The University of Southern Mississippi

Ghosts of the Mind:
The Supernatural and Madness in Victorian Gothic Literature

by

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Chapter One

The Victorian Era saw the emergence of social interest in the concept of the supernatural and in psychology. As these two areas developed, literature began to exhibit paranormal phenomenon and depictions of mental illness more frequently, often at the same time. The literary genre which exhibited these themes most prominently is known as Gothic Literature. Gothic Literature, particularly the Victorian Gothic, is generally domestic in nature, taking place mainly indoors and dealing with superficial social issues and serious personal issues. It focuses on characters’ individual thoughts and introspections instead of their outward actions. It is the Gothic’s supernatural themes, however, which set it apart from other literature at the time. The Gothic explores the paranormal world as well as the mind, often bringing characters’ sanity into question by describing strange, apparently paranormal, incidents which are generally only visible to them. Gothic literature brings the narrator’s reliability into question using this technique and often hints at madness or mental instability in its characters.

A primary example of the paranormal’s role in determining sanity can be found in Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw.” James’ novella describes the experiences of a governess in a household which is under the influence of two spirits that come and go as they please. She becomes convinced that the children can see the ghosts as well. Despite her attempts to bring the existence and nature of the ghosts to light, her efforts only serve to further question her mental stability.

Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s cautionary tale “The Yellow Wallpaper” operates in a very similar strain. However, Gilman’s short story leaves no doubt as to the protagonist’s mental state. After being prescribed a rest cure, the unnamed protagonist finds herself confined to a single room in a large house she and her husband are renting to help her cope with what is
suggested to be post-partum depression. Although she is sometimes allowed to sit in the garden or with the family in other rooms of the house, she is mainly restricted to her designated room. As she whiles away the hours in her domestic prison, she becomes fascinated by her room’s horrendous yellow wallpaper. At first, she merely spends her time absorbed by its overtly offensive design and color. However, as the story progresses, she begins to see shapes and faces in the wallpaper and believes that she can see a woman crawling around behind the paper’s design, struggling to be free. The short story ends with its protagonist crawling around the room rubbing her shoulder into the wall, a sight so shocking it causes her sturdy husband to faint at the sight.

Both works reflect the supernatural as not only a possibility, but also a strong implication of the protagonists’s mental instabilities. The presentation of the supernatural alongside mental illness, however, is not restricted to these two works alone. Gothic Literature, as a genre, often uses supernatural elements and happenings to prompt its characters to question their sanity. This development can lead modern scholars to examine the reasons behind such a strong, specific trend in a genre of literature. By examining Henry James’ “The Turn of the Screw” and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” it is possible to outline and interpret the instances of supernatural phenomena within the context of mental illness or instability and uncover the possible reasons behind the frequency with which the occur together in Gothic Literature. These two texts will help answer the question: how does Gothic Literature use the supernatural to portray, or act as an indicator of, madness as seen in Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper?
Chapter Two

Since the purpose of this research is to uncover the connection between the supernatural and madness in Victorian thought as shown in Henry James’s “The Turn of the Screw” and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” it is important to establish what has been and has not been previously studied. Though there have been studies done about the supernatural and madness in both works individually, studies which compare both works with or without attention to their testimonies about Victorian culture have not been found. This gap in the literature of these two pieces will offer a strong purpose for this research.

Literature examining Gothic Literature as a whole must be taken into consideration as well as literature targeted at analyzing the works themselves. The literature available for both works contains much analysis of both the supernatural and madness in the two works. These analyses offer an in depth look into the roles of these two themes in these works. Some analyses offer insight into the mindset of the authors as they wrote them or offer social contexts which may have prompted these works. By utilizing these analyses, the researcher can focus her research on uncovering the possible links the works may have to the lives of their authors and the societies in which they were written, revealing the motivations behind their creations and the cultural influences they may exhibit.

SOURCES RELATED TO VICTORIAN CULTURE

As Victorian culture and thought will play an important role in research of the Gothic subgenre, the following sources must be taken into account. Peter Lamont’s article “Spiritualism and a Mid-Victorian Crisis of Evidence” examines spiritualism and the emergence of séances in the Victorian Era, which were often cited as a cause of interest in the supernatural or occult.
Jennifer Bann’s “Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency: The Changing Figure of the Nineteenth-Century Specter” observes the connection between spiritism and the Victorian ghost story. She argues that the development of the Victorian ghost story is ultimately a manifestation of emerging concepts about the dead. ‘The Trouble with Ghost Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story” by Srdjan Smajic examines how the nature of specters changes through the transition from the 18th to 19th Centuries. Smajic finds these changes to be the result of cultural shifts and that the specters alter and the social and cultural mindset alters. “The Meaning of Mental Illness within the Victorian Mental Health Act: The Problem of Definition” by Paul D. O’Neal assesses the broad definition of what was considered “mental illness” in Victorian thought. O’Neal argues that the definition is too broad and must be trimmed down.

**SOURCES RELATED TO GOTHIC LITERATURE**

Sources relevant to this study which examine the human psyche include an original essay by Sigmund Freud entitled “The Uncanny.” This essay examines why we interpret various situations or occurrences as scary or eerie and is useful when examining basic elements of the supernatural in Gothic Literature. Julian Wolfreys’s article “Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature” goes a step farther than Freud’s “The Uncanny.” Wolfreys examines occurrences of the supernatural in Victorian Literature, especially in Gothic subgenre. The article explores the reasons behind the use of the supernatural in Gothic Literature and attempts to explain why it is a common theme in the genre. “The Ivory Leg in the Ebony Cabinet,” an article by Thomas Cooley, further examines the ways in which the Victorian mind viewed madness, especially early in the period. This source helps to explain and understand the
ways in which society at the time understood madness and can lead to explanations about the presence and explanations of madness in Gothic Literature.

In order to connect the supernatural to madness in Gothic Literature, Tom A. Williams’s “The Origin of Supernatural Explanations” and the article “Developmental Changes in the Use of Supernatural Explanations for Unusual Events” by Jacqueline D. Wooley, Chelsea A. Cornelius, and Walter Lacy will help to explain why the supernatural and superstitions are often used to explain strange events or visions. Williams’s piece was written in 1915, shortly after the end of the Victorian Period, and can provide insight into the views of superstition and the supernatural at the time. Williams also explores the reasoning behind the existence of superstitions and their usefulness to the human mind. Meanwhile, the source by Wooley, Cornelius, and Lacy explores how and why people try to explain that which they do not understand by attributing it to the supernatural. Additional information regarding these two themes in Gothic Literature can be found in Gilbert and Gubar’s The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination. While this work focuses primarily on the literary feminist movement, it offers information on Gothic women’s writing as the contexts in which they were written.

SOURCES CONCENTRATING ON THE TURN OF THE SCREW

For the analyses of the individual texts, it will be necessary to apply sources which examine each text individually. “Ghost Ambiguity: Presuppositional Constructions in the Turn of the Screw” by Helen Aristar Dry and Susan Kucinkas explores the ways in which James uses syntax to create ambiguity around the governess’s mental stability. Ernest Tuveson’s “The Turn of the Screw: A Palimpsest” explores both possibilities of the novella, taking a close look at the
interpretation that she is indeed seeing specters as well as the interpretation that she is actually mentally ill and has not experienced any supernatural phenomena at all. Thomas J. Bently also explores these two interpretations in “Henry James’s ‘General Vision of Evil’ in the Turn of the Screw.” This article acknowledges the two levels of meaning in the novella and explores the ways in which they are intertwined.

SOURCES CONCENTRATING ON THE YELLOW WALLPAPER

Sources which analyze “The Yellow Wallpaper” specifically include Loralee MacPike’s “Environment as Psychological Symbolism in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” and Carol Margaret Davidson’s “Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’.” MacPike concentrates on the symbolism of environment throughout the entire short story and draws meaning from the room itself to the wallpaper in general. Davidson’s article explores and examines the story’s supernatural and psychological elements and explains their purpose in the story.

FINAL LITERATURE METHODS

The logic surrounding the research question suggests that the emergence of paranormal interests and developing psychological theories prompted an association between the two in Victorian thought, causing works which blend the supernatural and madness to become more frequently written, creating the Gothic subgenre. Using the existing literature, the researcher can examine the possibility of this phenomenon and connect these themes to one another in Gothic Literature.
Chapter Three

By examining Henry James’ “The Turn of the Screw” and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper,” it is possible to outline and interpret the instances of supernatural phenomena within the context of mental illness or instability and uncover the possible reasons behind the frequency with which they occur together in Gothic Literature. For her study, the researcher has chosen to concentrate on Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper.” James’s novella *The Turn of the Screw* tells the tale of a governess who finds herself plagued by specters in the home of her employers. By the end of the novella, it is not made clear whether there are actually spirits haunting the house or the governess has actually lost her mind. The uncertainty of these two possibilities leaves the governess’s paranormal experiences open to the interpretation that she has either experienced a supernatural event or that she has begun to suffer a mental breakdown. Gilman’s short story “The Yellow Wallpaper” is less ambiguous about the reality of the supernatural. The protagonist, a young woman prescribed the rest cure for her post-partum depression, falls steadily into madness as the story goes on, believing that she has seen strange figures in the wallpaper and that there is a woman behind the wallpaper’s dizzying pattern trying to get out. By the end of the tale, it is clear that she has completely lost her mind and there is no question as to the reality of the hallucinations she has experienced. She has not experienced any supernatural phenomenon, but instead has been seeing supernatural images due to her declining mental state.
**VARIABLES**

The proposed study will focus on the relationship of two central variables popular in the Gothic literary genre – the “supernatural” (including the “paranormal”), and “madness.” Use of these terms will correspond closely to ordinary language usage. The supernatural is defined as “of, pertaining to, or being above or beyond what is natural; unexplainable by natural law or phenomena; abnormal.” The paranormal is defined as “of or pertaining to the claimed occurrence of an event or perception without scientific explanation, as psychokinesis, extrasensory perception, or other purportedly supernatural phenomena.” “Madness” (used interchangeably with “mental illness”) is defined as “any of various disorders in which a person's thoughts, emotions, or behavior are so abnormal as to cause suffering to himself, herself, or other people.” The researcher will use these definitions as a guideline when identifying these themes in the works she is reviewing.

**SAMPLE**

The study sample will consist of the comprehensive set of passages from the selected texts in which either of the two variables is evident. An example of this type of passage is available in the following “Methods” section.

**METHODS**

Through multiple readings of the selected texts, the researcher will identify all instances of the supernatural by identifying scenes, passages, or instances in which the narrator or one of the characters identifies something out of the ordinary which cannot be explained by rationale or which suggests the presence of a paranormal entity. These instances include ghostly apparitions, strange visions, disembodied voices or sounds, or general eerie visions or events which cannot be
otherwise explained. Instances of mental illness will be characterized by signs of mental weakness in the individual. These signs will indicate that what the individual is experiencing is not actually happening and is present in their mind only.

The researcher will record each instance of these two variables as well as their context, purpose in the story, and how it may be interpreted as a representation of the supernatural, madness, or both. She will document how these findings and interpretations of the text implicate the use of the supernatural to identify or explain madness and how each author uses these examples to do so. An example passage from Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* follows:

“How can I retrace the strange steps of my obsession? There were times of our being together when I would have been ready to swear that, literally, in my presence, but with my direct sense of it closed, they had visitors who were known and were welcome” (James 53).

The above passage displays elements of both psychological and supernatural phenomena. Here, the governess exhibits feelings of paranoia, as she believes that the children are hiding things from her but cannot readily present proof, and openly admits that the idea of strange presences in the house consumes her with obsession. However, this passage also suggests that there are entities in the house which she can sense. However, she is not sure if others sense them as well. This is an example of supernatural phenomena. While this passage exhibits both themes, it does not indicate the verity of one theme over another. After analyzing passages such as this from each work individually, the researcher will compare and contrast the two works side by side. This comparison and contrast will demonstrate the role of the supernatural and madness in these two texts as well as Gothic literature as a whole.
References


