sense of the reddish Martian vegetation that now thrives on

Earth (part of the Martians' colonization scheme). But, again, the miniseries does little with these

scenes, and both productions are not as artistically successful as they could have been.

Both series tend to rely on well-worn stereotypes and questionable writing, with the

Fox/Canal+ series in particular quickly stretching credibility. Its characters act and react in the

most unlikely ways, while its attempts at incorporating quantum theory to support the existence of

alternate timelines (another popular theme over the past few years) is rather unconvincing—the

writing is full of incoherence and contradictions, and the writers out of their depth. Only the

miniseries intermittently tries to achieve the same kind of thematic resonance as Wells, although

it also quickly falls back on family-driven story arcs and issues, foreclosing larger social themes.

The limited perspective of the first-person narrator in the original novel is an enticing one,

as it makes it possible to recount the story of an alien invasion through the partial and subjective

prism of isolated individuals and families. This is very much in line with the contemporary interest

in the human dimension behind such large-scale stories. Yet other post-apocalyptic TV series have

been more ambitious and successful in their treatment of similar material, both before (*Battlestar

Galactica* (2004-2009)) and after (*Invasion* (2021-2023)*, The Last of Us* (2023-present)*, Fallout*

(2024)) the release of these two adaptations of *The War of the Worlds*. It is a shame, therefore, that

one of the strongest source materials for such stories has not—yet—found the proper TV treatment.

Works Cited

Bernard, Jérémy et al, creators. *The Collapse*, Canal+, 2019.

Chesney, George. *The Battle of Dorking: Reminiscences of a Volunteer*. London, Blackwood,

    1871.

Clarke, I. F. *Voices Prophesying War: Future Wars, 1763-3749.* 2nd ed., Oxford UP, 1992.

Coleite, Aron Eli and Brad Peyton, creators. *Daybreak*. Netflix, 2019.

Druckman, Neil and Craig Mazin, creators. *The Last of Us*. HBO, 2023.

Hillegas, Mark R. *The Future as Nightmare. H. G. Wells and the Anti-Utopians.* Oxford UP, 1967.

Hyams, John and Karl Schaefer, creators. *Black Summer*. The Asylum, 2019.

Kinberg, Simon and David Weil, creators. *Invasion*. Apple TV+, 2021.

Knight, Steven, creator. *See*. Apple TV+, 2019.

Kostomarov, Pavel, director. *To the Lake*. 1-2-3 Production, 2019.

Moore, Ronald D., developer. *Battlestar Galactica*. R&D TV, 2004.

Overman, Howard, creator. *The War of the Worlds*, Fox, Canal+, 2019.

Robertson-Dworet, Geneva, and Graham Wagner, creators. *Fallout*. Amazon Prime Video,

    2024.

Viveiros, Craig, director. *The War of the Worlds*, BBC, 2019.

"The War of the Worlds." *The Mercury Theatre on the Air*. Performed by Orson Welles, CBS

    Radio Network, 30 Oct. 1938.

The War of the Worlds. Directed by Byron Haskin, Paramount Pictures, 1953.

War of the Worlds. Directed by Steven Spielberg, Paramount Pictures, 2005.

Wells, H. G. *The War of the Worlds.* London: William Heinemann, 1898. *Internet Archive,*

    archive.org/details/warofworlds00welluoft.

Mehdi Achouche is an Associate Professor in Anglophone Cinema and American Studies at Sorbonne Paris Nord University, Paris. He specializes in representations of techno-utopianism, transhumanism, and progress in science fiction cinema and television.

Book Reviews

Canepa, Nancy L., editor. *The Enchanted Boot: Italian Fairy Tales and Their Tellers*. Wayne State UP, 2022. https://wsupress.wayne.edu/9780814334751/

Shannon Branfield

The Enchanted Boot: Italian Fairy Tales and Their Tellers, edited, translated, and introduced by Nancy L. Canepa, is an important contribution to the library of fairy tale anthologies. The introduction establishes the history of fairy tales in Italy, arguing that "the three most significant moments in Italian fairy-tale history occur at pivotal moments of construction, deconstruction, or reconfiguration of national identity" (22). From Baroque and Renaissance Italy to post-war Italy, Canepa effectively elucidates the waxing and waning interest in fairy tales as part of Italy's literary and national history. Readers more familiar with the French and German fairy tale traditions will be interested to learn that Giambattista Basile's literary versions of familiar tales such as Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White, Rapunzel, and Hansel and Gretel precede Perrault's and the Grimms' versions. However, the initial flowering of literary fairy tales during the Italian Renaissance did not create the same sustained creative process that occurred elsewhere in Europe and they have fallen in and out of vogue in the literary tradition, which has contributed to the lack of Italian fairy tales in the canon. The lack of a comprehensive sampling in Italian fairy tales in English has also impacted this reduced presence in the European fairy tale canon. This anthology intends to expand the traditional European canon by reintroducing Italian fairy tales to English-speaking scholars. This accessible anthology features translations of key Italian fairy tales, ranging from the fourteenth to the twenty-first century. Although organized chronologically, Aarne-Thompson-Uther Index (ATU) tale types are identified in the preface to each fairy tale, as well as compiled in an appendix, which assists researchers in navigating this text.

This is an impressive compilation of Italian fairy tales. Part I begins the collection with an anonymous poem from the oral tradition alongside a novella from the latter fifteenth century to establish the origins of the Italian fairy tale tradition. Part II, one of the longer sections, showcases Giovan Francesco Straparola and Giambattista Basile, the authors who popularized the form in Early Modern Italy and laid the groundwork for literary fairy tales. Part III, aptly subtitled "Sleeping Beauty," explores range and genre in this period of inconsistent retellings with a play by Carlo Gozzi. Part IV highlights the "golden age" in Italian fairy tales, in which readers may recognize Collodi's *Pinocchio* (1883). This section also displays the contributions of female writers to the genre. Part V introduces Italo Calvino with excerpts from his monumental work, *Fiabe Italiane* (1956). Part VI closes the anthology by bringing the reader into the contemporary moment, with stories ranging from Gianni Rodari in the post-war period to authors writing in the 1990s and early 2000s. That this section also includes an excerpt of fairy tale scholarship discussing Propp's functions and Italian fairy-tale storytelling techniques was a pleasant surprise and a worthy addition.

Acknowledging the impossibility of fitting everything desired into an anthology, I would have appreciated more fairy tales in some of the sections. The section lengths vary widely, with some sections over one hundred pages and others ranging from twenty to forty pages. Some of the longest sections feature authors already the most well-known, such as a nearly forty-page excerpt of Collodi's *Pinocchio*. Since *Pinocchio* is already accessible in English translations and readily available, reducing the length of the excerpt would have enabled the expansion of the shorter sections. While the brevity of Part III makes sense, given the framing that this was a period of reduced output, Part I, on the origins of fairy tale motifs in early Italian literature, is the shortest section in the collection by a wide margin. While the introduction establishes that the focus is

predominately on literary fairy tales, an expanded exploration of links to the oral tradition and the groundwork that Straparola and Basile built upon would have enhanced the chronology that is established throughout. In addition, that would have strengthened the claims about fairy tales and Italian national identity, which is compellingly featured in the introduction but then lapses. Given the focus on building an anthology, the scholarship component set up in the introduction lacks full development, but it opens productive avenues for further research and consideration. As an anthology, this fills a lack in the canon and warrants a place on the shelves with Perrault and the Grimms.

However, the compilation of an anthology is always a delicate balancing act between inclusion and a manageable length. The breadth assembled here is formidable. This is an excellent teaching text with a sampling of fairy tales that provide accessible and engaging touchstones throughout Italy's literary history. No specialized knowledge of fairy tales or fairy tale scholarship is required to benefit from this collection. This anthology is not only for students, however. This is also an effective anthology for researchers who want to explore connections across European literary traditions, with ATU types ranging from the most anthologized to more specialized ones such as ATU 700 "Thumbling," ATU 441 "Hans My Hedgehog," and ATU 311 "Rescue by Sister" with links to ATU 312 "Maiden Killer." The consistent ATU notations make this text simple and efficient to navigate and it builds on existing scholarly collections well. The ability to use this book both for research and as a teaching tool is an asset.

In addition to folklorists, fairy tale scholars, and instructors of folk narrative classes, this book will also be of interest to adaptation scholars. Given the focus on literary retellings, as well as the emphasis on the way this literature grows out of contemporary social changes, this anthology is well poised to facilitate research into adaptation, cultural narratives, and genre. Indeed, some of

the tales included rewrite earlier stories in the anthology and also play with genre and form.

Furthermore, this collection is useful for genre scholars, since the development of the fairy tale

played out quite differently in Italy than it did in France and Germany, where the genre is more

widely studied. Given the focus on national identity in the introduction, this volume also provides

material for further study of the Italian literary heritage, the rebuilding of Italy in the post-war era,

or a cultural studies approach. Although the collection of stories included is specific to Italy, the

emphasis on national identity makes this work relevant to a broader study of interactions between

politics and literature or war and literature. This is a thorough and skilled compilation that distills

the wide variety of fairy tales, fairy tale motifs, and fairy tale retellings throughout Italian literary

history into a complex, varied, and representative assembly of key stories and authors of the Italian

fairy tale.

Shannon Branfield is a Visiting Assistant Professor at Colorado Mesa University where she

teaches courses in mythology, literature, and composition. Her dissertation, *'Wearing a mask to

each other': Masculinity and the Public Eye in Victorian Sensation Fiction*, examines masculinity

in the works of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Wilkie Collins, Charles Reade, and Ellen Wood.

Powers, Heather, editor. *Fairy Tales in the College Classroom: Essays to Spark Lesson*

Plan *Ideas Across the Curriculum*. McFarland, 2024.

https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/fairy-tales-in-the-college-

classroom/?srsltid=AfmBOooe6p1ao4nRT4UFNZE07LmjmE-4oY1Sow9dEznyevR6UYFhReFR

Aisik Maiti

As a curation of finely crafted essays on "the closest thing we have to a universal antidote"

(8), Heather Powers's *Fairy Tales in the College Classroom: Essays to Spark Lesson Plan Ideas*

Across the Curriculum provides important resources to locate the pedagogical impact of fairy tales.

Revisiting narratives that most readers are fairly well acquainted with, the essays span across the

discursive terrains of linguistics, critical race studies, gender studies, visual studies, and adaptation

studies. Exploring the potential of fairy tales as educational tools across various disciplines, the

collection offers important perspectives on how these narratives can resourcefully enrich college-

level teaching. Along with its rigorous academic approach, a reader's familiarity with the

background makes it an insightful read. This combination of academic rigor and familiar reading

experiences makes the work an intriguing exploration of the several approaches the study of fairy

tales invites: social, historical, anthropological, philological, and literary.

Powers's introduction effectively attends to recent scholarly directions that the subsequent

sections of the book also show. The neat progression of essays that follows not only highlights its

inherent conversational tenor, but also its organic conceptual development. Classified into five

sections involving the craft of writing fairy tales, the notion of the visual, decolonial perspectives,

gender, and adaptation, the cluster of essays suggests a pattern that essentially arrives from a

pedagogical involvement in the classroom. Rather than trying to fit in preconceived theoretical

models of teaching into the curriculum of fairy tales, the sharply written essays in the volume

develop on possible and demonstrated ways of teaching stories to arrive at a commentary on pedagogy.

One of the key notions that underwrites almost all the essays is how an academic engagement with fairy tales can corroborate the processes of both critical and creative writing. What becomes central to this is the question of the transition from orality to the written—a socio-historical and culturally facilitated transition that can have parallels within the very space of creative and academic transaction that a college classroom provides. One can find a substantial exploration of this idea in the first set of essays by Michael Jones, Theodora Goss and Amy Bennett-Zendzian, and Catalina Millán-Scheiding.

Jones, in ""Fires that blaze brightly': The Language of the Tale," sharply discusses how a "pedagogical focus" on the language of fairy tales can "aid students' writing development" (26). The essay provides an important framework that not only explores the potential of fairy tales in shaping the creative expression of learners but also delves into how one can reconcile the abstraction of these "tales" and the technical demands of modern literary writing found in, for instance, a novel. What comes as an important concern in the essay is how the practice of teaching these tales can be accommodated into the models of contemporary prose.

Goss and Bennett-Zendzian's essay discussing the pedagogic potential of "Little Red Riding Hood" adds another perspective on the students' familiarity with the topic through both their "experiences" and the strong, ubiquitous presence of fairy tales across several forms of media (33). Their argument, developing on the conceptual tools of psychoanalytic reading, traces the allegorical parallels between the narrative of the tale (decoding the symbolic "Grandma's house," the "dark forest," the "path of needles," and the defeat of the wolf) and the very act of navigating through critical thinking and writing. The essay spans across interrelated topics like the role of oral

storytelling in classroom pedagogy, the exercise of writing while thinking through the patterns of

fairy tale, and the correlation between comprehending the symbolism encoded in narratives and

the structural paradigms of academic writing.

Furthermore, Millán-Scheiding, in "The Use of Fairy Tales in Second Language Learning:

From Grammar Acquisition to Intercultural Competence," advances the idea of the "capitalist

rewriting of folk tales" when it comes to the very nomenclature of "fairy tales" for a "bourgeois"

readership (49). Developing concepts from linguistic studies and thinking through classroom

workshops on the processes of translation and creative writing (or storytelling/narratology at

large), the essay makes some key interventions in unpacking the grammatical potential of fairy

tales. As Millán-Scheiding suggests, fairy tales assist readers "to be very much alive in the words,

structures and knowledge of improving L2 [second language] speakers" (59).

The next set of essays by Gabrielle Stecher, and Daniel J. Weinstein and Nathan Heuer

brings in the notion of the visual while mapping the narrative element in fairy tales. Stecher's

"Picture This: The Pedagogical Value of Picture Books" substantiates the relationship between

words and visuality through the practice of using picture books in classroom workshops, showing

"how text and image come together to retell a particular fairy tale" (78). By further bringing in the

concept of "multimodality"—the conflation of the "linguistic, the visual, and the spatial" (67),

Stecher argues how picture books illustrate the potential of the juxtaposed image-text format

renders these narratives accessible and diverse. Weinstein and Heuer in "Tales for Today: A Fairy-

Tale Collaboration Between English and Art" further address the notion of collaborative work and

desired educational outcomes in a project specific to writing, editing, and illustrating collections

of flash fairy tales—an activity that can add "a touch of novelty" to the classroom pedagogy on

fairy tales and give learners "opportunities to enhance their flexibility as writers" (80).

Highlighting the importance of "fostering interdisciplinary collaboration" (80) among students, the essay moves through pedagogic instances of group writing, group editing, draft sketching, and "writing under pressure" (93). These essays not only provide ways to rethink the relevance of *visuality* in contemporary classroom teaching on fairy tales, but also frameworks to theorize the strong and resourceful intermedial connections between the literary and the visual across textual traditions of the fantastic.

"The Value of the African Dilemma Tales as a Pedagogical Resource" by Ayub Sheik, Martha Khosa, Nicholus Nyika, and Bheki Mthembu attends to the question of *decolonizing* the curriculum of fairy tales. The essay discusses the relationships between the "African dilemma" and fairy tales, on how classrooms function as oral spaces of "improvisation, spontaneity, and adaptation" (104), and further how this can be "a productive resource for participatory learning" among students, providing opportunities for "peer-to-peer intellectual exchanges" (111). The essay defines the African dilemma as "tales [that] celebrate African conundrums, African angsts and briefly peers into the private joys and wonder of tales long regaled by our African ancestors across the continent" (99). The focus on developing skills of open-mindedness, active listening, and decision-making skills through a decolonial, learner-centric framework of fairy tale pedagogy becomes central to the essay's concern of "making moral decisions . . . at the heart of educational practice" (112). The essay not only directs one to the "recognition" of the African dilemma tale in nurturing the creative and critical thinking of learners but also rethinks the importance of a "positive, entertaining and thoughtful" pedagogic apparatus for "multicultural heritage" (111).

Sarah Victor's contribution on "Empowerment Through Language" takes an interesting turn by discussing the potential of a multilingual text like Salman Rushdie's *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (1990), a "seemingly simple children's fairy tale," to invoke debates on the role of "home

languages" to immigrant and refugee populations. Victor's argument traces the questions of decolonial pedagogy and the immigrant identity through an understanding of linguistic "code-switching" in the text, advancing an important perspective: "it introduces and normalizes the mixture of languages and stories that occur when people from different cultures come together" (123). Through detailed examples of reading and discussion exercises centering on the text, the essay thus not only focuses on fiction and translingualism but also extends to the cognate fields of linguistics and cultural politics (116).

The next set of essays by Dillon Craig, Tanya Heflin, and Ka Yan Lam address fairy tales through developments in gender studies. Placing the well-known narrative of "Little Red Riding Hood" as a text that has potential to be "analyzed from a feminist and gendered perspective" (130), Craig's essay further attends to the question of teaching a gendered discourse through textual choices that "inform, educate, and engage students" (136) in a way that shapes their "perception of the world without bias" (136). Heflin's "Mystery, Magic, and Enchantment: The Uses of Fairy Tale in Teaching Women's Literature" further discusses categories like course design and setting, adding case studies of how learners across the academic spectrum respond to the teaching of women's literature. Heflin discusses the potential of teaching these stories in shaping "patience to help students recognize their narrative power, their psychological depth, and their profound seriousness of purpose" and further adds that once the students do so, "the rewards of fairy tales in the university classroom are multifold" (144). The conclusion of the essay sharply captures the essence of the praxis of teaching fairy tales, an observation that connects the essence of several of the pieces in the volume: "Far from being the 'most fleeting of pleasures,' *curiosity in the literature classroom* opens the forbidden door to bring to light what's *long been hidden in the shadows*" (160, emphasis added). Thinking along the same lines of pedagogy, Ka Yan Lam's "Disenchanting

the Romantic Ideal: Workshop Activities for Feminist Fairy-Tale Restorying" provides important tools to initiate class activities for "feminist fairy tale re-storying," assessing techniques of textual analysis through close reading that can potentially shape the critical skills of learners. Arguing for a revisionist framework that "interrogate[s] the presumptions in traditional tales" (165) in class-workshops, the essay substantiates how a pedagogic reimagination can provide a kind of agency to a learner's own creative and critical responses to the hierarchies of power that underwrite most fairy tales.

The final section, featuring essays by Melodie Roschman and Susanne Even, addresses the field of fairy tales and adaptation studies. Roschman explores the relevance of "adaptation criticism" in the study of fairy tales, assessing how an acquaintance with fairy tale narratives through familiar cultural forms "enables us to immediately discuss the difference between a text and its cultural permutations" (183). The essay advances a strong departure from the predominant Disney-influenced imagination of fairy tales and locates student projects in this spectrum of adaptation criticism, thus making a fine balance between the "knowledge of their source material" and their own critical perspectives (193). Even's essay, "Old and New Magic: The Grimm Brothers and Cornelia Funke's *Mirrorworld*," further examines the question of adaptation by addressing areas like intertextuality and archetypes in fairy tales. Even's argument also traces the "deliberate and purposeful" (200) historical markers in Funke's "tapestry of intertextuality" (198) through the presence of Austrian, British, and French history in the adapted characterization. By looking at an example from the pedagogical design of an undergraduate course, Even discusses how teaching Grimms' fairy tales in conjunction with Cornelia Funke's first book of the *Reckless* series (2010-present) can reflect "the potential of an approach that combines traditional fairy tales with a modern novel" (196). This directs the reader to rethink fairy tales not as stories residing in a

mythical or magical past, but as potential narratives that can have historical implications and contemporary appeal.

In almost all the essays, the prose is sharp, and ideas are well-facilitated with case studies that complement theoretical toolkits with practical models. Powers's collection is thus not only a careful anthology of cultural criticism on fairy tales, but also a testament to the interdisciplinary turn in fairy tale studies. While reflecting recent theoretical developments within the intersecting terrains of fairy tales and education, the volume attends to the larger question of literature as praxis—within and, consequently, beyond the college classroom.

Aisik Maiti has recently graduated with an MA by Research from the Indian Institute of Technology Bombay. His areas of interest include Victorian Studies, Modernisms, intellectual history, and visual cultures.

McCoppin, Rachel S. *The Legacy of the Goddess: Heroines, Warriors and Witches from*

World Mythology to Folktales and Fairy Tales. **McFarland, 2023.**

https://mcfarlandbooks.com/product/the-legacy-of-the-goddess/?srsltid=AfmBOooAtyBJIad-m0e-y_fV0-eEM70BXnDAUrVxgOKqBngKkFMAz7dj

Megan Spring

Rachel McCoppin's study of female archetypes considers the role of the feminine in world mythology, folklore, and fairy tales. McCoppin's argument unfolds over eight chapters, essentially split into two halves, bookended by a preface, introduction, and conclusion. Her purpose and desire for the book is perhaps most clearly stated in her conclusion. She writes, "This book has strived to portray how the female characters of folktales and fairy tales hold many important similarities with the most powerful imaginings of femininity that cultures around the world once envisioned—the goddesses of mythology" (244). The first half of the book examines how the female characters within myth, folktales, and fairy tales often serve as guides and teachers to the male protagonists they encounter. These chapters delve into different narratives that feature a female archetype aiding the masculine archetypal hero. The second half of the book focuses on the female archetypal hero in her own right as the author analyzes the role of formidable heroines found in many folktales and fairy tales from around the world. These chapters analyze the female heroes, protagonists, and villains as major actors within their own quests as opposed to characters acted upon by masculine heroes.

Throughout her book, McCoppin tells of, reframes, and analyzes a myriad of female archetypes and their respective narratives. She evidences the paradigmatic nature of various archetypes by tracing these characters across diverse cultures and different genres. In each archetype and tale she discusses, she meticulously points the archetype back to figures of the goddess. Thus, McCoppin's book becomes a matriarchal genealogy as she seeks to reclaim the feminine from the patriarchy.

She situates stories, heroes, and cultures commandeered by men and restores them to a feminine genealogy.

As McCoppin creates this genealogy, she also frames it in a feminine manner. She does not linearly trace cultures and characters and narratives, but instead focuses on liminality, almost like a dropped stone creates outward, emanating concentric circles from its source. She uses the goddess as the source, the stone, and lets the archetypes (Mother Nature, the warrior, the witch, the ghost, etc.) emanate from her, tracing these archetypes back to the source of the goddess in ever-concentric circles. She traces this genealogy across fuzzy sets of genre and culture, thus implicitly challenging the patriarchal dualism that would subjugate womanhood and the feminine to begin with.

McCoppin reframes many familiar folktales and fairy tales by positioning a villainized or subordinate woman as the hero, thus implicitly (and at times explicitly) complicating and challenging theorists like Carl Jung and Joseph Campbell. For example, using Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's feminist theory as a lens, McCoppin retells familiar fairy tales such as "Cinderella," "Snow White," and "Rapunzel," whose female characters are either viewed as evil witches or maidens to be acted upon instead of actors in their own stories. Specifically, she positions the notorious mother/stepmother archetype "as the most admirable character in the tale . . . [as] she is a 'plotter, a plot-maker, a schemer, a witch, an artist, and impersonator, a woman of almost infinite creative energy'" (Gilbert and Gubar 389-90, qtd. in McCoppin 206). McCoppin reshapes these well-worn narratives by reclaiming a matriarchal view of culture and establishing a matriarchal genealogy of humanity's heritage where the feminine is not reduced to tropes without agency. Instead, she reclaims these archetypes to positions of power as protagonists and inciters—heroes.

However, while McCoppin is fastidious and successful in pointing iconic, cultural stories back to the goddess (nobly resituating the feminine as a catalyst of belief, art, and humanity), because her argument is so entrenched in dualistic binary by nature of her subject matter, she at times struggles to unlink herself with some of the more problematic aspects of the hero's journey, and by extension, Campbellian theory. While there are moments where McCoppin leans into non-binary thinking, like engaging in the fuzzy sets of culture and genre, in writing to resituate the feminine goddess as a focal point, she further entrenches her argument in gendered character traits and roles that only serve the patriarchy. For example, the author argues that the marriage conquest of divine nature acts to portray the subversion of patriarchal ideals. However, she fails to address the problem that the institution of marriage and role of wife in and of itself can be interpreted as a means of patriarchal subservience (32, 35-36). For many of the myths she discusses in her book, marriage and sexual conquest is still the crux and climax of the narrative. Thus, the reader still must reckon with women not as heroes but as helpers to the heroes, perhaps even prizes to the heroes, even if they have agency within the myth.

In reclaiming the archetypal enchantress in "Beauty and the Beast," McCoppin argues the enchantress in the fairy tale is "a woman with explicit supernatural abilities . . . [signaling her] connection of traditional goddess-oriented ideologies" (35). She also acts as catalyst in the tale, "as she made an unworthy male turn into a beast, so that he could learn the ways of nature and the importance of sacred women. Therefore, the role of the enchantress is directly connected with Beauty in the fairy tale, as united, both women serve the same agenda" as characters with ability and agency as opposed to villain and victim, respectively (35). However, the dualistic antithesis to McCoppin's argument is that both Enchantress and Beauty serve as pawns to a patriarchal system—one as the angel and the other as the demon—in which the Beast wins sexual conquest

of Beauty. In another example, McCoppin offers a feminist reading of Theseus and Ariadne;

however, in this reading too, the hero Theseus is still featured as the protagonist and the woman,

Ariadne, exists on the margins of the story (71-74). Even when valorizing Ariadne, the story still

centers on a man growing into a chosen identity for himself. The hero focuses on self-actualization

while the female entity focuses on marriage, birth, or educating the hero. While McCoppin at every

instance points back to the goddess and her worship, thus elevating the feminine, she does not

consider the cost of flipping the patriarchal binary. Is goddess worship just another way of

dehumanizing women? I think of Emerson's elevation of Nature and his depiction of it as feminine

only to record in his journal, "Women should not be expected to write or fight or build or compose

scores; she does all by inspiring men to do all. She is the requiring genius" (qtd. in Eckel 596).

Perhaps in analyzing these myths, folk tales, and fairy tales, the archetypal narrative is too deeply

rooted in the quest narrative which itself is too deeply rooted in conquest, thus perpetuating a

binary that intentionally subjugates an other, regardless of reclaiming and resituating the goddess

as a worthy and autonomous figure.

Despite these critiques, there is immense value in reclaiming and resituating the goddess as it

allows the reader to create the world and its cultures in a woman's image, allowing for positive

and powerful feminine representation. As American cultural norms continue to embrace a

religious, oligarchal ideology that elevates the idea of a masculine god while aggressively

subjugating a feminine goddess, retracing a genealogy to feature the goddess reclaims a power that

would offer agency and autonomy to traditionally othered groups. Therefore, McCoppin implicitly

undermines a Western cultural belief that would see the goddess as folkloric as opposed to

legitimate. By creating this genealogy, she challenges the idea that history is a neutral collection

of facts, and instead links history with the "fictional" nature of myths, folktales, and fairy tales—

constructed narratives heavily influenced by power dynamics. By inverting those power dynamics, she challenges history as fact and myth as fiction, creating an account of a matriarchal genealogy that emancipates femininity from the patriarchy.

McCoppin concludes her book by lamenting that "female characters within modern and contemporary works still end up perpetuating the journeys of male characters, or only partially gaining self-actualization lack[ing] the heightened spiritual abilities that many folktale and fairy tale women discovered within themselves in order to reach goddess-like apotheosis" (244). Retracing a cultural genealogy toward the goddess emboldens marginalized individuals who exist outside the confines of traditional masculinity to find full self-actualization in their own right, creating representation that would proliferate that self-actualization across perpetually othered identities.

Works Cited

Eckel, Leslie Elizabeth. "Emerson, Reluctant Feminist." *The Oxford Handbook of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. Oxford UP, 2024.

Gilbert, Sandra and Susan Gubar. *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*. Yale UP, 1979.

Megan Spring is a PhD candidate at Florida Atlantic University, where she also teaches courses in literature and composition. Her dissertation focuses on the symbolic nature of the ghost in nineteenth-century American literature.

Young, Simon. *The Nail in the Skull and Other Victorian Urban Legends*. UP of

Mississippi, 2022.

https://upress.state.ms.us/Books/T/The-Nail-in-the-Skull-and-Other-Victorian-Urban-Legends

Brittany Sanders

Simon Young is a British historian who has published several books and peer-reviewed articles on topics concerning the supernatural, history, and folklore. In 2022, he added *The Nail in the Skull and Other Victorian Urban Legends* to his extensive publication repertoire. Young's impressively exhaustive methodology for curating this collection of Victorian legends is unlike other books of its kind, which have generally focused on fairytales, ghostly and spectral stories, or, such as in the case of Karl Bell's 2012 book, *The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore and Popular Cultures,* many alterations of a singular legend or unifying motif. In this book, Young investigates a very particular type of story: "belief narratives . . . stories in which the readers or listeners are *expected to believe* or in which they are expected to *consider belief*" (xxi; emphasis added). In other words, Young limits his survey to the sort of extraordinary tale that allows the audience to ponder the *probability* of its validity rather than immediately dismiss the *impossibility* of it. The resulting collection is rather sensational without crossing over into the realms of science fiction, fantasy, or wholly unbelievable tall tales. The most noteworthy effect Young's book has on our understanding of Victorian folklore is the way he reveals a network of literary culture via the history of transmutable storytelling as he carefully traces the variations of each legend from one version of the story to the next, across publication venues, social classes, British territories, and time periods of the nineteenth century.

Young's brief preface summarizes his meticulous investigation into the British Newspaper Archive and similar libraries, wherein he scanned for urban legends using thematic search terms

like "the very common 'strange story' and 'horrible story' to more recondite phrases: 'stranger

than fiction,' . . . 'smoking room stories,' 'something out of Arabian Nights,' . . . and so on" (xiii).

Deciding which legends would make it into the collection, Young says, depended on if he "found

at least three versions (with at least one published in Britain)" or if "there was a comment that the

story type was 'common' in the United Kingdom" (xiv). He excluded many interesting stories

based on these criteria, but with the sheer volume of possible stories out there, his necessary

scrutiny comes at no real detriment to the book's massive survey and global reach.

While the preface outlines Young's selection methods, the significantly longer introduction

provides important definitions as well as key historical contexts. The most pertinent definition is

one that addresses the book's title:

> Urban legends are belief legends that touch on extreme or difficult aspects of life:
>
> crime, death, illness, sex, the supernatural, and war. They frequently involve
>
> troublesome informal social institutions (thinking of the Victorian period, duels or
>
> wagers or elopement) and anxieties over new technologies (again for the 1800s,
>
> bicycles or railways) and social changes (in Victorian Britain the enfranchisement
>
> of the Catholics, say). (xxii)

Prior to the 1950s, "folklore" was understood to be stories about fairies, witchcraft, ghosts, and

Paganism; however, by the mid-twentieth century, British and American scholars recognized

belief legends as a sort of folklore with their own flair for the fantastic in everyday issues (xxii).

There is a lot of useful information in the introduction for folklore scholars and enthusiasts alike

thanks to Young's diligent study of the oral and literary means through which these Victorian

legends survived and evolved. Countless newspapers circulated these "horrible," "romantic,"

"shocking," "very strange," and "wonderful" stories (198-201). These narratives spread as rumors,

ballads, poetry, and false reports in print; they were shared in homes and clubs; printed in magazines, chapbooks, and broadsides; directly stolen ("clipped") from competitor publishers, individually reported, or invented entirely (xxvi-xxxvi). Before we read a single tale in this collection, Young clearly illustrates that the complex evolution of stories is more than proportional to the labyrinthine network of literary systems that reproduced them in the first place.

The remainder of *The Nail in the Skull and Other Victorian Urban Legends* presents seventy urban legends and the brief delineations of each one's unique literary mobility and their expression of some Victorian phenomenon, anxiety, or cultural artifact. Young consciously avoids the repetition of too many similar motifs or plots in his selections by varying the assortment of dark and whimsical themes. The sensationalism awaiting the reader is made obvious with such illustrative titles as "Child Pie," "Chloroformed!," "Human Sausages," "Poison Duel," "Sewer Monsters," and "The Suicide Club." These seventy legends express Victorian anxieties over death, robbery and murder, women's sexuality, lucky (and unlucky) coincidences, and the fragility of social classes, to name a few.

All seventy sections of this study (one per legend, not including the preface, introduction, notes, or staggering bibliography) are extremely short—only one to four pages in length, with the exception of two sections that reach five and six pages, respectively. While no two sections are identical in format, Young does adhere to a basic organizational structure for exploring each legend's history. Each section begins with a one- to two-line summary and the earliest attestation or print source of the first version of the legend. In some cases, Young suggests thematic connections with other similar legends in the book. Young first discusses the cultural context or phenomenon the legend emerged in response to. Then, he provides a full version of the tale, analyzes the social response, details the publication history, and records variations in the legend's

adaptations over time. Sometimes, the plot grows much more severe, while other times only a line or two is changed, or a title is added. A total of twenty paintings and illustrations accompany selected legends throughout the work.

Legends about death are in no short supply in this book. Stories like "Buried Alive" take this terrible phenomenon as its central theme. Other buried alive stories include an ironic twist of fate, such as "Jolting the Coffin," wherein a woman on her way to her burial awakens when her coffin bumps into something, or "The Lady and the Ring," wherein a graverobber wakes a woman in her coffin when he tries to steal her ring. In fact, the very thin line that separates life and death characterizes a number of stories about coming back from the dead, as in "The Galvanic Convict," where a deceased convict is electrocuted back to life, or "Paying for His Burial," where a husband who faked his death is discovered sitting upright in his coffin counting the donations given to his wife at the wake. There are numerous legends about ghosts interacting with society, pretending to be a ghost, or discovering the skeletons of accidental deaths—such as a soldier found in a tree in "Hollow Tree Death," murdered adulterers in the wall and under the flooring in "Immured Lovers," a couple who leaves a party early in "The Skeletons That Eloped," and a bride who locks herself in a chest during a wedding-day game of hide-and-seek in "The Mistletoe Bride."

As someone who studies women's issues in the Victorian period, I was particularly drawn to the plethora of tales about women that showcase anxiety over a woman's sexuality. There are tales that suggest adultery, such as "The Wrong Bed" where a newlywed ends up in a stranger's bed, or "The Wrong Trousers" where a husband dresses himself, only to find he is wearing another man's pants. Prostitution—or rather, rescuing a woman from it—is addressed in "Do You Know Her?" and "Harem Prisoner." One prostitute attracts the wrong customer in "I'm Jack the Ripper!" There is even a type of oedipal story about accidental incest, tellingly titled, "She's My Daughter?"

Many stories poke fun at society in this book, too, with stories like "Hands in the Muff," wherein two suitors seated on either side of a woman try to hold her hand inside her (euphemistic) "muff," but only end up holding each other's hand. My favorite part of this story is how sexually charged later iterations of this story became, eventually inspiring the addition of the final line, "the two gentlemen are strangers now" (73).

Many more incredible and entertaining stories in this book comment on Victorian life—an eagle kidnaps a baby, beetles eat the eyes of poor children, murdered men are made into meat pies, a woman swallows a snake, a whale swallows a sailor, the earth swallows a sinner—and Young has done an excellent job of not only informing but also entertaining his readers with his incredible coverage of these urban legends. If this is not enough material for folklorists, one of the more astonishing feats of this book—a testament to Young's archival laboring—is the twenty-seven-page bibliography that includes nearly twelve hundred citations for further exploration. *The Nail in the Skull and Other Victorian Urban Legends* is a great resource for anyone who not only loves a good, *weird* story, but is also curious about how such stories came to be and interested in tracing the mobile afterlives of these remarkable legends.

Work Cited

Bell, Karl. *The Legend of Spring-Heeled Jack: Victorian Urban Folklore and Popular Cultures*.

    Boydell and Brewer, 2012.

Brittany Sanders is earning her PhD from Texas Christian University, where she serves as a graduate instructor, teaching assistant, and editorial assistant for her department. Her research focuses on the intersections of women and class issues as they pertain to the cult of domesticity, sexuality, and labor.