"Undead Empire: How Folklore Animates the Human Corpse in Nineteenth-Century British Literature"

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores representations of the human corpse in nineteenth-century British literature and ephemeral culture as a dynamic, multidirectional vehicle used by writers and readers to help articulate emerging anxieties that were complicating the very idea of death. Using cultural criticism as its primary critical heuristic filter, this project analyzes how the lingering influence of folklore animates the human corpses that populate canonical and extra-canonical nineteenth-century British literature.

The first chapter examines the treatment of the human corpse through burial and mourning rituals, as specific developments within these procedures provide interpretive windows into how the idea of death was quickly changing in nineteenth-century British culture. The second chapter engages representations of the human corpse as “subject” for study, especially as it figures within the contexts of body-snatching and human dissection. The third chapter explores specific nineteenth-century iterations of the ghost, as representing incorporeal extensions of the troublesome human corpse. The fourth chapter examines the uniquely Victorian literary and ephemeral figure of the ghost monkey; this entity, a reanimated, incorporeal specter of the human corpse from the “deep past,” occurs frequently in Victorian culture.

Ultimately, this dissertation hopes to show how representations of the human corpse in nineteenth-century British culture demonstrate, the persistent presence and
influence of older, “exploded” folkloric beliefs, powerfully extant within a culture that frequently fought to marginalize them.
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INTRODUCTION

Much has been written about nineteenth-century Britain’s culture’s obsessive attraction to the idea of death and the imagery that accompanies it. The Victorian century is essentially book-ended by literary works that were immersed in concerns about death, opening with Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818/1832) and closing with Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). Tellingly, in both of these works the tensions regarding death were largely encoded onto the dead or the undead human body, as *Frankenstein* examined the actions of human ambition and technological advancements upon the dead human body, while *Dracula* worked with the supernatural reanimation and subsistence of the “un-dead” human body.¹ The human corpse in both these works was a restless entity, and in both cases death was represented as an unstable boundary, more malleable than it had been considered to be in previous eras. Also, in both cases the violations that blurred the boundary between life and death were specifically encoded in supernaturally modified human bodies. In *Frankenstein* this involved the regeneration of dead human bodily material, and in *Dracula* it involved the reanimation of human corpses by malignant spirits capable of turning the corpses into dehumanized vessels. Developing ideas in scientific and technological discourse found treatment in these texts through the implementation of older folkloric traditions, which allowed these authors to refine and embody the anxieties that flowed throughout nineteenth-century British culture. These
texts are emblematic of the larger cultural concerns about death that authors of
nineteenth-century literary and ephemeral culture embodied in unquiet human corpses
and intertwined into their work.

And so following these influential and highly-critiqued literary leads, this project
examines how the literary and ephemeral (or “popular”) treatment of the human corpse
provides a productive vehicle toward understanding how nineteenth-century Britain
processed its specific and unique concerns about death. This project considers any
human corpse that transgresses its role as immobile dead material to be “undead” and
analyzes the frequent appearances of these “undead” human corpses as active,
multidirectional images. In other words, the corpse is examined in tandem with both the
cultural contexts from which it was shaped and the influences it spilled forth into the
culture that read and spoke about it. What, ultimately, can the widespread literary and
ephemeral deployment of the undead human corpse tell us about nineteenth-century
British culture?

In investigating this question I hope to engage critically the longstanding
assumption that for Britain the nineteenth century was the site of a simple, traceable
progress from archaic patterns of life into the more modern world, of which we in the
early twenty-first century consider ourselves an extension. In many ways this progress
appears to be undeniably visible. Technological advances, for example, allowed the
nation to lose its agrarian heart and become more industrial and urban-centric; advances
in medical knowledge seemed to push aside folkloric philosophies of treatment of the
human body and allowed for the proliferation of techniques and medicines which greatly

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improved the quality and duration of life; and literary authors evolved new forms of expression that borrowed from earlier artistic traditions and blazed the trail for the birth of Modernism. Even spiritually, the nineteenth century is frequently seen, from the retrospective eye of the twenty-first century critic, as an era in which longstanding belief in conventional Christianity was compromised and eventually replaced by a view in which the emerging ideas of evolution and natural selection were considered crucial. In short, the nineteenth century has been easy to read as a period in which the Old was cast off in favor of the New.

This vision of “forward-progress” is, however seductive to the critic, oversimplified. A clean progression from Old to New ideas, in which the archaic voluntarily vanishes in favor of the modern, is not possible, but the persistence of “outdated” influences is sometimes difficult to detect. Here is where literature is tremendously useful. Specifically, when the cultural deployment of the human corpse within literature and ephemera is considered, one does not see a bloodless evolution from the Old to the New. Instead, we see the tenacious power of the Old through the use of folklore, which refuses to abandon the culture of the nineteenth century and, in fact, continues to color literary and ephemeral notions in regard to death and dying.

The human corpse undergoes a significant cultural change as the nineteenth century progresses, as its meanings and implications shift in tandem with societal changes. As Diana Fuss explains in her “Corpse Poem” (2003):

The Enlightenment transformation of the dead body from an object of religious veneration into one of scientific experimentation deidealizes and desacralizes the human cadaver. Industrialism’s conversion of the entire corpse into a commercial
item that can be bought and sold begins the historical process Philippe Aries has so famously documented as the progressive silencing of death in the modern period. Science’s commodification of the cadaver, interestingly enough, did not lessen the fear of death but actually heightened it, creating a new definition of the human body as spiritually irredeemable base matter. (Fuss 3)

The folkloric beliefs that informed popular notions about the human corpse’s potential for postmortem activities do not get replaced at all, even within the cultural discourse that devalues them as “exploded” and unproductive. Instead, like a house that refuses to stop being haunted, these beliefs persist, coexisting with and even helping to shape the new ideas that were coming to light.

**Methodology**

This dissertation project explores the human corpse in nineteenth-century Britain through the lenses of cultural studies, arguing that literary authors did not construct these representations of dead bodies in a vacuum isolated from the culture in which their authors lived. Such a critical approach invites the inclusion of ephemeral sources, as these non-canonical literary expressions frequently allow for a deeper and sometimes more unedited connection with the cultures from which they have come. In other words, a crude pamphlet circulated on the street, hastily and sloppily composed, while lacking what is typically defined as “literary merit,” may in fact offer a less-reserved glimpse into the thought processes that motivated writers and readers in the nineteenth century than a more polished and ultimately “careful” novel. These materials will be referred to as “ephemera.” Charles Dickens will frequently be consulted as a “bridge” author here, as his status as a canonical author belies the depth of his dealings with myriad extra-canonical elements of the culture. His respectability with both middle and working class
readers, as well as his tendency to borrow from source material and experiences considered “beneath” literary acceptability, make him something of a hybrid figure for this dissertation. Frequently, the ephemeral sources will be highlighted, as many of these works have been lightly considered by previous criticism, or ignored altogether.

Thus, this dissertation project assumes a kind of New Historian approach, in that its inclusion of canonical and extra-canonical material privileges neither type over the other. It treats all relevant nineteenth-century sources as equally valuable conduits toward the understanding of the implications of representations of the human corpse. It borrows from the work of cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz’s notion that “paroles,” as any events laden with cultural meaning, are worth the sort of close inquiry he characterized as “thick description.” This project uses the death of the human being, and the subsequent “creation” of the human corpse, as the “parole” upon which it dedicates its practice of “thick description.” Through this approach the project explores the multidirectionality that is revealed by an examination of how the presence of the human corpse both informed the culture which inspired its construction and was informed by that culture.

As a result, this dissertation project takes on an unconventional hermeneutic stance as it focuses largely on peripheral figures with the literature it examines, rather than close readings rendered upon the content of entire literary texts. This is done because the human corpse is typically not a central feature in nineteenth-century British literary or ephemeral works; instead, it tends to appear briefly, and suddenly, and to dominate literary works as an image and an idea that propels the plot significantly before
it vanishes from the narrative. An investigation into the meaning of the unquiet human corpse in nineteenth-century Britain would be less productive were it to focus solely on a thorough reading of the oft-critiqued *Frankenstein* or *Dracula*, for example, than it would if it were instead to commit itself to the “thick description” of a variety of textual moments from many sources of the period. Explorations of heavily-analyzed works of literature stand on the shoulders of giants and can expect to illuminate few unexplored dark corners of meaning. Similarly, a close reading of the entirety of *Bleak House* would swallow in its vastness the specific concerns which interest this project, while a consideration of those features, such as the spontaneous combustion of Krook and the imagined presence of a Megalosaurus wandering through the London fog, may be isolated and examined in detail, still with due diligence paid to how the entire novel provides a context and explanation for their presence. In this way this dissertation does not lock itself into a single literary storyworld, but conversely explores the fragmentary presence of the figure of the human corpse across the spectrum of the nineteenth century. In other words, this project is interested in a “thick descriptive” survey of the unquiet human corpse in nineteenth-century literature and ephemera more so than it is interested in a single author’s incorporation of this figure. Both canonical and ephemeral materials will be equally engaged with this philosophy, as many of the lesser-known texts analyzed here have been either under-treated or entirely ignored by academic inquiry. Again, the literary and ephemera-infused work of Dickens will anchor this dissertation, as it occupies, more profoundly than any other nineteenth-century author, the important liminal spaces that straddles the canonical and the extra-canonical.
And the folklore that traffics with the human corpse is perhaps even more underserved by current literary criticism. The exact trajectory of a folkloric idea across any culture is impossible to trace, and developments in a traveling ghost story, for example, that take place outside of the confines of the written word leave us no empirical traces to analyze. However, even if we cannot map out the seamless, coherent evolutionary track of a particular story, the continual, persistent presence of “exploded” folklore in all forms of literature cannot be overlooked. In a period in which literacy rates rose, inexpensive printing methods were developed, and the mechanization of the Industrial Revolution created more opportunities for some to enjoy increased leisure time, written literature that concerned the unquiet human corpse became available to wider audiences than even before. And as the human corpse became a sort of cultural battleground, as dangerous rotting detritus, a Subject for the anatomist, a communicative ghost, or a reminder of a terrifying deep-past ancestor, more occasions arose to employ folklore as a filter to sharpen its presentation in literature.

Coupled with the exposure provided by authorized and unauthorized theatrical adaptations of many canonical and ephemeral literary works, the frightening ideas that circulated from the spoken to the written word, then likely back again, manifest themselves with a thickness that cannot be ignored. The unquiet human corpse, ubiquitous in nineteenth-century British culture, perhaps offers the most productive illustration of folklore’s unwillingness to vaporize in the wake of new developments that allegedly rendered it obsolete.
Definitions

This project concerns itself not only with traditional literary expressions of active and restless human corpses, as an examination of some of the more evocative and influential human corpses requires a foray beyond the boundaries of the established canon. Of course, canonical works, those traditionally considered to contain lasting value and be “worthy” of literary study, will play a role. So too will semi-canonical texts, those which typically fall outside of the parameters of traditional literary study in the twenty-first century but which were popular when they were published and remain useful windows into the cultures which produced them. Inclusion of semi-literary contributions, here called “ephemera,” are primarily offered through written representations of and discussions about oral-centered folkloric beliefs. Though “ephemera” carries the connotation that these materials are non-permanent and incapable of surviving beyond their immediate dispersal, I will argue on the contrary that these fluid oral narratives, developed, transmitted and revised among both literate and non-literate storytellers and listeners, do supply a deep and lasting undercurrent, and that they provided a process responsible for shaping many of the cultural concerns that literary authors would in turn borrow from them as they constructed their own work.

1st chapter

The first chapter explores the appearance of the human corpse as a direct marker of death. Consistent with all horrific objects, the corpse is not a stable body, and it is through reading that instability that the meanings embodied within the nineteenth-century literary corpse become clear. Specifically, the human corpse in the nineteenth-century
becomes a thing distinct from that eras of previous; it is an entity specifically engineered to address the cultural turbulence of its time, even if it is not necessarily simply defined as a unified figure. The chapter begins by discussing the uncertainties that nineteenth-century culture felt about defining the exact moment in which a human being became a human corpse. It moves on to consider how literary and ephemeral voices treated the rituals that concerned the treatment of the human corpse at the moment of death and beyond, and the spaces in which corpses were expected to be interred. It will focus on the usage of folkloric traditions attached to death and death rituals, which, though strongly critiqued by authoritative voices, continued to assert themselves and proved difficult for British culture to discard.

2nd chapter

The second chapter will extend this analysis to consider specifically how representations of the human corpse were used to embody lingering concerns in regard to the fundamentally intertwined practices of body-snatching and human dissection. The human corpse here becomes a source of significant income and meaningful scientific discovery. Highlighted at the dawning of the Victorian era by the Burke and Hare case in 1828 and its gory, extensive aftermath, and stretching outward to London in regard to the “Italian Boy” case in 1831, the culture’s concerns for the postmortem treatment of their and their loved ones’ bodies motivated much of the horrific literature of the era. In short, in the nineteenth century the human corpse here takes on new roles and becomes a commodity in ways that it never had before, but the anxieties triggered by these developments is only made manifest through reliance on older folkloric tropes. This
chapter demonstrates the lingering presence of folkloric beliefs as cultural catalysts responsible for stimulating the expression of anxieties relating to the disturbing processes of body snatching and human dissection.

3rd chapter

The third chapter explores nineteenth-century British ghosts as representations of human corpses which have been hollowed of their corporeality by death. The ghost offered for nineteenth-century British culture as a sort of middle-ground. Its appearance helped to affirm the presence of an afterlife in a culture which increasingly expressed doubts to this end. Ghosts also allowed for a remnant connection to a past more dominated by folkloric beliefs than scientific discourse, whose emergence proved troubling to many people. However, the ghost-figures that populated eighteenth-century Gothic fiction had lost their cultural appeal and so, infused by the emerging philosophies of Spiritualism and the residual presence of folkloric ghost beliefs, writers in the nineteenth-century invented their own iterations of the ghost. This chapter analyzes the formation and deployment of these new ghosts in literary and ephemeral cultural expressions. The ghost is always a liminal figure, as it straddles the space between life and death, but the nineteenth-century ghost is even more so. This chapter examines how these ghosts have been rhetorically constructed outside of the reach of scientific discourse so that skeptical criticism becomes virtually impossible or at least irrelevant.

4th chapter

The fourth chapter examines perhaps the most unusual but persistent figure of the human corpse-as-ghost, the ghost monkey. The ghost monkey is constructed from the
template of the nineteenth-century ghost but is specifically inscribed with a kind of evolutionarily-infused animal corporeality. Cultural tension was spawned by emerging thought and research which compromised long-held beliefs about human origins; this tension was compounded by a growing awareness of humanity’s troublesome relationship to, and possible participation in, the world of the deep past. These anxieties had long been building in British culture but found explosive literary and cultural release in the nineteenth-century. While the new findings and their growing popularity did not eviscerate existing adherence to the Christian narrative which had dominated Britain for the previous millennium, they did complicate how these longstanding beliefs might offer comfort, especially when death and an afterlife were considered. The ghost monkey emerges as a by-product of these tensions, occupying this unique niche in such a way as to remind Victorian culture that that culture may not be the apex of creation on earth. Importantly, it is through the channeling of older folkloric traditions that the ghost monkey is constructed to operate as a vehicle for these concerns.

**Purpose**

Ultimately, this project looks to examine, through “thick description,” nineteenth-century British literature to explore how older folkloric traditions associated with death and the human corpse refused to be annihilated in the nineteenth-century British literary and ephemeral culture, despite existing in the wake of scientific developments that challenged them and amid a profound sense of cultural embarrassment regarding their persistence. Like a haunted house that resists giving up its ghosts to an exorcist, nineteenth-century British literary culture could not discard its old “superstitions,”
especially when they provided meaningful understanding about such disturbing concerns as death itself, the treatment of the human corpse, the possibility of the corpse returning to earth as a ghost, and the implications of the human corpse of the deep past. Nineteenth-century British culture remains haunted, and an analysis of the ever-turbulent representations of the human corpse remains a productive vehicle through which to perceive and examine these conditions.
CHAPTER ONE: DEATH AND DEATH RITUALS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY BRITAIN

While never necessarily stable, the line that divides life from death becomes in nineteenth-century English culture a much less impermeable boundary than it had been in previous centuries. The issue of death is typically discussed within the parameters of philosophic discourse, but here we will consider the “dross,” the human body, or corpse, as the physical symbol of death and, thus, the vehicle through which shifting perceptions of death were filtered. Specifically, we will concern ourselves with how the collision between entrenched religious and folkloric beliefs and emerging scientific discourse complicated literary readings of death as it was written onto the human corpse. The human body, in other words, becomes to the culture of the nineteenth century a battleground, on which scientific developments were incapable of dislodging long-held folkloric beliefs. No matter how thoroughly folkloric thinking was labeled by the purveyors of scientific discourse as “exploded superstitions,” it was an inextricable filter through which nineteenth-century culture discussed matters concerning death and the human corpse. In this project, the presentation of corpses within the literary record will be examined to illustrate the lingering presence of folkloric thought. Canonical texts, including descriptions of cemetery conditions, poverty and human spontaneous combustion in Charles Dickens novels *Oliver Twist* and *Bleak House* will be explored in
depth, as will Bram Stoker’s “The Man from Shorrox” and “Dreams in the Dead House,” Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Body Snatcher” and the poetry of Thomas Hood. Less canonical works equally fixated on the human corpse and will also be considered, such as Alexander Leighton’s *The Court of Casus*, Jerome K. Jerome’s “The Man of Science” and the anonymous short story “The Victim.” An examination of cultural issues will intertwine with an exploration of the literature of the era, bringing to light the shadows of superstition that enlightened Victorian culture was never able to chase away.

**The definition of the moment of death**

For example, folkloric beliefs, infused by Christian thought practiced by the Anglican and Catholic churches in England, posited the moment of death as the separation of the immortal soul from the mortal human body. When considered through scientific understanding of the time, though, this question became more murky. Little consensus was achieved in terms of understanding how bodily human death was to be determined, though the visible cessation of breath and even the stopping of the heartbeat were eventually thought to be infallible determinants. However, advocates of the prevention of premature human burial, armed with a horrifying collection of “buried alive” narratives, largely agreed that visible evidence of putrefaction was the only clear, indisputable factor that evidenced a human being’s death had occurred. It was, in short, when the human body could be perceived as losing its physical integrity as a discrete object that death could conclusively be declared to have occurred. Though the actual threshold moment was a point of increasing dispute, death was fairly universally understood at partially through the filters of the Christian religion, as a separation of the
spirit (however this was defined) from the body, creating a space in which the living ceased to be alive. Needless to say, nineteenth-century British culture recognized this as a commonplace. *The Uses of the Dead to the Living*, a pamphlet sent to Parliament in 1828 intended to arouse support for the process of human dissection, poetically details the thoughts that the living carry in regard to their attachment to the dead bodies of those they have loved:2

It is nothing, the survivor may justly say, to tell me, when disease has completed its work, and death has seized its prey, that that body, with which are connected so many delightful associations, is a senseless mass of matter: that it is no longer my friend, that the spirit which animated it and rendered it lovely to my sight and dear to my affection, is gone. I know that I never more shall see the light of intelligence brighten that countenance, nor benevolence beam in that eye, nor the voice of affection sound from those lips: that which I loved, and which loved me, is not here: this is his form, and the very particles of matter which compose this dull mass, a few hours ago were a real part of him, and I cannot separate them, in my imagination, from him. (*The Uses of the Living to the Dead* 29-30)

In other words, the nineteenth-century English observer of the corpse knows rationally that his friend has succumbed to the irresistible predatory talons of death, and that he is no longer present, even though the shape of the body inspires such feelings of familiarity. However, and importantly, this observer still cannot, even in his “imagination,” truly separate the notion of the lifeless human carcass from the beloved human being which once, but no longer, inhabited it.

Myriad factors, from changing thoughts about science to changing thoughts about religion, the technological advances and opportunities offered by the Industrial Revolution, and even the rise of Spiritualism and its related death-questioning causes, contribute to this kind of problematic interpretation of death, but the importance of the
destabilization of this boundary cannot be overstated. Anthropologist Mary Douglas notes that “all margins are dangerous. If they are pulled this way and that the shape of the fundamental experience is altered. Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins” (Douglas 150). Death, in other words, becomes much more dangerous when the margin that separates it from life is destabilized, and the space it was previously thought to occupy becomes indistinct.

And the working of many cultural factors, again, served to complicate the “structure of ideas” that had previously produced consensus about the meaning of death which had been held for centuries, and which created the conducive environment that allowed for the Victorians to develop this uniquely destabilized interpretation of death. However, these entrenched folkloric beliefs remained present. No longer could death even be considered, as it long had been, a period of eternal “rest”; the process of decay was increasingly seen as a very active, non-restful process. Indeed, it was, for example, described eloquently and graphically by Sir Henry Thompson, the founder of the Cremation Society of Great Britain, in 1874 as a time in which “the pallor visibly increases . . . and the profound tranquil sleep of Death reigns . . . Here, then, begins the eternal rest. Rest! No, not for an instant. Never was there greater activity than at this moment exists still in the corpse” (McMillin 21). Instead of reposing, the corpse was decomposing, moving as it did so back into the natural world, contributing its ever more rotting matter back to the greater world. This image is especially appropriate for this project, as the bodily connection between humanity and this natural world was becoming a stronger part of the discourse in the nineteenth century. An active human corpse,
returning to the natural world whose forces of evolution and natural selection both
spawned and extinguished generates a very salient image. It allowed for the cultivation
of a non-religious consideration of an afterlife for human beings in which the dead human
body re-immersed itself in the turbulent natural processes of the world in which it had in
life participated actively.

And corpses could still be active even after death had stripped them of their
corporeality. The process of decomposition, whether made visible to the living through
dilapidated graveyard conditions (which will be discussed below) or through the
observation of a gibbeted corpse on display, could be empirically validated as an active
procedure, changing the shape of the human body as it consumed it. Moreover,
Spiritualism, a movement informed by folkloric thought but disguised as a scientific
endeavor, introduced the notion that the body was not the sole vehicle of the human spirit
and that, through increasingly elaborate ritualized performances, the dead could, and even
wanted to, communicate with the living. These beliefs grew from earlier, equally
pseudo-scientific cultural practices which experimented with the notion of how death
operates on the human body, including galvanism, which used electricity to stimulate
visible muscle responses in dead animal and human tissue, and mesmerism, which
involved the placing of a living human body in a deathlike state, catalepsy, in order to
cure its physical and mental afflictions. All of these practices achieved a spectacle-value
that made them very visible, while controversial, to the culture of the nineteenth century.

Beyond these Spiritualist practices, more visceral factors remained; the overfilling
of urban cemeteries, the introduction of the process of cremation, and the practice of
human dissection as a tool to learn about the working of the body, as well as the
emergence of body-snatching as a means to procure these corpses, all created an
enhanced sense of the presence of death and corpses in societal thought; the Burke and
Hare murder trial in Edinburgh in 1828 and the subsequent though controversial
establishment of the Anatomy Act in 1832 brought these fears to a head early in the
century. (These issues will be discussed in depth in the second chapter.) An increasingly
secularized society, informed by scientific developments such as the discoveries of
prehistoric fossils and the shaping of evolutionary thought and natural selection,
attempted to de-center Victorian society’s belief in itself as the final, perfected result of
God’s process of Creation, and compromised the longstanding belief in the sense of
death’s meaning for a Christian society, as well as introducing the possibility of terrifying
proto-human ghosts from humanity’s “deep past.” (These issues will be discussed in the
third and fourth chapters.) All of these developments may, and will, be tracked through
the manifestations, in literature and ephemeral culture, of iterations of the human corpse
and, in particular, what happens, or at least may happen or be feared to happen, to the
human corpse in the increasingly unclear liminal space that separates life from death.

The corpse in nineteenth-century British culture is best understood through an
examination of the process which creates it: death itself. It is instructive at this time to
acquaint ourselves with the culture’s traditional understanding of death, as best it can be
recovered from both ephemeral sources and literature, and how death-rituals, as
performances of these beliefs, were enacted. Such an investigation will allow us to see
that the influence of folkloric impulses remained strong, even as scientific understanding
encroached on the territory of the human corpse, and specifically on how death was to be culturally interpreted. The processes of these culturally-accepted rituals of death, when they are properly practiced and everything happens in accordance with the culture’s expectations of how these processes should proceed, serves essentially to remove the corpse entirely from the world, at least as a physical object. The rituals are in this way are *apotropaic* measures, in that the corpse is not expected to return.³ In other words, if there are no perforations in the rituals that concern death and how the corpse should be handled, it is prepared for burial and interred in a grave underground. From that moment, it is expected to be a literal non-presence in the nineteenth-century world, other than through memory, as an object of mourning and lamentation.

**The Victorian deathbed ritual**

Death rituals in Victorian culture started before the actual moment of death, and concerned the human body in the space it occupied prior to its becoming a corpse. Specifically, the deathbed comprised an important, culturally-defined space and time for the dying person and her or his loved ones, framed by Christian belief, in which sins might be atoned for and proper goodbyes spoken, setting the stage for the dying person to have a “good death” and pass on. In the liminal space between life and death, the dying person, in a bed that prefigured the coffin it would likely soon occupy, could unburden her or his conscience of anything that needed to be shared to the “audience” attending; these scenes were supposed to be calm, peaceful, awash with tears but providing a sense of closure. A significant literary tradition of “deathbed scenes” may be found in the nineteenth century, but these were largely literary moments and did not correspond with
the reality of nineteenth-century life, in which, for example, a death from cholera was viscerally disgusting, painful and tremendously messy, and frequently happening so rapidly and amid such a panicked epidemic-environment that a deathbed scene would be impossible, if not almost comically grotesque and immensely unhealthy for those attending the dying person. In other words, there was no clean, culturally acceptable space in which a dying cholera victim could put her or his affairs in order, at the same time that her or his body was literally coming apart from the inside out.

Nonetheless, the notion of the “clean deathbed,” allowing a clear, sanitized resolution to a Christian life, maintained itself within the culture, reflected in the unrealistic imagery associated with it in literature. Perhaps the most recognizable, characteristic deathbed scene in nineteenth-century literature is that of Little Nell Trent in Dickens’ *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1840-1). The overpoweringly good-hearted but slowly wasting-away protagonist Nell, finally succumbing to the long illness that has plagued her, arrives at her deathbed well-prepared, and, in a heartbreaking scene in which she displays her awareness of the scene’s importance, the reader finds that it looks “appropriate”; “[h]er couch was dressed with here and there some winter berries and green leaves, gathered in a spot she had been used to favour. ‘When I die, put near me something that has loved the light, and had the sky above it always’” (Dickens, 1840, 734). After Nell dies, following an extended scene in which her mourners speak their praises over her dying body, she is finally acknowledged as dead, but she leaves the world “[d]ear, gentle, patient, noble” (Dickens, 1840, 734). This scene is heartbreaking and poignant, and, importantly, it allows a controlled forum for the dying person to
deliver as much of a final monologue as she wishes to speak. It is, quite simply, what a
deathbed scene *ought* to resemble, and the fact that, for reasons delineated above, it did
not, in actual human life, became a troublesome point for Victorian culture. But the
deathbed, whether attainable in a pleasant, sanitized form or not, was only the first stage
in the death rituals of the culture of the nineteenth century. After the human being died,
the body left behind had to be removed from the presence of the living.

The Victorian funeral

The funeral ritual itself, as the procedure whereby the dead human body is
disposed, underwent a significant change during the Victorian era. In previous centuries,
exorbitant parades accompanied the dead body, especially if its owner was wealthy, to its
resting place, and these rituals of course emphasized the status of the deceased within his
or her community. As industrial advances and urban living came to dominate the English
landscape in the nineteenth century, a middle class began to take shape. Those belonging
to this growing segment of the population did not have ancient names and royal heritages
to flaunt, but they did have money. As a result, elaborate funeral ceremonies became
available to more people. New industries developed, as “[t]he undertaker rose as a
servant of this new order” (Laqueur 113), merchants who could rent out “cloaks,
hangings, escutcheons, coach coverings and even coaches to whomever could afford
them” (Laqueur 113). Professional mourners could be hired, leased out by undertakers
who employed them; these men and women would dress in mourning clothes and
accompany the coffin, perhaps gesticulating and wailing wildly through the funeral if
paid to do so. The young titular character in Charles Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* (1837), for
example, is briefly apprenticed to abusive undertaker Mr. Sowerberry as a “mute” mourner, after he notices “an expression of melancholy in his face [. . .] which is very interesting” and which could be exploited if only he could be made into “a delightful mute” (Dickens, 1837, 28). Oliver’s subsequent training involves “many opportunities of observing the beautiful resignation and fortitude with which some strong-minded people bear their trials and losses” (Dickens, 1837, 33) as well as noticing how mourning family members exhibited a tendency to cease mourning immediately and return to their day-to-day states as soon as their loved ones’ funerals concluded (Dickens, 1837, 34). He learns that mourning is, at least in this context, a performance, and so studies his art accordingly.

The funeral offered a prominent, frequently expensive display of the deceased’s, and the deceased’s relatives’, social standing, much less affiliated with name as with money. The Duke of Wellington’s funeral in 1852 is frequently used as an illustration of the extremes to which Victorian mourning culture could go. This ceremony was about the corpse of the Duke, so to speak, but the corpse was never directly visible, as it was instead the idea of the corpse that fueled the ritual. The funeral parade was massive and expensive, calculated, perhaps, as a huge, technology-infused spectacle in order, in part, to eclipse in splendor Napoleon’s funeral in 1840 (Cadwallader 10); it was also heavily-commodified, as everything from good seats for the parade to Wellington-themed items were sold (Cadwallader 11). The Illustrated London News described the moment in which Wellington’s coffin was lowered into its crypts as “one of the most . . . impressive incidents it has ever been our lot to witness” (Cadwallader 11). The attending crowd was
so gigantic that, according to the 15 November edition of the *Times*, the police force attempting to control the throngs of mourners accidentally killed two people through their exuberance. (The funeral here is more than a mirror, reflecting the ultimate destiny of the gazer; when the gazer can actually be killed in the course of attending the funeral itself. The funeral then celebrates the death of one while it brings death to others.) But the funeral becomes a complicated death-mirror in the nineteenth century, because, unlike in previous centuries, in which the mirror of the corpse was a clear reminder of the eventual death of the viewer, now, “[i]t was a looking glass in which a person’s life and his relationship to society could be viewed within a certainty and finality that only death could bring” (Laqueur 120). To insinuate that this structure is best seen as a “mirror,” though, elides the reality that class differences were an inescapable component of Victorian society. While participating in the ritual of the Duke of Wellington’s funeral, for example, the vast majority of Londoners would never be granted such a lavish ceremony to commemorate their own passing.

Part of the reason, perhaps, for the interest in and expansion of death rituals across all classes at this time may have involved the fact that there were quite simply more deaths in England than there had ever been before. A number of factors contributed to this massive nineteenth century influx of bodies, which included the fact that the English population increased tremendously during the nineteenth century, from 13.9 million in 1831 to 30.5 million by 1901 (statistics.gov.uk). Specifically, the city of London’s population grew from 900,000 at the turn of the nineteenth century to over seven million by its end (Denhour 16). Modern research estimates that, in 1870, for example, someone...
in London died every eight minutes (Denhour 17). The rates of violent crime did not necessarily climb in accordance with these swelling populations, though. In fact, murder was not necessarily committed at higher rates than it had been in previous centuries, in spite of what one might assume from the hyperinflated and sometimes completely fabricated accounts of murders the reader-hungry nineteenth century popular press records. As a result, the bodies of violent-crime victims were not numerous enough to register as a significant factor in the swelling of nineteenth-century cemeteries. Wars were not fought on British soil at any time during this century, so the body-count that such conflicts would generate was also not a factor here.

However, the burgeoning Industrial Revolution, while offering advances that helped increase the average person’s lifespan, brought more people as potential laborers to London in particular and, between industrial accidents and death by natural causes, significantly increased the number of bodies that had to be buried. A series of cholera epidemics, the worst erupting in 1832 and 1849, claimed tens of thousands of lives, frequently operating with a fifty-percent mortality rate (Denhour 20). These epidemics continued to ravage the population until Dr. John Snow, in 1854, discovered that the disease was not miasmatically contagious, but connected instead with contaminated drinking water people had been drawing from wells immediately downstream from areas that received massive deposits of human sewage (Arnold 113-4). In spite of these discoveries and the changes they facilitated, though, an outbreak in 1866 nonetheless claimed 5000 lives in London in a three-week span (Denhour 20). These epidemics produced massive numbers of corpses, all of which had to be disposed of quickly in
cemetery spaces that were already overfilled, specifically because the bodies of those who died of cholera were believed to continue carrying the contagion and so needed to be removed as rapidly as possible. Cemeteries, as a result, became “scenes of the most appalling horror, where bones would be heaped on bones, and partially rotted bodies would be disinterred to make way for a multitude of corpses” (Curl 41). Death, in this context, was literally very visible in the nineteenth century and, subsequently, “the threshold between the dead and the living was a deeply permeable one” (Hackenberg 69).

**The Victorian cemetery**

Perhaps the most immediately visible reminder of the corpse was one that sheltered the sight of the corpse from the living: the cemetery, as the literal repository for human bodies. The corpse was not visible in the cemetery, of course, but was buried under the ground, and, unless the corpse belonged to the very poor or someone who had died during an epidemic and had been tossed into an unmarked mass grave, it had the spot of this burial marked with some sort of permanent memorial artifact. Via gravestones, in a way, the dead human body remained visible by proxy. These gravestones varied in size and ostentation according to the economic statuses of the deceased and were placed, largely, to give the living a visible object, much less disturbing than an actual rotting corpse, to use to remind themselves of the loved ones they had lost. But this system was not in the nineteenth century a sustainable, or even stable, one. This instability can be seen in London, specifically, where these cemeteries were absolutely flooded with corpses. Most of London’s cemeteries were over two centuries old and had fallen into complete disarray by the early nineteenth century, if not
earlier. The overcrowded, dilapidated conditions created coffins so packed with
“miasmatic” gasses that they exploded and lethally poisonous fumes that at least in one
instance killed two gravediggers who died of asphyxiation from inhaling them
(Hackenberg 66). Finally, a Select Committee was assembled by Parliament in 1842 to
deal with the problem; legislation aimed toward improvement of conditions, however,
could not resolve the issue that existing cemetery spaces were overfilled so in 1852
Parliament passed a law forbidding any new burials in urban cemeteries. The
establishment and increasing popularity of privately-owned, for-profit cemeteries, as
early as the 1830s, also helped to take some of the pressure of this situation. Still, it was
largely from the ranks of the very poor that the worst burial conditions could be expected,
as many people could not afford any services other than those which essentially pitched
the bodies of their loved ones into shallow, poorly-maintained mass graves. The
decrepitude and overcrowding at many cemetery spaces remained grim, though, and
much was written about these conditions at the time, indicating that British culture was
aware of and actively discussing the problem. For example, London’s Daily News
reported that, at the churchyard at St. Martin-in-the-Fields, which had allegedly crammed
sixty to seventy thousand corpses into a 200 square foot space a decade and a half earlier,
in 1856 “broken coffins and dismembered corpses have shocked the mind and the sense
of every passer-by” (McMillin 15). The visible human corpse in these areas could not be
avoided, and the shattered coffins and bodies-in-pieces were likely to remind readers not
so much, maybe, of the inevitability of their own death as of the much-publicized
activities of resurrection men decades before.5
These conditions left impressions in literature, too. The work of Charles Dickens in particular offers several grotesque descriptions of contemporary cemetery conditions; perhaps his working-class background and early employment at a blacking factory provided him opportunities to witness these conditions which his more wealthy authorial brethren would either have lacked or consciously avoided. Dickens’s *Bleak House* (1852-3) offers a glimpse of a pauper’s buying ground which, though fictive, is presented in accordance with contemporary accounts of the appearance and maintenance of actual urban burial spaces; Jo shows the veiled Lady-servant the spot in which the corpse of Nemo was buried, heaped “‘among them piles of bones [. . .] They put him very nigh the top. They was obliged to stamp on it to git in it’” (Dickens, 1852, 222). Clearly, no sense of reverence is allowed the human remains here, as violent manual labor is employed to “stamp” the corpses into place. Jo points out, too, the ease with which he could expose the cadaver, as it is so shallowly buried, and, emphasizing further the unpleasant conditions, notes the presence in the boneyard of at least one rat (Dickens, 1852, 222). Decomposition was not even allowed to take its time to break down the human corpse on its own, as the presence of scavengers would seem to indicate. The Lady recoils in terror, worries about whether the ground has actually been consecrated, and labels it a “place of abomination” (Dickens, 1852, 222). Dickens’ *Oliver Twist* offers another, slightly earlier (1837) fictive glimpse of how such a body might have been interred, and what callous and rough energy might have been invested in such procedures. Here, an attempt to bury the corpse of a pauper woman in a visibly overfull grave site, witnessed by the young Oliver, “was no very difficult task; for the grave was
so full, that the uppermost coffin was within a few feet of the surface. The grave-digger shovelled in the earth; stamped it loosely down with his feet; shouldered his spade; and walked off” (Dickens, 1837, 32-3). Again, the act of “stamping” the body down into its overcrowded space emerges as the best practice for burying a human corpse in such overcrowded conditions. This body, similar to many thousands of bodies of the poor disposed of in English cemetery spaces, could hardly under these circumstances be considered “buried.”

Dickens’s descriptions of cemetery conditions, awash as they are with horrific imagery and evidence of blatant disregard for any consideration of the graveyard as a sacred space, do seem to be in accordance with accounts provided by Victorian cemetery-reformers, who recorded the results of their observations made on conditions at relevant sites. G.A. Walker, for example, translated what he claimed to witness at sites from churchyards in Whitechapel, St. Ann in Soho and St. Giles in the Fields into poetic form, under the title “City of Graves,” which was published in Dickens’s journal Household Words in December 1850; “I saw from out the earth peep forth / [t]he white and glistening bones, / [w]ith jagged ends of coffin planks, [t]hat e’en the worm disowns; / [a]nd once a smooth round skull rolled on, / [l]ike a football, on the stones” (Curl 114). Overcrowded conditions packed with corpses beyond their capacity, to the extent that disarticulated human bones, separated entirely from their coffins, were littered around in a graveyard so disturbing that even maggots would spurn it: this environment certainly seems to be in agreement with the conditions described by Dickens.
Folklore of the cemetery

The cemetery is of course a site of horror with a deep history in English culture, which is informed by folklore. These resting places for the dead carry longstanding connections with notions of supernaturality. Fears about cemeteries remained, in spite of nineteenth-century cultural impulses in England to isolate these worries as “exploded,” the archaic detritus of primitive thinking, and the province only of isolated rustic communities and especially the Irish. It was largely believed in mainstream nineteenth-century British culture that superstitious beliefs increasingly thrived the further one got from London, as distance from the cultural and learning capital of the Empire created an environment in which such superstitions remained unchallenged. As superstition tended to be thought to reign in these faraway locations, the label might be seen as a critique from the cultural center of any and all competing philosophies toward understanding the world; to this point, Angela Bourke offers that for those in London “‘superstition’ meant a system of reasoning alien to those in power” (Bourke 38). Critics in London of Ireland’s attempts to secure Home Rule from England frequently deployed references to lingering superstitious beliefs in the Irish countryside, many of which concerned issues of death and burial, as evidence that such a region was not culturally mature enough to govern itself. In truth, much of the folklore concerning death was important for many non-literate Irish communities, which were non-literate and not served by centralized governmental programs, as the superstitions encoded important messages pertaining to the recognition of signs of death and the sanitary disposal of corpses. Catholicism, associated largely with the Irish, was also particularly thought to allow ideological
scaffolding favoring credulous responses to supernatural and superstitious phenomena.

Much of the work of Irish author Bram Stoker plays with the tenuous cultural space in which superstitious beliefs, while frequently ridiculed, still provided an accurate understanding of the mysterious machinations of the real world. For example, Stoker’s short piece “The Dream in the Dead House” (1897, originally intended as an early chapter of Dracula but cut at his publisher’s request to shorten the text), now largely anthologized as “Dracula’s Guest,” describes a very non-superstitious Jonathan Harker, who hears vague, terrifying stories of Walpurgius Night when he visits Dracula’s homeland, and in response to these superstitions, his “English blood rose at this” (Stoker, *Midnight Tales* 21). He decides to ignore the terrified Transylvanian natives’ warnings not to wander abroad on this particular night but, when he finds himself lost in a dark snowstorm in the middle of a gigantic, abandoned graveyard, “[i]t took all my philosophy, all the religion I had, been, all my courage, not to collapse in a paroxysm of fright” (Stoker, *Midnight Tales* 24). The space of the cemetery quickly un-mans his bold English blood, in spite of his cultural training that would make him rationally understand that there is nothing to fear in a place that simply houses dead human bodies. His fears are, significantly, validated, as he encounters and is attacked by a werewolf sleeping in a tomb, and loses consciousness, also unmanfully, as he is unable to endure what he sees; “[t]he last sight that I remembered was a vague, white, moving mass, as if all the graves around me had sent out the phantoms of their sheeted-dead, and that they were closing in on me through the white cloudiness of the driving hail” (Stoker, *Midnight Tales* 25). In spite of the best efforts of Victorian culture to demystify the graveyard, it still could
easily inspire the kind of Gothic imagery Stoker’s speaker envisions and, as a result, remained a profoundly disturbing physical place.

However, interestingly, even the absence of the cemetery might have been a disturbing sight for those living in nineteenth-century culture. Perhaps, with this in mind, another hint in literature about the widespread Victorian interest in issues pertaining to body disposal at this time is provided through H.G. Wells’s fin de siècle novel The Time Machine (1895). Here, the Time Traveler observes and is interested in the fact that he, visiting the year 802,701, “could see no signs of crematoria nor anything suggestive of tombs” in the Eloi civilizations, which left him very “puzzled” (Wells 37). This puzzlement makes sense, as Wells, and putatively his Time Traveler, came from a culture in which insufficient disposal options for human bodies was a very visible issue, especially where cemeteries were concerned. (If cemeteries were overcrowded in the nineteenth century, how much worse, a Victorian might think, might the situation become uncountable millennia down the road?) So it seems that, in this storyworld, the problem has been resolved, as corpse-disposal facilities are not visible elements of the landscape. The solution to the problem, though, is not a pleasant one for the Eloi, as the Time Traveler discovers later that the Eloi dead probably do actually end up underground, though not in well-maintained graves: rather, they are forcibly taken underground by the Morlocks to be butchered and eaten. The fate of the Eloi may be seen as a parallel to that of Britain’s dead in the nineteenth century; horrible things await the human body when it is transported underground.
Exacerbating the disturbing visibility of death in nineteenth-century culture was the presence of public executions, which made the human body, at the moment it transitioned from life to death, a spectacle, and, more specifically, a means of intimidating the viewers into practicing acceptable behavior. The corpse may be seen as a mirror here, or a warning, that if the viewer breaks the laws, then his or her future is that of the executed corpse. Public dissection of criminals became one method of “postmortem punishment,” demonstrating that what can be done, punitively, to the body of the criminal does not cease after the criminal’s death.

Postmortem punishment already had a long history in England, even before dissection became a part of it. An older and more common tradition of hanging criminals’ carcasses in gibbets enhanced this usage of the deceased human body, as the prominently displayed corpses would decompose, fall apart and be devoured by scavengers, all in plain sight of the people’s gaze. England only slowly phased out public executions, and perhaps their lingering presence comprised an attempt by those in positions of authority to continue using the human body as an object of torture and execution in order to discourage viewers from fomenting the kind of social unrest that exploded sporadically in England and Europe throughout the late Regency period and early nineteenth century (Foucault 14).

These factors, from the overfilled cemetery to the public display of criminals’ corpses, presented a series of cultural situations in which the human corpse was made a visible object which had to be confronted. It might be helpful to recall here that in general the human corpse, as an obvious and undeniable physical embodiment of death,
has always been a troublesome subject for many cultures; its presence, especially when it is unexpected, as a violation of the cultural rituals set forth to move it out of the way, necessarily triggers an almost universally recognized negative response. In general, according to Ruth Richardson:

[a] corpse has a presence of its own. it resembles the dead person, yet it is not that person. Death transforms the body of a known individual into something else - removing [him or her] from the realm of the ordinary in which survivors continue to have their being. It impresses survivors with the power of death, of its arbitrary effects; it is a menace to the living, a reminder of their own mortality, a threat of further death. (Richardson 15-6)

Truly, for an English culture, infused with Christian thought and rhetoric, the corpse tended to embody awareness of human mortality, specifically in the observer of the corpse. Julia Kristeva reads the corpse as a thing which inescapably terrifies anyone who comes into contact with it because it must “show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live” (Kristeva 3, italics Kristeva’s). In other words, the corpse is something of an undeniable mirror. To see a dead body is to be reminded of one’s own death.

Even late in the nineteenth century and deep into the fin de siècle, evidence of this relationship is apparent in the literature that would shape Modernism; in Joseph Conrad’s Heart of Darkness (1899), the narrator Marlow reacts to the death of the mad, devolved genius Kurtz by imagining himself in the place of the corpse as it is buried. He is aware that “the pilgrims buried something in a muddy hole,” and, while this “something” must have been the body of Kurtz, Marlow feels perhaps that it could have been he: the pilgrims “very nearly buried me” (Conrad 112). It is only after much rumination that he assures the reader that “[n]o, they did not bury me” (Conrad 114). Marlow does,
however, emerge from the experience feeling as though he has taken the dead man’s passage to the afterlife, claiming that “there is a period of time which I remember mistily, with a shuddering wonder like a passage through some inconceivable world that had no hope in it and no desire” (Conrad 114). If the corpse is something of a mirror, showing its observer his or her own mortality, then Marlow has in a way just watched his own burial. This connection between the gaze of the living observer and the corpse being observed carries a long and direct tradition in English culture.

**Victorian Memento Mori**

Dating from the early Middle Ages, the longstanding tradition of the *memento morti* on European funeral art frequently provided visual reminders of the human mortality, encoded in representations of the rotting carcass of the corpse in various stages of decay. Evident following the plague outbreak in the mid-fourteenth century, and increasingly visible by the fifteenth century in England, cadaver-versions of the deceased were often carved atop grave monuments, to reinforce awareness of the frailty of human life and caution those Christian souls still living to rectify their wayward thinking before they, too, were reduced to rotting corpses. The reflexive connection intended between the artifact and the viewer is emphasized on a banner carved across the corpse-monument of John Baret, who died in 1467: “[h]e that wil sadly beholde one with his ie / [m]ay se hys owne merowyr and lerne for to die” (Platt 254). The corpse is the “merowyr,” or mirror, in other words. Monuments were frequently commissioned to depict a pair of effigies of the deceased: one atop the monument would represent the deceased as in life, and in a properly pious pose, while one beneath, in the ground, would represent the
deceased as a decomposing, skeletalizing corpse. The soul, hopefully ascendant, lay atop this structure, while the body, discarded physical detritus the soul has vacated, lay beneath; in these monuments, the “mirror” is death and the body lies on one side and the soul on the other. This message is easily read, even for a non-literate viewer.

Of course this kind of anxiety about death, represented through the depiction of the human corpse, has not even in the early twenty-first century vanished from English culture but by the nineteenth century, it began to take on a very different shape. In England, rapid industrialization and the expansion of the Empire both created new concerns in regard to the disposal of human bodies, but, more importantly in regard to the consideration of death, the development and dissemination of notions of natural selection and evolution, created a cultural atmosphere in which such an allegorical reading of death was becoming problematized. Science, as it presented a burgeoning awareness of what was to be called a prehistoric “deep time,” decentralized the notion that the human was the planned, terminal point of all creation and therefore complicated the feasibility of a Christian afterlife; as a result, the idea of death as a mirror, for the Victorians, becomes much more distorted.

This unfocused conception of death may be read from images similar to the memento mori that can be found even late in Victorian visual culture. In particular, it takes shape in the work of artist Aubrey Beardsley, a black-ink illustrator whose work emphasized decadence, sexuality and horror, and who is best remembered for his provocative illustrations which accompanied Oscar Wilde’s Salome. Specifically, Beardsley created a work which may be read as a self-memento mori just two years
before his own death from tuberculosis, which he knew was imminent. The ink drawing “Remorse” (1896), attributed to Beardsley, provides an evocative representation of how the idea of death as a mirror might have been read late in the nineteenth century (Harris 196). Even the title, phonetically or at least assonantly similar to *memento mori*, invites the same sort of feelings that medieval memorial displays of the skeletalized dead might be expected to inspire: a remorse, in other words, felt for the living for the dead. The use of the decayed human corpse as a visual reminder of death is presented in Beardsley’s piece, but in a manner more complicated than we see with earlier, more direct renderings of similar material.

Here, a pair of human figures, one living and one dead, recall the cadaver monuments of the fifteenth century: one figure, above ground, appears to be that of a living man dressed in black while the other, buried underground, has been reduced to a skeleton. The buried skeleton appears to be covered by a shroud, offering a visual clue that proper burial procedures seem to have been performed for this deceased human body, as well as an artificial barrier that further separates the living from the dead. The figures are linked, but not in the equivalent mirror-sense which funeral monuments of earlier centuries might lead us to expect. One seems to grow directly from the other. Specifically, a connection between the two is implied visually in the living figure’s long cloak, which grows up from the buried body of the skeleton almost like a root; the cloak seems to resemble the remains of the skeleton’s burial shroud, too. But it is not an easy life-to-death mirror relationship, as the apparently living entity, very ghostlike while still appearing solid, rather than facing its skeletal counterpart beneath the soil, points instead
to a living tree which grows on the left edge of the piece. As the tree seems to have sprouted directly from the skull of the buried figure, perhaps this gesture is meant to show a naturalized iteration of resurrection. Instead of the body returning to earth on the Day of Judgment, the body returns to the world in a purely organic sense, as it literally provides the fertilizer for other life, in this case a tree, to “come to life.” The only kind of “afterlife” that can be expected in this storyworld involves a return, through the process of decay, to “life” as fertilizer for other living material. The figure above the ground, while seeming to be moving away from the place under which the skeleton lies, cannot sever its gaze from the tree. Perhaps this is meant as a signal that the living, in Beardsley’s time, could not escape considering the dead. More specifically, if we read the tree as a tree of knowledge, considering the dead as a source of productive information for the living, we find this piece in accordance with the philosophy that motivated Spiritualism. Notably, the skeleton is considerably larger than the apparently living body above it, which reinforces a sense of disharmony between the two and suggests that a mirror-relationship is not necessarily viable here. It perhaps too indicates a belief that death, quite literally, is larger than life.
But the human corpse, for nineteenth-century English culture, was much more than a mirror-like reminder of death; it was perhaps the most prominent and disturbing object through which a new series of anxieties about death in this time of transition were played out. And the Beardsley image with its apparently restless buried skeleton evokes one of the most pressing concerns of the century: the fear that one might be interpreted as a corpse without actually being dead, and that, subsequently, one might be buried alive.

The image in “Remorse” of the perhaps not-dead body underground does, indeed, evoke the possibilities attached to the fear of being buried alive. Careful investigation of reported cases of live human burial never unearthed any compelling evidence that this
practice had actually occurred, either in the nineteenth century or even in previous centuries, and that “evidence” that the exhumed corpses that showed signs of awakening in their tombs reflected nothing more than misinterpretations of the gruesome but expected processes of bodily decomposition. Nonetheless, the anxiety did not subside until the early decades of the twentieth century.

The coffin was no longer a stable resting place for the human corpse as cemetery overcrowding created conditions that literally disturbed the dead. Sometimes a dozen bodies would be stacked on top of one another, especially in plots that housed the poor. Many cemeteries, both old and new, were also terribly maintained, and sometimes poorly-constructed, and the nationalization of the country’s cemeteries in 1852 only slowly began to remedy these conditions (Arnold 158-9). At least early in the century, some coffins of the recently-buried were being broken open by resurrection men, who were exhuming bodies to sell to medical students who needed a constant flow of such material for dissection. Highlighting all of these concerns was an ever-present fear in the culture, in spite of the preponderance of scientific evidence which allegedly refuted its possibility, that those buried in the cemetery might not actually be dead. Accounts of premature burials tended to take the shapes of folktales, in that when investigated they were found to be entirely untraceable to actual, recorded events, or explainable as byproducts of conventional putrefaction. Most of the accounts could easily be classified as one of a series of “type tales,” or even urban legends, trope-filled stories which were told and written about in fairly unchangeable forms throughout the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. Perhaps because they were so horrible, these unverifiable stories
were consumed voraciously by nineteenth century English culture, continuously recycled and circulated and passed on as true.

**Premature burial fears**

In the canonical English literature of the nineteenth century, the issue of premature burial is, unusually, not heavily treated. At least one literary figure, Willkie Collins, was concerned with the possibility of being buried alive though it never factored as an element in his fiction; Collins distrusted Continental medical professionals and frequently left notes on the mirrors of hotels rooms in which he stayed, ordering that in the event of his apparent death he should not be buried until he was examined by a presumably more competent English doctor (Bondeson 223). References to the subject are typically fleeting, as, for example, a short scene in *Oliver Twist* in which an impoverished man attempts to keep undertaker Sowerberry from gaining access to his wife’s dead body; “‘I tell you,’ said the man: clenching his hands, and stamping furiously on the floor - ‘I tell you I won’t have her put in the ground. She couldn’t rest there. The worms would worry her - not eat her - she is so worn away’” (Dickens, 1837, 31). The man ascribes the ability to “rest” and “worry” to his wife’s corpse, possibly implying that he fears she is not actually dead, or that her state in life was so corpse-like and “worn away” that it is impossible to determine if she has truly passed on. Perhaps the most well-known literary character associated with live burial is Count Dracula, who travels and sleeps diurnally in his coffin. Dracula’s identification as a living dead entity is enhanced by this behavior, as he rests temporarily in the very container designed to entomb the human body for its eternal rest. Dracula in his coffin “sleeps” in a place in
which no human being is expected to awaken from until the time of Christian
Resurrection. According to Professor Van Helsing, Dracula regenerates himself “when
he have his earth-home, his coffin-home, his hell-home, the place unhallowed” (Stoker
308). The coffin allows Dracula, again according to the research of Van Helsing, to have
lived for centuries (Stoker 310). In immersing himself within this ritual of death, and
encasing himself with this artifact, paradoxically, he maintains and supernaturally
extends his own life.

Overall, the fear of being buried alive was more of a concern in continental
Europe than it ever became in England. In Germany and France, for example, chambers
were constructed, adjacent to mortuaries, in which human corpses could be stored and
observed; as soon as they showed indisputable signs of decomposition, they were buried.
Indisputable evidence of decomposition was the only way to “read” death upon the
human body, according to the majority of nineteenth-century scientific discourse, as
testing for breath with a mirror and confirming whether or not the heart was still beating
have both proven to be fallible determinants of death. Until that point, though, at which
decomposition could be absolutely confirmed, they were treated as spectacles, and in
some cases tourists were allowed to walk through the facilities. These chambers were
proposed in England but were not thought by skeptical mainstream scientists to be
necessary and so never actually materialized in the British landscape.

However, the idea of observing a corpse was not alien to English culture, and in
fact has deep roots here and in other European cultures. Many nineteenth-century British
folklorists recorded, with a considerable amount of judgmental commentary, the folk
tradition of “corpse watching,” in which a human body was kept under observation until clear signs were perceived which indicated it was truly dead. The “folk” who practiced these rituals, labeled by folklorists as “‘Vulgar,’” would probably have been horrified at the disrespect and possible danger involved in leaving a corpse alone” (Richardson 12). The only significant differences between the folkloric practice of corpse-watching and the placement of a corpse in a specially constructed burial chamber involve the fact that the latter was mandated by scientific discourse, and that the onus of corpse-observation was removed from the family members to the scientific community. In the eyes of scientists, the “folk,” as the nineteenth century progressed, were increasingly not to be trusted as evaluators of death when compared with the professional gazes of more specially-trained medical practitioners. Corpse-watching was still practiced especially in rural areas, but it was increasingly marginalized by the encroachment of university-trained medical practitioners into these less-urban, distant spaces.11

Indeed, Victorian culture largely tried to convince itself that the scientific gaze was superior to the folk gaze, as a means of interpreting death, and even the very sparse literary references to the practice of corpse-watching align it with rural, antiquated thinking. Bram Stoker’s largely forgotten short story “The Man from Shorrox” (1894, originally published in the February edition of *Pall Mall Magazine*) for example, written in a heavy Irish dialect, describes the misadventures of a corpse-watcher: “the watcher from th’ undertaker’s kem to sit be the corp [of a man recently deceased] till the mornin’” and he is soon joined by a young lady, whereupon the two begin to kiss, not taking the corpse-watching duty overly seriously, apparently. They are suddenly horrified when
“the corp rose up in the bed, an’ they seen it pointin’ at thim, and heard a voice say, ‘It’s in hell I am- Devils around me!’” (Stoker, *Midnight Tales* 117). This is not an instance of resurrection or, more importantly, corpse-watching being responsible for rescuing a “dead” person from premature burial though, as it is quickly discovered to be a case of mistaken identity. Apparently, the wife of the innkeeper has sent an obnoxious drunkard who has demanded a room into the room occupied by her dead husband, “the corp,” without telling him this; the drunkard awakens, reacts in horror to his situation, and is misperceived by the corpse-watcher and his girlfriend as an awakened corpse. This practice, at least as presented in Stoker’s storyworld, is not a productive one, as it is relegated to easily-frightened, superstitious characters, and the act of corpse-watching itself accomplishes nothing other than generating a few dark comedic moments. However, it does describe a tradition that continues to exist throughout England in the nineteenth century, even as the idea of the putatively scientifically-underwritten corpse-watching chambers is abandoned.

However, while the officially-mandated corpse-chamber never made an appearance in England, the fear of being buried alive did create a cultural impression among the Victorians. Burial Societies, also known as “Friendly Societies,” began to be established in the 1830s in response to fears of premature burial, as well as larger fears that the corpse of an impoverished person would be mistreated, abused or abandoned if its family could not pay for its proper disposal. In these clubs, working class Englishmen were expected to contribute monthly fees to a pot of funds which would be used, in the event of the death of a member, to guarantee a decent burial for that unfortunate
individual. These societies did produce numerous ill results, though, as unscrupulous men and women would enroll family members, pay the first month’s dues, then kill the family member to collect the burial money they were owed by the society. This is one of the many ways in which the production of a human corpse, by way of murder, became a lucrative practice. The “Friendly Society Act” in 1847 was designed in part to curtail these murderous but profitable (assuming the perpetrator was not caught, tried and hanged) practices (Knelman 125). Yet in spite of the preventative, if exploitable, measures such as Friendly Societies, the fear of being buried alive remained a presence in the culture.

Many rhetorically-excitable tracts were published, even late in the century, to continue to stimulate the terrors of the Victorian reading public in regard to the possibility of premature burial. In 1896, the Society for the Prevention of Live Burial was formed in London by William Tebb as an organization to raise awareness of the possibility of live burials, frequently through the use of terrifying and exaggerated, if not completely invented, narratives, and to encourage the education of medical practitioners in regard to recognizing the true signs of death on the human body. Tebb and Edward Perry Vollum, a military surgeon active during the American Civil War collaborated on Premature Burial and How It May be Prevented (the first edition of this book was published in 1895), a large volume of dramatically-narrated accounts of live burial. 12 Tebb and Vollum describe the process of premature burial in an especially gruesome manner, one which taps in Victorian mourning rituals by emphasizing the unintended guilt that might be laid on the consciences of the loved ones left to mourn a corpse that is
not actually a corpse: those buried prematurely “will have to undergo slow suffocation, in
furious despair, while scratching their flesh to pieces, biting their tongues, and smashing
their heads against the narrow houses that confine them, and calling to their best friends,
and cursing them as murderers” (Tebb and Vollum 262). This book, in addition to
absorbing virtually every newspaper account of live-burials the authors could find from
either side of the Atlantic, also borrowed heavily from old folkloric narratives that treated
the subject, frequently duplicating variant forms of a single story, then passing these on
as individual, factual cases. For example, the “Lady and the Ring” trope, in which a
woman is mistakenly buried alive and awakens in her coffin as a grave robber is
attempting either to pull or cut a ring off of her finger, is recounted in the book half a
dozen times (Bondeson 190).

The long-lasting nature of this anxiety, in spite of apparent lack of evidence that
live burials had taken place at all, let alone on the scale that was being reported by anti-
premature burial publications, is evident in the late date of some of the more dramatic
poetic depictions of the horrors of being buried alive. The Society for the Prevention of
Premature Burial kept the issue in the spotlight even after the turn of the century,
especially through the contents of the Burial Reformer (beginning in 1905), its journal,
which published minutes of the Society’s meetings alongside histrionic, terrifying and
sometimes humorous tales of premature burial. As late as 1913, in the pages of the third
issue of the Burial Reformer, one finds the poem “Living with the Dead,” by Mark
Melford, which describes, from the point of view of the victim, the process of being
buried alive. The language of Gothic horror is evoked here, long after one might expect
to find it in literary expression, as the doomed protagonist finally and painfully escapes his entombment and exclaims “[o]h horrible! Oh damnable! / For now with drowned groans / [w]ith frenzy in my stifled soul / [t]hat thaws my stiffened bones / I, bursting forth the coffin’s sides, / [f]all bleeding to the stones” (Melford, from Bondeson 197). This scene was not based on an actual event, had not in any form been reported through any accurate sources, and was, if anything, borrowed entirely from the tropes of much older folkloric traditions of live burials and the miraculous escapes from such fates.

It would be reductive to dismiss these concerns as the product of a sort of lunatic fringe, and, perhaps aware of this perception, the *Burial Reformer* did not confine itself to hysterical poetry but also collected and published some unusual instructions left in the wills of prominent English people which indicated that there existed a real fear of the possibility of premature burial in the culture. The most prominent figure mentioned here is Herbert Spencer, who stipulated in his will that, prior to his cremation, he should “be placed in a coffin with a loose lid easily opened from below” (Behlmer 222).

Importantly, not all scientists ascribed this fear to folkloric thought. Similarly, Lady Isobel Burton willed that a needle be passed through her heart to determine that she was truly dead, so that she would not be buried alive. Certain death, in short, was a more acceptable alternative to premature burial. Perhaps the most dramatic instructions were left by Frances Power Cobbe, who left twenty guineas in her will to be paid to a surgeon who was to “perform on my body the operation of completely and thoroughly severing the arteries of the neck & windpipe (nearly severing the head altogether) so as to render my revival in the grave absolutely impossible” (Behlmer 222, parentheticals Cobbe’s).
Technological responses to this anxiety included the manufacture of “safety coffins,” which offered such expensive features for those who might have awakened in their coffins as breathing tubes, alarm bells hung over the grave which were attached to the finger of the buried body, and spring-activated flags, also propped up over the grave, which would be triggered by any significant movement from inside the coffin (Behlmer 222). Many safety coffins were designed to house their own air supply, so that the revived “corpse” would not suffocate before he or she could be discovered (Bondeson 136). Some coffins even had windows designed at the top to reveal the face of the buried person, which would be left uncovered by dirt and thus allow the face to be watched for any kind of movement that might reveal that the body was not actually dead. The corpse-as-spectacle is perhaps nowhere better framed than by this practice. These safety coffins, largely patented and manufactured in Germany and the United States, never became overly popular in England.

Interestingly, concerns about premature burial do also appear, though subtly, in more canonically-recognized nineteenth-century fiction. Victor Frankenstein dreams, immediately after he finally becomes capable of “bestowing animation upon lifeless matter” (Shelley, 1818, 80), and envisions himself emerging from darkness of uncertainty into the light of revelation; “I was like the Arabian who had been buried with the dead, and found a passage to life aided by only one glimmering, and seemingly ineffectual, light” (Shelley, 1818, 80). In short, Frankenstein visualizes himself via a literary trope as a man who has been buried alive. The fact that at least some of the “materials” from which he will later shape the monster may have come from human corpses which,
according to popular anxieties, may have suffered similar premature-burial-related torments, is worthy of consideration in this way; Frankenstein imagines himself to be comprised of the very “raw materials” from which his monster would be created.

The rise of cremation

One way to avoid the possibility of premature burial, which would also allow one to sidestep concerns about ending up as a corpse on a surgeon’s dissection table, involved the embrace of the burgeoning practice of cremation. Support had been building throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century for cremation as an alternative method of corpse-disposal, and slowly a movement took shape advocating the legalization of the practice and the official establishment of crematoria so that it may be done in an ethical and sanitary manner. An anonymous 1879 *All the Year Round* article entitled simply “Cremation” productively encapsulates the health concerns that would be alleviated by cremation. The “carbonic acid” released through the process of decomposition by dead bodies is thought “deleterious to the living by most medical men” and an estimated eighty thousand burials in England every year, causes “the liberation of four million cubic feet of carbonic acid gas” into the soil, water and air (Cremation 128); the author claims that as a result “[w]e are laying up poison for our children’s children, says [an unnamed] authority, ‘by accumulating dead bodies in churchyards and cemeteries’” (Cremation 128). Cremation allegedly eliminates this problem entirely. But while cremation still was not legally sanctioned, those who performed cremations were, for the most part, not prosecuted. Perhaps the most dramatic incident which propelled cremation into the public’s mind occurred in 1883, when self-proclaimed “Welsh Wizard” Dr. William
Price attempted to cremate the body of his five-month-old son, Jesu Grist Christ, on a hilltop ten miles from Cardiff; dressed in a Druidic white tunic, Price ignited the petrol-soaked corpse of his son, but was interrupted by horrified eyewitnesses who tried to salvage the corpse by pulling it from the barrel in which it was burning and extinguishing the flames that had partially cremated it (Arnold 240). The judge appointed to settle this matter in court, Mr Justice Stephen, was sympathetic to Price and declared that cremation was not illegal as long as it posed no danger to the public. The judge proclaimed that “the burning of a dead body is not unlawful, unless the process is conducted in such a manner as to amount to a nuisance at common law, or is resorted to for the purpose of preventing the coroner from holding an inquest” (Little 11). However, in spite of this precedent it was not until 1902 that Parliament issued the “Law of Cremation” and finally legalized cremation, acting in response to the longstanding concerns about the lack of burying space in and around London and fears about the poisonous miasmatic “carbonic acid” that decomposing bodies were thought to emit. Perhaps more importantly, this law also allocated resources for the building and maintenance of crematoria in England.

Nothing foul could befall a human body after it had been burnt to ashes and there would be absolutely no chance that a cremated body might return to life inside a coffin. The cremated body could not be interred alive, nor, for that matter, could it ever find itself splayed out on an anatomist’s dissecting table. However (and this was important for a culture that valued the spectacle of mourning as much as the Victorians did) the body was not entirely lost through cremation, as urns became exponentially more popular as the century progressed, as increased cremation rates provided more human remains to
be contained. The urn provided a tasteful artifact that, while it contained the mortal remains of a human body, did not physically remind the viewer of the morphology of the dead body. This would allow death to be contemplated without the accompaniment of the disturbing thought that a real moldering corpse was ultimately the object of contemplation.

But while it might be a useful apotropaic against premature burial and, to a lesser degree, resurrection men, the concept of cremation did not achieve a smooth, uncontroversial integration into English society, in spite of myriad efforts by cremation promotion societies and the undeniable fact that burial plots were in increasingly short supply. In fact, cremation created difficulty in a Christian culture which had accustomed itself to burying its dead, at least in part with the intention that the corpses would be well-prepared to rise on the Day of Judgment. Cremation, of course, destroyed the body, leaving no physical shell to participate in this sense of Resurrection. Yet the increasing shortages of burial spaces in London facilitated this method of disposing of the dead, as the overfilling of cemeteries produced horrible, unsanitary conditions, which have been discussed above. The loss of the physical body also had significance for a society which was virtually obsessed with the notion of crime and criminality. Specifically, the lack of a body meant that the corpse of a victim of poisoning would never be able to be tested for the presence of lethal substances and that, subsequently, poisoners would be able to get away with murder if the bodies of their victims were subject to cremation before they could be examined.
However, cremation had very eloquent advocates. For example, oft-published cremation proponent Isabella Holmes wrote, in 1896, about how this method might, and must, be adopted by a culture initially very resistant to it; “I fail to understand how any serious-minded person can harbour the idea that burning the body can be any stumbling block in the way of its resurrection, for the body returns ‘earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust’ whether the process takes fifty years or fifty minutes” (Arnold 226). W. Robinson, in his 1889 treatise “Cremation and Urn Burial, or, the Cemeteries of the Future,” his defense of the practice of cremation, taps into the notion of the corpse-as-spectacle as he offers a discussion of how much less viscerally disturbing the burning of a body is when compared to allowing it to decompose in a grave:

If people could see the human body after the process of decomposition sets in, which is as soon as the vital spark ceases to exist, they would not want to be buried; they would be in favour of cremation. If they could go into a dissecting-room and see the horrid sights of the dissecting-table, they would not wish to be buried. Burying the human body, I think, is a horrible thing. If more was known about the human frame while undergoing decomposition, people would turn with horror from the custom of burying their dead. (Robinson 45-6)

This dramatic language is analogous to the sort one might expect to find within the previous century’s wildly popular genre of Gothic horror, and the choice to place the reader in the imagined role of the rotting corpse may be read as a nineteenth-century rhetorical iteration of the *memento mori*. (It is not mentioned that the reader, as a corpse, would in actuality be quite insensible to all of the grotesqueries and indignities of decomposition, but the implication seems to be that these horrible processes would assail the living relatives left in the wake of the reader’s imagined death.) Notably, too, the reference to the dissecting-table, even decades after the horrors set astir by the discovery
Cremation made less of an impression in Victorian literature than it did in regard to the authors of that literature. Perhaps the most notable author-cremation was that of poet Percy Bysshe Shelley, whose waterlogged and heavily-decomposed body was recovered from the Ligurian Sea after his new boat, the *Don Juan*, sank on its maiden voyage and cremated on a beach near Vireggio in 1822.\(^\text{17}\) The cremation was necessary, as concerns about contagion had facilitated very strict quarantine laws in this region, and the only way to get Shelley’s body to its cemetery plot in Rome was to burn the body and transport the ashes. (This incident serves to remind us that cremation, if nothing else, transforms the human corpse into a more convenient and less cumbersome artifact.) Shelley’s colleague Edward Trelawny told and wrote many conflicting accounts of the cremation and his role in the ceremony, but the most dramatic involved how he noticed Shelley’s heart refused to burn along with the rest of his body, so he reached into the flames and pulled it out in order to preserve it. An interesting relationship is created with this account of the flame-resistant heart of the burning poet, in which a literary figure’s cremation seems to become constructed as itself comprising a very literary moment. According to this account, Shelley’s corpse, or at least a symbolically charged piece of it, becomes readable as a reflection, of the kind of art that he produced when he was alive. If we are to read this account as we would a literary text, we are confronted with the
interpretation that Shelley’s heart, ideally like his poetry, would not easily be erased from the earth by the mere death of his corporeal body.

Within literature, the concept of cremation is not explored, with the notable and dramatic exception of Frankenstein’s monster, who, in the novel’s closing moments, promises to Walton that “I shall ascend my funeral pile triumphantly, and exult in the agony of the torturing flames. The light of that conflagration will fade away; my ashes will be swept into the sea by the winds. My spirit will sleep in peace; or if it thinks, it will surely not think thus” (Shelley, 1818, 244; Shelley, 1831, 185). The monster’s notion of afterlife is interesting, and, shaped as it likely is by the reading and eavesdropping he had done into the Christian culture he inhabited, it nonetheless reflects a similar uncertainty to that of nineteenth-century culture in general. Specifically, the monster’s post-life state will either involve “sleeping in peace” or a state in which he will not be compelled to think as he had when he was alive. The method the monster chooses for his self-destruction is also worth mentioning in the sense of the notion of the afterlife that is pondered upon here. In short, it is impossible not to connect this seaside act of cremation with that of Percy Shelley, and the monster’s uncertainty as to what sort of afterlife awaits him also seems to mimic Percy Shelley’s agnostic-leaning thoughts.

However, Frankenstein’s monster’s case brings up the possibility that the immolation of the living may be interpreted as a sort of cremation, or at least what might happen, what “agony of the torturing flames,” in particular, may await those who are cremated before they are actually dead. It is not the hell-fire of the Christian afterlife here so much as the corporeal fire of the empirical world. Though specific anxieties
concerning live-cremation do not seem as apparent as do narratives detailing contemporary fears about live burial, it may be productive to examine the nineteenth century’s concern with the possibility that human spontaneous combustion might be interpreted as an extension of that worry.

**Spontaneous human combustion**

The anxiety generated by the notion of the destruction of the human body by fire was made evident through the presence of accounts, both in the literary record and in the media, of spontaneous human combustion. In these instances, though, the human body was suddenly and mysteriously immolated by fire, whose source was difficult if not impossible to determine, and burned to cinders, frequently and bafflingly leaving its immediate surroundings unscathed. Perhaps, when read through its presentation in *Bleak House* at least, spontaneous human combustion may be understood as a possible cremation-equivalent of the fear of being buried alive, as, in both instances, a human body is treated as dead (as we will see below, human incineration victim-to-be Krook is presented as a walking corpse), and either buried or burned, before its life is actually extinguished. The body in both cases is considered to be a corpse even though it is not one.

Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* brings the issue of human spontaneous combustion to the forefront of his day’s literary discourse by describing how a character, the already corpse-like rag-and-bone merchant Krook, succumbs to the phenomenon and burns to death without doing an excessive amount of damage to his immediate, extremely cluttered surroundings. For a character to succumb to what is essentially the process of
cremation while still alive may mark the presence of an anxiety in regard to this method of body-disposal; it is as horrible to be burned to death as it is to be buried alive, perhaps. The scene is difficult to read definitively, as it takes place away from the narrator’s eye so we as readers do not get to experience it in detail as it transpires. Instead, Krook’s bizarre fate is pieced together through the discoveries made by Mr. Weevle and Mr. Guppy. Krook’s remains have been dispersed throughout the house and perhaps even out into the neighborhood outside, and these characters encounter his organic detritus long before they discover what is left of his corpse. Guppy wonders, for example, if a chimney in the area is on fire, while the fire he smells is, of course, the one combusting of Krook’s body. The two observe a “hateful soot” (Dickens, 1852, 444) falling indoors, accompanied by a “black fat” (Dickens, 1852, 442) that is, again, obviously a portion of the melted remains of Krook. (It is perhaps productive to note that Krook’s remains have in this way contributed themselves to the allegedly harmful atmosphere of “miasma” that was believed to infest the city of London and carry disease to its inhabitants, among other unsavory attributes.) Weevle notices a “thick yellow liquor” defiling the fingers he has rested on his windowsill, “which is offensive to the touch and sight, and more offensive to the smell” (Dickens, 1852, 445). The presence of these disturbing substances increasingly trouble and repulse the two men, and it is eventually Weevle, who had set an appointment to meet with Krook at midnight, who discovers the scene of the combustion. His first description of the scene he encounters sounds like a clean, successful cremation; “the burning smell is there - and the soot is there, and the oil is there - and he is not there!” (Dickens, 1852, 446). The body, as it would be if it were conventionally
cremated, is gone and no longer presents any corporeal difficulties in terms of its
disposal; what is left, a smell, soot and oil, comprise the expected by-products of
cremation, too. Ultimately, Krook’s remains are scarcely recognizable as comprising a
human body, as the narrating voice immerses the reader in the storyworld at this moment,
casting the reader as a character accompanying the horrible discovery and asking “here is
- is it the cinder of a small charred and broken leg of wood sprinkled with white ashes, or
is it coal? O Horror, he is here! and this, from which we run away, striking out the light
and turning one another into the street, is all that represents him” (Dickens, 1852, 448).
The narrating voice concludes by offering the sort of moralizing rationale that typified
much older, Gothic-tinted responses to the phenomenon of spontaneous human
combustion, namely, that the victim’s immoral habits and behavior were such that she or
he deserved this appropriate fate:

    Call the death by any name you will, attribute it to whom you will, or say that it
    might have been prevented how you will, it is the same death eternally - inborn,
inbred, engendered in the corrupted humours of the vicious body itself, and that
only - Spontaneous Combustion, and none other of all the deaths that can be died.
    (Dickens, 1852, 448)

In other words, the blaze originates from materials within the human body itself, and
these materials have festered there as a result of the moral failings (with Krook,
drunkenness and greed stand out as possible ingredients in this lethal recipe) of the
person who combusts. This invitation for the reader to consider a worldview that had
largely vanished by the nineteenth century, a world in which a person’s corruption may
result in a supernatural, symbolically-appropriate death, is not simply an aberrant
moment in the speaker’s voice here at the end of the chapter, but rather reflects a
tendency throughout the entire chapter to filter its material through the heuristic provided by an older world, one more steeped in superstitious thought and interpretation. This chapter, more than any other in the novel, acknowledges the inextricable place of folkloric thought in Victorian society.

Indeed, though most of the literary critics who discuss this novel comment on this chapter, none of them seem to have noticed that the entire storyworld of *Bleak House* essentially shifts into the space of eighteenth-century Gothic horror for the duration of this chapter, then, at its conclusion, returns to its more conventional narrative atmosphere.20 At the chapter’s beginning, the narrator notes, for example, that the “damp cold” of the night feels as though it is “searching,” and that the night may ultimately “give the Registrar of Deaths some extra business” (Dickens, 1852, 436). The characters to whom the narrator devotes the most focus, Mr. Guppy, Mr. Weevle and Mr. Snagsby, are troubled, the first two partially by the small scam they are plotting but even more, seemingly, in regard to the feeling the night instills in them; Weevle feels ill-at-ease, possibly as a result of “something in the air” (Dickens, 1852, 436), Snagsby finds that “[i]t is a tainting sort of weather [. . .] and I find it sinking to the spirits,” and Weevle agrees that “it gives me the horrors” (Dickens, 1852, 437). One of the components of the eighteenth-century Gothic was that the weather, when violent, unpleasant or otherwise disturbing, was a ubiquitous backdrop which announced the immediate onset of something terrible or horrifying. And of course, here, this is exactly what the weather does. Snagsby notes that the night air carries with a “greasy” flavor, which prefigures the greasy leakings that the two later discover Krook’s entire body has been reduced to; he
adds that a bad smell is in the air, which resembles the burning of meat that was not fresh (Dickens, 1852, 437). This, again, would seem to describe the olfactory sensation which may have been stirred up by the immolation of Krook’s not-too-fresh, withered, skeletal body. Even Snagsby’s nervous observation about his perception of the clock-time is significant, as, in claiming that “according to my count - it’s ten times ten - it’s a hundred o’clock” (Dickens, 1852, 439), he seems to set the occurrences of this chapter within an impossible time, which places it well outside of the more realistic context that the rest of the novel provides. The title of the chapter, “The Appointed Time,” perhaps also points indirectly toward the importance of how this “hundred o’clock” comment moves the events contained within it outside of a normal sense of time, and into a space, as is the Gothic, in which supernatural occurrences such as human spontaneous combustion may be expected to happen.  

When Weevle and Guppy move indoors to discuss their plot, the latter notices the odd shape of a burning candle; “there’s a blessed looking candle! [he observes], pointing to the heavily-burning taper on his table with a great cabbage-head and a long winding-sheet,” which his friend tells him has been burning in that unusual shape ever since it was lighted (Dickens, 1852, 439). The Gothic tradition frequently employed the shrouded ghost in a winding-sheet as a reminder of imminent death, and it seems to serve the same function here. The Gothic aura is enhanced further by the men’s conversation, as Weevle describes his room as “suicidal” and Krook as the “old Boguey,” as he is all the while staring into the fire in his own fireplace (Dickens, 1852, 439-440), his gaze fixated unknowingly by the element that has already consumed the Boguey’s old body. The
men’s nervousness in regard to the conspiracy they are hatching creates a sense of paranoia that infuses the atmosphere with a fear of ghosts; “[s]o sensitive the two friends happen to be, that the air is full of these phantoms; and the two look over their shoulders by one consent, to see that the door is shut” (Dickens, 1852, 444). Furthermore, Snagsby notes that the last time he saw Krook the old man was singing “the only song he knows,” which was an early eighteenth-century ballad about a drunkard, Bibo, who awakens on Charon’s boat on the river Styx and argues that he cannot truly be dead until Charon convinces him that he was probably too drunk to remember dying (Dickens, 1852, notes, 881). This song seems to provide a self-eulogy for Krook, who is “continual in liquor” (Dickens, 1852, 435) and has likely died drunk, and, in fact, may be burning at the very moment Snagsby, who is again occupied by his own fire, describes this recollection. Quickly, the two men notice, without realizing its import, evidence that human spontaneous combustion has taken place in their immediate proximity. Black soot was observed, as were “nauseous pools” of “a stagnant, sickening oil, with smoke natural repulsion in it that makes both of them shudder” (Dickens, 1852, 445), which, in addition to comprising some of Krook’s body, also reminds the reader of the spirituous substance he so enjoyed (and which may have led to his combustion). Moreover, the men’s “shuddering” reaction and feeling of repulsion mirror responses seen in Gothic horror that confront characters who come into contact with human corpses. The fear and disgust build in the two men until Guppy declares it to be “a horrible house,” disturbing him to such a Gothic degree that he demands water, “or I shall cut my hand off” (Dickens, 1852, 446). Finally, it must be noted that the discovery of Krook’s burned body is made by a
pair of men who are described as “more dead than alive,” making them supernatural entities themselves, perhaps, and that finding the remains of the corpse is immediately preceded by an encounter with his terrified black cat, an ever-present Gothic trope, who they suspect of being mad due to being trapped in this “evil place” (Dickens, 1852, 448).

It is important to realize that these hints of the earlier Gothic literary tradition do not necessarily insinuate that human spontaneous combustion is to be read here as an old, laughable superstition, as archaic as the environment which appears to frame its occurrence. The phenomenon of human spontaneous combustion was not necessarily considered to be a universally exploded superstitious belief in Dickens’s time, though it was controversial enough for Dickens (who never pretended that the novel was anything other than a work of fiction) to feel compelled, after the serialized version of Bleak House had been published, to enter a public debate in letter form with the skeptical George Henry Lewes in which he argued for the plausibility of spontaneous human combustion and called for more study to be made in regard to it. Lewes felt that Dickens’s popularity made his erroneous presentation of an exploded phenomenon dangerous; “[w]hat you write is read wherever English is read. This magnificent popularity carries with it a serious responsibility. A vulgar error countenanced by you becomes, thereby, formidable,” he claims (Lewes, in Haight 55). Dickens managed to get in the last word, so to speak, in this specific debate in the preface to the novel, in which he referred to the letters he and Lewes had exchanged, but conceded no ground to his opponent. Rather, he refutes Lewes’ claim that scientific discourse had determined that human spontaneous combustion “could not possibly be” and notes that “I have no need to observe that I do
not wilfully or negligently mislead my readers, and that before I wrote that description I took pains to investigate the subject” (Dickens, 1852, xxxvi). He continues to detail several thoroughly-documented eighteenth-century cases of spontaneous human combustion. The details of the first of these, that involving the Countess de Baudi Cesenate in 1731 in Verona, he claims to have borrowed very specifically in order to describe the post-combustion scene in Krook’s room. It was in this era widely believed that excessive alcohol consumption rendered a person potentially spontaneously flammable, and this diagnosis accompanied most of the examples Dickens provides. (Alcohol was thought to activate the process, either by creating a volatile flammable mixture within the victim’s body or, perhaps more plausibly, by intoxicating the victim to such a degree that accidents involving fire would be much more likely.) Dickens’s preface of course did not end the debate. At least one contemporary review of *Bleak House*, George Brimley’s, felt the need to mention not only the spontaneous human combustion incident, but also the ambiguity with which its legitimacy was viewed at the time, claiming that “however Nature and Mr. Lewes may deride the pride of the intellect, the resources of the Adelphi will unquestionably prove possible” (Brimley 551). In other words, Nature and the academy are skeptics in regard to this phenomenon, but occurrences have been recorded.

The academy did not provide consensus on this matter, though. Early twentieth-century researcher C.D. Josephson claimed to find only one occurrence on human spontaneous combustion recorded in medical literature after 1848, in 1870 (Perkins 60), and argued that this was the result of the scientific consensus as to its exclusion as a
viable explanation for cause-of-death. However, The British Medical Journal in 1870 found that, when analyzed, “the weight of authority is in favour of spontaneous ignition, or, at least, of increasing combustibility,” which it considers under the terminological umbrella of “empresmus” (“Spontaneous” 294). Specifically, the process is considered possible under the following theories:

[o]ne of the most prevalent theories regarding spontaneous combustion has been that hydrogen or other gases were present in the connective tissue and cavities of the body, and that these gases could be ignited by the electrical condition of the body. The other opinion held has been, that alcohol was present in the blood and tissues to such an extent as to be combustible. (“Spontaneous” 294)

Scientific discourse, in other words, had created a space of plausibility for the existence of spontaneous human combustion, even if a consensus was not necessarily held. In fact, though these were not mentioned directly by Dickens, specific occurrences of this bizarre phenomenon were reported throughout England in the nineteenth century, in close proximity, though not directly connected, to the publication of the novel. Most of the victims were characterized as drunken, older women with heavier frames, attributes which, oddly, match Krook only in drinking habits and age. Specifically, the year that Bleak House began to be serialized (1852) a case was reported, from Dunaway Forest, concerning a farmer, John Anderson, who burst into flame and burned to death after stumbling while carrying firewood; the victim was reported to be habitually intoxicated and a lighted pipe was found underneath his corpse, so rational explanations were available, but the case did involve the spontaneous combustion of a human body (Randles and Hough 194-5). Fourteen years later, too, in a case more instructive as it was related more directly to the notion of the disposal of the deceased
human body, the corpse of a typhoid victim erupted into flame, in its coffin, thirteen months after it had been buried in its vault. Again, the cause was not necessarily read as having a supernatural origin, as a discarded taper left behind after a worker lit a cigarette was thought to be responsible (Randles and Hough 195). It is instructive that these incidents involved bodies which had already received the rituals of Christian burial, yet whose remains were “claimed,” so to speak, by fire, the vehicle of the process of cremation.

The immolation of the human body by fire, whether through cremation or combustion, effectively removes the corpse from the world, or at least renders its physical shape unrecognizable by metamorphosing it into ash. This process activates the Christian mantra of “ashes to ashes, and dust to dust,” which is meant to remind believers that death awaits us all and that we are all destined, at least in bodily form, to return to the ashes and dust from which we have come. Burial removes the ashes as a literal symbol of this process, while burning offers an empirically verifiable representation of this concept. Impressions may be found in the literary record, even as late as the fin de siècle, to indicate that both burial and cremation remained troublesome thoughts. Specifically, the narrator of Ernest G. Henham’s Tenebrae (1898), while obsessing over dark thoughts after awakening from a dream in which he was killed and eaten by a giant spider, finds himself drawn to a passage in a book that sits open on his lap, and which encapsulates the fear that bodily death does not necessarily comprise the total separation of the soul from the body:
It were idle to imagine that the act of dissolution concludes physical suffering. Matter, being in its essence indestructible, is subsequently subject to pain as much after the severance from soul as before. So the body cremated endures all the anguish of a torturing death by drowning. The body interred within the dark recess of some earth tomb is compelled to undergo the fearful pangs of a gradual stifling, followed by a still tardier process of decomposition. (Henham 39)

In other words, neither method of disposing of the human corpse was preferable if, since matter is indestructible, the body retains the ability to feel pain postmortem, as this unnamed author suggests. Notwithstanding the fallacious logic here, the idea is an important one for Victorian culture, as it employs (though badly) notions of science to complicate and render more horrible what death means.

Conclusion

To this point the human corpse has been examined as it pertains to what nineteenth-century British culture thought about death. Literary voices and ephemeral-cultural developments have both contributed significant evidence to support the claim that folkloric beliefs, far from being pushed out of circulation in the wake of advancing theories and practice of science, actually flourished within this turbulent milieu. Whether at the point of death or immediately after, or as a carcass needing to be removed from the presence of the living, the human corpse in the nineteenth century was an unquiet entity. It was marked by the kinds of “superstitions” which many Victorian mainstream thinkers wished could be buried alongside the corpse they adhered to, but they refused to vanish. In fact, these beliefs could be found intertwined with literary and ephemeral cultural interpretations of the burgeoning scientific practice of human dissection, and the vile resurrection trade in human cadavers that it spawned. We will now see how the human
body continued to be embodied by folkloric thoughts and folklore-infused anxieties even as it lay, literally, in the heart of emerging scientific development: on the table of the anatomist.
CHAPTER TWO: HUMAN DISSECTION AND THE RESURRECTION TRADE

The medical gaze turns onto the human corpse:

For nineteenth-century culture the human corpse was more than an emptied vehicle. Emerging scientific and medical developments added a new horror to the notion of death. Specifically, part of the newly-developing Victorian anxieties about death were expressed in the culture’s treatments, in literature, of the postmortem human body as a potential source of scientific and medical knowledge, which had been inherited from earlier in the century. As early, in fact, as the middle of the eighteenth century, the human corpse was thought of as not simply organic detritus to be disposed of but rather a “thing” to be dissected, an “object,” or a “subject” for study. All of these euphemistic terms were actively deployed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, seemingly as means of generating rhetorical distance from the reality that it was the human body that was being dissected. And such a procedure, this cutting open, flaying, disemboweling, and dismembering of a human body intended, as claimed by the anatomists and student within the medical schools which practiced it, to discover the secrets of the human body and improve the quality of human life. Over the course of the nineteenth century in England and Scotland, the “subjects” for this postmortem operation shifted from the corpse of the executed criminal to the corpse of the impoverished, but the use of bodies from each of these troublesome categories for this purpose created
tensions for the culture as a whole. Furthermore, as the century progressed, increasing

demands for bodies to dissect were not met by the limited legally obtainable “objects,”
especially in Edinburgh and London. This paucity of available corpses created a situation

in which fresh graves were routinely robbed for dissectable corpses. Quickly the

anatomists and medical students responsible for this body snatching, and later those who

were hired to procure corpses for them in this manner, were demonized by the populace

as body-stealing ghouls. The association between medical practice and disturbing acts of

body-snatching were not easily dispelled, as literature across the nineteenth century, both

canonical and extra-canonical, saw the dissector and the grave robber as inextricably

amoral, and outright ghoulish, kin.

Anatomists themselves tried to emphasize the importance of the dissection

process as a means to enhance understanding of the workings of the human body, and

specifically to improve medical knowledge in response to injury and disease. London

surgeon John Abernethy, during a 1829 lecture to his students at London Hospital, for

example, claimed that “[t]here is but one way to obtain knowledge . . . we must be

companions with the dead” (MacDonald 9). While for millennia English cultural practice

had enforced boundaries to separate the dead from the living, scientific voices in the

nineteenth century were advocating the opposite approach in the belief that only by

immersing themselves in the dead, or making themselves “companions” with them, might

conditions be improved for the living. Similarly, London-based surgeon Sir Astley

Cooper, whose ethics eventually came into question as his methods for acquiring human

bodies to dissect were not always legal, explained in 1816 that:
by examining Dead bodies, we become acquainted with the changes produced by Disease, with its nature whether curable, or incurable; if it be of the former description we are enabled to form an opinion respecting its best mode of treatment, and if of the latter, we avoid giving unnecessary torture to future Patients with the same disease. (MacDonald 10)

However, for the majority of the general public in the nineteenth century, the act of exhuming a buried human body, and thus disturbing its sense of “eternal rest,” is a disturbing thought in itself, even in the absence of fears that the unburied body is destined for dissection. In the Christian sense, the grave was to contain the body until the moment of Resurrection, when all human corpses would arise, literally or figuratively, to receive their eternal Judgment; a body removed from its grave before the Resurrection might be removed from consideration when the moment of final Judgment arrived. The belief in this kind of corpse-central Judgment, though, was not universally accepted, and a variety of factors had created a cultural splintering even among Christians in regard to how literally this event was to be interpreted. If it could be read figuratively, of course, the physical condition of the human corpse became much less important.

Nineteenth-century literature frequently placed concerns over the condition of the buried dead, and their presence or non-presence in the graves that marked them, in this society that still (though sometimes tenuously) believed in an actual Resurrection, into the mouths of superstitious, country-dwelling characters, often hinting at the antiquated nature of their thoughts by filtering them through heavy walls of dialect. Especially present in the folk traditions reproduced within the literature of the fin de siècle, many of these characters seemed to become receptacles for the beliefs that had been culturally marginalized but could never be entirely discarded. For example, the elderly Mr. Swales,
who befriends Lucy Westenra and Mina Harker early in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and regales them with gloomy stories about the Gothic landscape of Whitby, comments extensively on the lies he sees etched on local tombstones (Stoker 90-1). Many of these mark the empty graves commemorating those lost at sea, and at least one of them contains elevating words of mourning from a mother to a son who, in life, she had actually hated. Instructively, though, Swales provides a vivid, if comical, image of the literalized Resurrection, in which the resurrected corpses will attempt to use the testimonials on their tombstones to testify to their worthiness:

> [m]y gog, but it’ll be a quare scowderment [commotion] at the Day of Judgment, when they come tumblin’ up here [from their watery sea-graves] in their deathsarks, all jouped together an tryin’ to drag their tombsteans [tombstones] with them to prove how good they was; some of them trimmlin; and ditherin’, with their hands that dozzened an’ slippy from lyin’ in the sea that they can’t even keep their grup o’ them.” (Stoker 88-9)

The speaker’s rampant colloquialisms and heavy dialect mark this speech, so different from the proper English spoken and written by all the characters expect Van Helsing, as something that is external to the philosophy of the rest of the novel. Shifting God to “gog,” it implies a clear misreading of Christian belief. Beyond this, its entire delivery is peripheral, stained throughout by non-standard English patterns, into virtual incoherence in spots; by association, this amusing notion of a very literalized Judgment, in which the conditions and placement of the corpses is of crucial importance, as are the words written on these corpses’ gravestones, becomes pushed to the edge of the culture’s boundaries, into the distant rural spaces where archaic superstition was still encouraged to flourish. Even though its delivery is likely meant to be tongue-in-cheek, this dialect, in all of its
improper English, helps us to understand what, at least in Stoker’s storyworld, 
superstitious beliefs in the Day of Judgment and the role of the human corpse in this 
event would *sound* like.

Other problems, less religiously-tinted and more culturally-infused, existed for 
exhumed bodies in nineteenth-century England. The textual markings on a grave, and 
even the grave itself, are supposed to mark the spot where the body to which it is 
dedicated is buried and if it does not in fact do so, it upsets the authenticity of mourning 
practices for the bereaved, if nothing else. Most religious and secular thinking at this 
time agreed that the soul, or, areligiously, the crucial “essence” of human life, vacates the 
body after death (though the exact time it did this, in regard to the apparent “moment of 
death,” was open to rigorous debate), leaving the body an empty vessel. To inter this 
vessel underground in a grave provided, for the survivors of the deceased, a physical 
location on which rituals of mourning could be focused. The practice of grave-robbing 
created a sort of double-death, a situation in which the grave might be vacated of the 
body as the soul had vacated the body when the person to which it belonged had died. In 
these cases, mourners stationed over an empty grave literally mourned over nothing.

Literary culture considered this possibility of mourning in the unknowing absence 
of the object being mourned. Whereas the notion of the empty tomb activates a 
comparison to the empty tomb of Christ, literary voices tended to demystify this 
possibility by focusing on the physical, gruesome implications of the tomb without a 
body in it. For example, Thomas Hood’s largely-forgotten 1826 poem “Mary’s Ghost” 
(which will be discussed below in some detail) points toward the difficulties involved in
the process of mourning over a grave the mourner does not know is empty. But this was
in no way simply a nineteenth-century fear. In fact, evidence in the literary record
pointing toward this concern appear, perhaps most visibly, in the 1616 epitaph on
William Shakespeare’s grave site in Stratford-upon-Avon; “Good frend,” the well-known
epitaph warns readers, “for Iesus sake forebeare / To digge the dust encloased heare. / 
Bleste be ye man [that] spares these stones, / And curste be he [that] moves my bones”
(Richardson 80). So, even if grave robbery was not being practiced at the same rate as in
the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, these lines, if read literally, would seem to
indicate that it was also a concern that existed in Shakespeare’s culture. And it should be
mentioned here that the fear of grave-robbing could certainly flourish even if actual
grave-robbing was not being practiced; many of the anxieties in Victorian society, for
example, were based more on the fear of something horrible happening, fueled by a
hyperbolic and sensational popular press, than the actuality of that thing happening.23
Increasing literacy rates stimulated the Victorian popular press, which, understanding
how voraciously these new readers devoured gruesome and terrifying tales, filled their
pages with horrible, graphically-illustrated accounts of crimes and accidents, including
cases of premature burial. These stories were tailored toward the Victorian interest in
such fare and, as competition between newspapers increased, were frequently recycled
from earlier editions or outright fabricated in order to outperform stories provided by
competitors.

But the removal of corpses from graves either by anatomists or body-snatchers
was only the first step in the indignities the corpse was to suffer. The procedure of
human dissection itself encountered a predictable amount of resistance from those outside and inside of scientific culture, as centuries of folklore, within and preceding the influence of Christian doctrine, prescribed very specific roles through which the body of the human being was to be honored and disposed of in particular ritual fashions. Perhaps more universally repugnant was the idea not so much of oneself being dissected but instead of a loved one ending up on the anatomist’s table, destined for a gruesome procedure that left little, if anything, to bury respectfully. The fragmentary organic detritus left after a dissection was barely recognizable as human, and was not treated with even a modicum of decorum. In regard to the “funerals” granted the dissected bodies of the insane poor at St. Bartholomew, for example:

the human remains [from several dissections] were tied together, wrapped in a woollen shroud, then covered in lime, and buried in a pauper pit, without a coffin. In reality, there was little left to inter after the brain, skin, skeleton, limbs, organs, tissue and torso had been cut with the lancet into dismembered body-parts and museum specimens. (Hurren 68)

These types of “burial” practices were discovered and made public in such places as Aberdeen, where, in January of 1832 a dog digging outside the grounds of a new anatomy school uncovered a collection of carelessly discarded fragments of human bodies; the ensuing community rage resulted in the anatomy school being burned to the ground (Richardson 90-1).

It is fair to say that a profound horror existed among the populace in regard to the possibility of ending one’s life as material for the anatomist, and no attempts to ameliorate this fear by removing its inextricable cultural connections with criminality and poverty proved effective. In his will Jeremy Bentham provided his own body for
dissection, hoping to set an example for others that such a postmortem fate did not carry with it any shame or horror. Few anatomists followed his lead, however. Royal College surgeon Sir Robert Peel spoke publicly of his anxiety in regard to leaving his body for dissection (Richardson 151), Sir Astley Cooper demonstrated his probable fear of dissection by commissioning a massive, impenetrable stone sarcophagus to contain his own corpse (Richardson 117) and, in response to such behaviors, in a 1829 open letter to the Home Secretary anatomist G.J. Guthrie challenged his colleagues that:

if a medical man maintains the opinion that dissection is an unobjectionable process which people ought to submit the dead bodies of their friends to for the sake of science and he benefit of the living, I in my turn maintain, that they are bound to set the example. (Richardson 145)

His fellow anatomists did not respond to this charge. Further complicating this notion was the fact that many of the better known anatomists in this era, while touting the myriad benefits of dissection, steadfastly refused to allow their own bodies to be considered for the procedure. In many cases anatomists, such as Robert Knox, had massive tombs constructed for themselves, and it seemed to many of the poor that these were designed exclusively to keep grave-robbers out and thus to protect their deceased inhabitants from being subjected to the very practice of dissection that they, in life, claimed carried no stigma. Technological advances which addressed the fear of becoming material for the dissector began to become popular, further indicating the depth to which this fear had sunk into the culture. As early as 1818, for example, customized “Patent Coffins” were available which had been designed exclusively to frustrate the attempts of grave-robbers to gain access to the corpses inside (Richardson 81).24
As a result of these increasing tensions, and in order for human dissection to be an effective procedure for those involved with it, a sense of “clinical detachment,” according to researcher Ruth Richardson in her seminal work *Death, Dissection and the Destitute*, needed to be maintained between the anatomist and the corpse upon which he would operate. Accordingly, strong efforts were made within scientific discourse to divest the dissected, or to-be dissected, human corpse from the identity it had when it was alive, and many of these efforts were visible in the choice of words used to describe the procedure.
and its materials. For example, James May, one of three London men on trial for murdering a “subject” to sell for dissection in 1831, moved further than calling them “subjects” and labeled the corpses with which he did traffic as “Things” (Wise 217). Literary works adopted this tendency, too. For example, the speaker in Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Body Snatcher” (1884), himself a body snatcher, erases any connection between the “subjects” he discusses and the human lives and identities they once lived by commodifying them into the category of “sad merchandise” (Stevenson 167). This avoidance, an attempt to employ euphemism in order to distance the speaker and listener from the thought of these bodies being considered the mortal remains of human beings, is paralleled in literature by Victor Frankenstein. He scours charnel houses, dissecting rooms and even slaughterhouses for human corpses, and parts of them, to experiment upon and learn the secrets of life and death:

Darkness had no effect upon my fancy; and a church-yard was to me merely the receptacle of bodies deprived of life, which, from being the seat of beauty and strength, had become food for the worm. Now I was led to examine the cause and progress of this decay, and forced to spend days and nights in vaults and charnel houses. My attention was fixed upon every object the most insupportable to the delicacy of human feelings. I saw how the fine form of man was degraded and wasted; I beheld the corruption of death succeed to the blooming cheek of life; I saw how the worm inherited the wonder of the eye and brain. (Shelley, 1818, 79)

His view of human corpse is governed by his profession and his obsession within that. He never addresses these as anything more specific, or attributable to once-living individuals, than as “my materials” (Shelley, 1818, 82; Shelley, 1831, 52). In this he shares with many resurrection men and human dissectors the tendency to erase any thoughts of the extinguished uniqueness of the human beings whose corpses they

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manhandle. Furthermore, as they are described as “my” materials, Frankenstein removes any sense of ownership from those to whom the bodies or their parts belonged and claims them for himself; these dead bodies now belong to science, or more specifically to him. Any thoughts about the human beings whose spirits once animated these materials are consigned to oblivion.

The encoding of the human corpse, increasingly enshrouded in rhetorical darkness as a “Thing” to be studied for anatomists and medical students, hinted how, over the course of the nineteenth century, the corpse as an object of learning became treated and discussed as a commodity. Rumors abounded in the early nineteenth century, for example, that medical students could pay for their tuition entirely by supplying corpses to the schools they wished to attend (Richardson 54). Even if the evidence to support this widespread claim is lacking, the presence of the rumors confirmed the presence of an awareness within the culture that the human body had a value. In short, the dead human body was thought so much a commodity that it was often considered actual currency within the anatomist’s professional space.

But the association of these body-dealing anatomists with unpleasant cultural attachments was already extant by this point, and had in fact been heightened by a 1752 Act of Parliament, designed for “better Preventing the horrid Crime of Murder” (Marshall 21). This Act gave the Bench the prerogative to decide whether an executed criminal should be publicly dissected instead of being gibbeted. The corpse of the executed felon became a symbol of terror for the gaze of prospective future criminals, and its grisly public dissection was intended to provide “for some further terror and particular Mark of
Infamy [to] be added to the Punishment of Death” (Montillo 82). (Surgeons at this time do not seem to offer any argument regarding this implication that dissection was for the dissected a form of posthumous punishment.) As a result, the public (the societal body from which these dissected felons originated) came to associate this severe punishment for the most horrific crimes with the surgeons who anatomized these dead criminals, and it was such an entrenched association that it took most of the nineteenth century to dislodge it (Marshall 21). The anatomist was inextricably intertwined by the grotesque act of human dissection with the issue of criminality, because it was only the criminal’s, and specifically the worst of the worst criminal’s, body that was available to him. The deathlike taint that connected the dissector to the condemned was not fixated only on the dissector, but operated as well upon the executioner (Foucault 53). The executioner’s attachment to the condemned criminal’s body highlighted its nature as a commodity, since tremendous cultural cache and virtual celebrity object-status were passed onto the dead criminal’s clothes, blood, hair, body parts and even the rope used to hang him or her. All of these were considered the possessions of the executioner to display or distribute as he liked. Frequently, he exhibited or sold these artifacts for considerable sums. So the association with the death of criminals did indeed taint the executioner, but it was in many ways a very lucrative taint.
But what was the actual, visceral fate of the human corpse condemned to be dissected, or more importantly, what did the culture of the nineteenth century believe these dissections looked like? “The Reward of Cruelty” (1751, above), by William Hogarth, provides a compelling visual interpretation of the cultural attitudes that concerned human dissection in the eighteenth century, and in the first decades of the nineteenth century. This illustration, the final print in “The Four Stages of Cruelty” series, depicts the dissection of cruel lifelong criminal Tom Nero, whose descent into
criminality and execution is documented in the earlier prints of the series. Nero, shown being dissected, is visually marked as a criminal with the noose around his neck, and the process of dissection is made unblinkingly grotesque. The corpse’s mouth hangs open in a silent, dead scream as a dissector digs a blade into one of his eye sockets, another dissector dangles a phallic-looking blade directly above the dead man’s genitals, and a long trail of intestine hangs out of the body, being pulled by a dissector’s assistant into a bucket of viscera and visually directing the viewer’s gaze to a dog which is eating the dead man’s discarded heart. Nero’s dead finger points the viewer’s attention to a cauldron full of burning human skulls and leg-bones at the forefront of the print, intimating, perhaps, a reference to cannibalism and subsequently presenting a gesture toward the barbaric, or un-Christian, nature of the entire procedure. In the background, a worried-looking young man, likely a conscientious medical student, looks out of the frame of the print to make eye contact with the viewer, while pointing meaningfully to a anatomized display skeleton, which, itself, points to another skeleton propped up on the opposite side of the print, pointing back at the first skeleton. Cyclicality is indicated here, as well, by the suggestion that Nero’s bones are destined to take the place of the skeletized criminal the young man points toward (Shesgreen plate 80). Maybe this is a warning to the viewer that the ultimate “reward” for “cruelty” is to end up here, as a stripped-down, labeled criminal’s skeleton hanging from a wall in a surgeon’s hall. The implication seems to be that cruel behavior in life begets cruel treatment in death.
Dissection via the gaze

Dissection did not necessarily only involve the pulling apart of the dead body, though. Specifically, the dissection that awaited the condemned murderer described and illustrated above was perhaps only the literal deployment of the more figurative dissection that took place. This form of dissection is especially visible in regard to female victims of the gallows. Maria Manning, for example, who was hanged along with her husband for the murder of her lover in 1849, was scrutinized in the press to a degree that seemed like a dissection. Manning’s appearance in court was detailed by meticulously, in terms of her physiognomy, and begins to sound like a dissector’s report. The Herald, for example, described her physiognomy at her first appearance in court as belonging to “a woman about five feet seven in height, rather stout made, and rather good-looking, but not by any means what might be termed a handsome woman” (Knelman 254) and the Globe inventoried her wardrobe, painstakingly recording such details as the cap she wore, adorned “with an extraordinary profusion of lappets [ribbons], fastened tightly under the chin, the extremities of which were richly laced and frilled, hanging down to the waist” (Knelman 255). In contrast, nothing was noted of either the appearance or clothing of her husband, who was being tried at the same time (Knelman 255). This emphasis perhaps intended to reinforce a traditional sense of femininity upon these female murderers, whose alleged violent and therefore “manly” actions moved them well outside of Victorian understanding of what was acceptably feminine. The body of the female murderer did not need to be directly accessible to the dissector’s gaze either as interpretations could be derived through consultations of images
of the body. For example, the phrenological validation of criminality for Elizabeth Berry, a nurse executed in 1887 for allegedly poisoning her eleven-year-old daughter, was diagnosed by a medical professional who studied a photograph of Berry and saw in her skull significant evidence of “amativeness” but very little “conjugalitv” (Knelman 255). This combination of features helped to rationalize the reasons for Berry’s actions by aligning criminality and sexuality. According to Judith Knelman, “science” such as phrenology could be used in these situations to link female guilt and female sexuality, as they had been since the story of Eve tempting Adam with the Forbidden Fruit (Knelman 255).

The physical act of executing the murderer, especially the female murderer, as it publically transformed a living human being into a corpse, was performed, at least in part, in order to remind observers of the ultimate consequences of criminal behavior. It could, however, easily take on more puerile connotations, and even be read as a sexual act, or, more specifically, as an act of “judicial rape” (Knelman 267). These executions did not fail to attract the attention of contributors to literary culture, and influenced them enough that, even if they were not directly recreated in fiction, they were considered at least worthy of being written about. For example, Thomas Hardy, recalling in a letter how he witnessed the execution of Maria Manning when he was sixteen years old, deployed highly sexualized language to describe the action that transformed Manning into a corpse; “what a fine figure she showed up against the sky as she hung in the misty rain, [and] how the tight black silk gown set off her shape as she wheeled half round [and] back” (Knelman 267). This woman’s death-as-spectacle becomes a window of
sorts through which artistic sentiment may be generated; she continues to “live” after
death, then, as a fetishized artistic object, re-animated by Hardy.

But the human corpse was of course not only valuable in the figurative sense, as a
cautionsary warning for potential criminals or even a sexualized, fetishized object. As the
nineteenth century progressed the possession of the physical material of the human body
itself became increasingly lucrative, both for trade and for learning. As medical schools
began to flourish throughout Europe during the early decades of the nineteenth century,
the need for human corpses for dissection increased rapidly. While France allowed
medical colleges and their dissectors access to anyone who died on the streets or in a
poorhouse, English laws were much more restrictive. Specifically, these laws would only
provide corpses taken from the gallows for scientific dissection, and the demand began
dramatically to outpace the supply. Grave-robbing, as discussed above, presented
another viable source for corpses, and to procure a body this way was not terribly
perilous, as the act was not considered a criminal offense unless, interestingly, the burial
clothes were stolen along with the body. If clothing was taken with an exhumed body,
the crime was defined as theft, so grave clothes were typically reburied with the coffin
after the body was stripped and removed from it. The body was not property, but the
dressings of the body were.

Horrors in the public mind

In the first decade of the nineteenth century, body-snatching was primarily
performed by the doctors and medical students themselves, who exhumed fresh corpses
from graveyards for the purposes of dissection. It was only after a rising tide of public
rage and disgust at these activities that laws began to appear and cemeteries began to be monitored (Knott 2). The degree to which the public was infuriated by grave-robbing cannot be underestimated. As early as 1795, following the apprehension of three grave robbers sneaking out of the Lambeth cemetery with five recently-buried bodies, a large crowd of enraged residents actually exhumed the entire cemetery to ensure that the corpses of their loved ones had not been stolen; some were indeed found to be missing, much to the horror of the people, and others removed the coffins of relatives and took them away to prevent them from being snatched in the future (Knott 3). The cemeteries, already overflowing, were no longer safe repositories for the human corpse. They had lost that quality that the authors of the influential 1828 pamphlet *The Uses of the Dead to the Living*, either William Mackenzie or Thomas Southwood Smith, imagine hypothetically. “[W]hen I have ‘cast a heap of mould upon the person of my friend and taken the cold earth for its keeper,’ I visit the spot in which it is deposited in awe: it is sacred to my imagination: it is dear to my heart” (*The Uses of the Dead to the Living* 30).

Other literary, or quasi-literary, reflections of these fears can be found as well. For example, amid a series of urban-legend horror stories concerning the dissection trade recounted, without attribution, in Alexander Leighton’s *The Court of Casus* (1868), is one which describes how a young medical student in Edinburgh, identified only as Burns, sees what he believes to be the corpse of his mother on a dissection table, so, in a mad panic, he flies back to his home town of Dumfries and tells his father about his horrible suspicions. The two horrified men creep into the cemetery, like body snatchers themselves, and exhume the body of the student’s mother and the older man’s wife to
ensure that it has not been pilfered, whereupon they find that it is still there, intact
(Leighton 12-2). Such a story, though likely apocryphal, indicates the depth to which the
fears people had toward the bodies of their loved ones being stolen from their graves and
sold for dissection. Driven by terror, they would dig up the decomposing carcasses of the
people they loved most in order to be certain that these corpses remained in the ground as
fixed objects of mourning and not as the callously mutilated victims of human dissection.

**Rise of the resurrection man**

This increased angry attention from the public which focused on anatomists’
grave-robbing facilitated the need to farm out this service to a shadowy group of semi-
illegal “professionals” who became known as “sack ‘em up” men, or, more commonly,
resurrectionists or resurrection men.31 (This should not be confused with the groups,
certainly present throughout the nineteenth century, who continued to believe in the
inevitability of a very literal Christian Resurrection of the dead.) This term operates as a
reminder that the culture was moving toward secularization in ways that had not been
seen before. Within both the Anglican and Catholic traditions, it was believed that at the
time of Resurrection all dead human bodies will come out of their graves to await their
Final Judgment by God. The resurrection man takes God out of the equation altogether,
as he removes the dead from the ground not for judgment, but purely for profit.
Importantly, it is not the dead who profit from this kind of Resurrection, as an eternity in
the afterlife is not at stake here; the only benefit is financial and it goes entirely to the
resurrection man. (The “judgment” of the resurrection man would typically involve
nothing more than assessing whether an exhumed body was too thoroughly decomposed
to be sold, and had nothing to do with evaluating the moral standing of the person who once occupied the body.)

Resurrection men, operating in the dead of night, would procure recently buried human bodies, for a price, and deliver them to an anatomist or student (or, more frequently, to an anatomist’s assistant, which allowed the anatomist himself to feign ignorance as to the questionable legal conditions under which his “subjects” were received) for use in dissection. It was said that a skilled resurrection man could exhume and remove a corpse, then replace the grave dirt to hide his work in as little as ten minutes. However, the work was difficult and increasingly more dangerous as public outrage over grave robbery translated into the formation of armed patrols in cemeteries in which members of a frightened public would more often shoot one another than the resurrection men they so feared.

As a result, other methods, equally repellant, were employed in order to acquire bodies before they found their way to the cemetery, including stealing corpses from their own homes, under the noses of the family members who were grieving and preparing them for burial. Sir Astley Cooper, an anatomist who dealt frequently with professional body snatchers, describes them in a way that reveals clearly how bodies were perceived in the culture, even by those who depended on them for “subjects”:

there is no crime that they would not commit . . . if they would imagine that I should make a good subject, they really would not have the smallest scruple, if they could do the thing undiscovered, to make a subject of me. (Richardson 117)
The influence of Burke and Hare

In fact, this ghoulish practice became even more horrifying for nineteenth-century culture after the “Edinburgh Horrors,” in which resurrection men-turned murderers John Burke and Edward Hare were brought to trial in Edinburgh in 1828. After an elderly tenant died without settling up on his rent at Burke’s wife’s boarding house, these money-strapped, alcoholic felons hauled the body to the facility of Doctor Robert Knox, one of many surgeons known in the city as a performer of human dissection, and sold it as a “subject” in order to recoup their losses. This windfall of money inspired them to devise a plan to begin supplying subjects in a much more active fashion through extinguishing the life of human beings without leaving any tell-tale marks of violence. They would select victims who were easy to exploit and likely not be missed by anyone of stature, lure them to their abode, get them heavily intoxicated, then suffocate them, as one murderer would cover the victim’s face while the other sat on his or her chest. Burke and Hare would then sell the body to Knox, typically through his servant but occasionally supervised by the doctor himself. At least sixteen people, all of them poor, many elderly but some very young, fell victim to this scheme. This murder technique became known as “Burking,” and the ensuing moral panic that followed the trial saw many people labeled, often with little or no evidence, as “Burkers.”

Doctor Robert Knox was the recipient of all of these bodies, though the actual transactions were conducted by a servant, and Knox defended himself after the fact, both in court and in print, by proclaiming his ignorance as to how Burke and Hare had acquired the bodies. Public wrath, following the execution of Burke, was divided
between being directed at Hare or Knox. Hare was thought to have escaped the gallows despite being the more odious of the two murderers (and certainly the more unpleasant-looking, which reminds us of the cultural importance of physiognomic readings of a person’s features being thought to indicate the nature of that person’s personality). Knox, whose professional and personal reputation in Edinburgh was thoroughly ruined by his connection with the crimes and the belief that he knew he was dealing with murder victims as “subjects.” Knox, in fact, was “dissected” in effigy by an angry crowd that tore his proxy body to pieces, imitating, and probably not accidentally, what happened to the human body as it was dissected by medical professionals (Richardson 138). The literary record, which rarely makes direct reference to actual cases such as this one, still does provide evidence that, decades after this affair, people remembered that the public’s rage was directed toward the doctor who had received the murdered bodies as subjects. Stevenson’s narrator in “The Body Snatcher,” when recalling the Burke and Hare case, comments on the people’s fury that the surgeon was not held accountable through recounting his personal observation that “the mob that applauded at the execution of Burke called loudly for the blood of his employer” (Stevenson 165). Indeed, this careful but consistent claim of ignorance on the part of the medical professionals receiving their “subjects” is important to consider, and is in no way limited to the defensive approach taken by Knox.

It was likely the Burke and Hare murder trial that facilitated the legislative act that changed the landscape of human dissection. Most historians and literary critics who write about this era cite the Anatomy Act of 1832 as a turning point in how and what
kinds of human corpses were considered for dissection, and subsequently how resurrection men interacted with nineteenth century culture. The Anatomy Act was originally proposed in 1829, directly on the heels of the Burke and Hare murder scandal, and designed to offer a means through which to deprive the resurrection men of their foul trade. The Act proposed that the subject for human dissection be shifted from the body of the criminal to the body of the poor. Those who died in workhouses and hospitals now would, if “unclaimed” by relatives or friends for a decent Christian burial, would be given over to anatomists and medical students for dissection. This plan addressed the problem of numbers, in that many more corpses would now be available than the paltry few provided by the gallows, but it opened up a potentially troubling new interpretation of poverty. Since the dissected human corpse had previously been associated with execution and thus criminality, dissection was widely considered as a final punishment passed down onto the body of the condemned. Now, however, this sense of “punishment” was to be passed on to the poor, thus, in the minds of the culture, effectively serving to criminalize poverty. In fact, the Tories in the House of Lords rejected the Anatomy Act on those grounds, while the House of Commons and its more liberal members felt or at least maintained the ideological stance that the Act would actually protect the poor, who had almost without exception been the victims of “Burkers.”

The poor and the Anatomy Act

It would require a London-based scandal in 1831, involving three men - John Bishop, Thomas Williams and James May - who killed at least two impoverished people
to sell their bodies to anatomists, to revive discussions of the Anatomy Act, which, largely in response to the rage inspired by these “London Burkers,” was finally passed in 1832. But in spite of a short-lived but ineffective attempt to re-brand “dissection” as “examination,” which never took hold in the culture, the “taint” that the Act passed over to the impoverished was never resolved, and seemed to fit with the attitude informing other acts of legislation during this period in regard to the perception of poverty. The New Poor Laws, passed by Parliament in 1834, underscored this cultural reading of the impoverished as needing to be punished as it imposed draconian measures in order to encourage people not to fall so far that the workhouse became their only means of support (Geremek 239). Charity, in short, was not to be given and could instead only be earned through back-breaking, relentless labor. The prevailing thinking in Parliament, and in the larger culture of the non-impoverished in England, was that “[p]overty could either be ignored altogether, or the demand could be made that the poor should earn by impossible labours the charitable help which Christianity teaches should be given freely” (Richardson 148).

Literary voices provided stinging and often culturally influential commentaries on this situation. One perhaps recalls here in particular an enactment of this inhumane attitude in Dickens’ *Oliver Twist*. Here, the young Oliver trudges along the road to London to look for work when he is taunted by a group of wealthy people riding in a carriage who demand that in order to earn a halfpenny, he keep pace on foot with them as they travel up a steep hill; when he falls behind, wrecked with exhaustion and starvation, the carriage riders withdraw the offer of their “charity,” “declaring that he was an idle
young dog, and didn’t deserve anything” (Dickens, 1837, 44). In other words Oliver, much like the English poor in general, was assigned an impossible task, made even more so by the weakened condition his poverty imposed upon him, and when he failed to complete it, he was branded an “idle dog,” in spite of his specific display of the absolute opposite of idleness, and the opportunity for charitable contribution to his welfare was immediately withdrawn.33

The Anatomy Act created a significant amount of controversy in the value that it suddenly and officially assigned to the corpses of the poor. The poor who were unable to generate enough income to maintain themselves found that only in death were their bodies capable of making money. Their laboring bodies yielded little, if anything, to maintain their lives, and it was only when those lives expired, transforming those bodies to corpses, often as a direct result of the deprivations that accompanied poverty, that value was assigned to them. It was not their labor which would provide income, but the mere ownership (by others) of their dead bodies. These circumstances gave rise to a belief, if not an actual practice, through which the living poor would sell access to their bodies to anatomists, who could then claim them after the seller had died.34 Thomas Hood’s 1827 poem “Jack Hall” (playing as it does with the nature of the body-selling business in analogy to “jackals”) satirically describes a situation in which a dead body-snatcher is revealed to have sold his own body multiple times in order to collect more money for it. He posthumously confesses that “when I drove a certain trade / [i]n flesh and bone, / [t]here was a little bargain made / [a]bout my own” (Hood, “Jack Hall,” lines 225-8) and that, specifically, after selling access to his body once, “[t]en guineas did not quite suffice, / [a]nd so I sold my body twice; / [t]wice did not do — I sold it thrice, / [f]orgive my crimes! / [i]n short I have received its price / [a] dozen times!” (Hood, “Jack Hall,” lines 235-240). While the
anatomists who have purchased his corpse battle over it, the body mysteriously vanishes.

“Whether some comrade of the dead, / [o]r Satan took it in his head, / [t]o steal the corpse — the
corpse had fled! /’Tis only written, / [t]hat ‘there was nothing in the bed, / [b]ut twelve were
bitten!’” (Hood, “Jack Hall,” lines 253-8). Through this act, the apparently reanimated corpse
gets the last laugh but also profits from its own death in ways that, outside of literature, the poor
were unlikely to be able to do. This kind of triumph may only have been attainable through
access to the knowledge that Hall had as a body-snatcher, for example, or through deals made
with the devil, neither of which are appealing prospects for the poor. Typically, when profits as
considerable as ten guineas for the bodies of the dead poor were actually bartered, it was after the
death of the poor individual, and those profiting were the body-snatchers or murderers who
provided the body. At the 1831 trial of London Burkers John Bishop, Thomas Williams and
James May, for example, witnesses testified that the Burkers created a traveling corpse-auction,

as they

carried their victims [to potential purchasers] on a cart in a wooden box, with one of their
wives walking next to it holding a band box to make it appear as if theirs were but an
ordinary family moving house. “Ten guineas!” “I’ll give you eight!”; “I’ll take it
elsewhere”; “nine guineas!” “Sold!” (Lacquer 124-5)

It was extremely troublesome that the bodies of the poor were only lucrative after their
deaths, at which time, in most cases, they could do nothing economically for their former owners.
Nor, disturbingly, could their bodies provide any financial benefit for the relatives or loved ones
of the deceased. If the body was “claimed,” it was released to its claimers who were expected to
pay for its disposal themselves, and if it was “unclaimed,” then its financial fate was handled
entirely by medical institutions and owners of workhouses. Sometimes, disturbingly, even a well-
financed attempt to “claim” a corpse in order to prevent its dissection would be rebuffed. Polly
Chapman, a young prostitute who committed suicide by drowning herself in December 1831, was
given over to anatomists despite the efforts of several of her similarly “unfortunate” friends who had raised enough money to cover her respectable burial. The Coroner decided that, as a suicide, her case needed to be used as a cautionary example in order to prevent others in her state from pursuing such drastic action, and so she was considered “unclaimed” and sold for dissection (Richardson 234-5). A reporter for the True Sun captures a moment that carried powerful implications for the stated intentions of the Act. In claiming that “[t]he announcement of this decision was received with the most bitter lamentations by the females, who appeared much attached to the deceased” (Richardson 234-5), the reporter notes that people did care, and strongly so, about the postmortem fate of Polly Chapman. This is important because much of the Parliamentary rhetoric that supported the Anatomy Act’s use of the “unclaimed” bodies centered on the notion that an unclaimed corpse was an unlamented corpse, and that nobody cared about what happened to it after its owner had died. The failure to claim a body, in the words of the Select Committee responsible for crafting the Anatomy Acts, was a sign of “indifference” (Richardson 124). Clearly, this was not the case here, and one can imagine other cases in which it was the finances, not the inclination or the compassion, that were unavailable for the poor to bury their dead. Perhaps even more important here, in a cultural sense, is that this case reveals human dissection was still considered to be a punishment meted out to the perceived “criminal.” Opponents of the Anatomy Act noted that poverty was essentially being classified as a crime through this Act, as even minor property crimes committed by the poor resulted in sentences of heavy imprisonment, transportation and even hanging (Richardson 137).

The poor, and their advocates, responded harshly to this injustice and to other perceived attacks on their condition that this Act appeared to inaugurate. “Anatomy Riots” took place, most notably in Aberdeen, in response to the passing of the Anatomy Act. These reactions spoke to a larger, and more longstanding, sense of mistrust the poor felt in regard to medical practitioners
and hospitals in general. Medical treatment for the poor was difficult to secure. Those who entered hospitals rarely came out alive, stimulating a belief that the living poor, along with the dead poor, were being experimented upon, so that the knowledge extracted from these procedures could be used to enhance the health and longevity of the wealthy. In fact, in the summer of 1832 in some of the more poverty-consumed areas of Britain and Scotland, this concern was strong enough that cholera outbreaks were believed to be manufactured by local authorities in order to haul the allegedly afflicted poor off to sick houses, ostensibly for treatment but in reality for vivisection (Richardson 223-4).

One heuristic filter through which literature might be consulted as to how issues of the dead human body inextricably concerned issues of class, specifically in regard to the poor, may be found within the almost completely forgotten penny dreadful serialized anonymous novel *Sweeney Todd; or, the String of Pearls* (1850). In this novel, the demoniac barber Sweeney Todd murders his wealthy clients in order to steal and sell the valuables he coaxes them into revealing they are carrying about their person. His barber’s chair is rigged to drop its sitter down into a secret subterranean chamber, and if the fall does not break the victim’s neck, Todd will “polish them off” himself. After the valuables have been removed and trophies, including hats and walking sticks, taken, the bodies are conveyed to Mrs. Lovett’s impossibly popular pie shop, where they are, unbeknownst to the shop’s clients, of course, ground up into the pies. The complicated, subterranean machinery that processes the human meat, and the deplorable conditions of the slave-laborers who operate it (*Sweeney Todd* 88-9), provide an interesting iteration of the horrific conditions Victorian society forced upon the working poor as a result of the technological developments that fueled the Industrial Revolution.

While the plot has little to do with resurrection men and human dissection, elements of the story unquestionably intersect with these larger cultural narratives. First, Sweeney Todd is, in
many ways, similar to Burke and Hare, in that he lures his victims into his property with promises of service, but instead murders them, employing a reasonably intricate system designed to mask all evidence that a crime has taken place. Secondly, the moving of corpses from the site of their murder to the site of their “dissection,” if this term may be used to describe whatever process (undetailed in the text) is involved in shredding a human body into meat-pie material, resembles the trajectories resurrection men, especially those who murdered their “subjects,” needed to take in order to deliver their own booty. (One scene, in particular, which details the carrying to a madhouse of an unconscious young woman cruelly mislabeled as “mad” by her family, who hopes to steal her inheritance by removing her from the world of the sane, sounds a great deal like the moving of a dead body to its medical professionals who will hopefully pay for it.) Thirdly, the presence of the incriminating articles of clothing and personal effects left behind after the killings reminds one of the difficulties involved in disposing of these to avoid either identifying the victim or being charged with the possible capital crime of possessing grave-goods. Finally, the text highlights how easy it is to disappear in a city the size of London, though, instructively, it does make apparent that wealthy victims will actually be tracked down by equally wealthy loved ones. One could hardly assume such efforts being possible for the poor victims of the resurrection trade and their loved ones. Economic status is the crucial factor. (The Chapman case, detailed above, comes to mind here.) Though the novel does not engage in direct conversation with the wider social concerns of Victorian culture and essentially confines itself to the developments in the lives of its individual characters, it does nonetheless, and perhaps unintentionally, channel the Swiftian satire of the previous century and posit a disturbing notion that cannibalism may be a viable response to widespread poverty. Of course, throughout the course of the novel Mrs. Lovett’s human-meat-pies are ravenously devoured by the poor and moneyed alike in a frenzy in which the moment they are offered forth “such a smacking of lips
ensues as never was known” (Sweeney Todd 253). But most specifically disturbing might be the
textual moment in which one of the impoverished lads who hungrily devours Mrs. Lovett’s cold
meat pies, at this point blissfully unaware of their horrific true ingredients, claims to her that
“Lor’ bless you, I’d eat my own mother, if she was a pork chop, done brown and crisp, and the
kidney in it; just fancy it, grilling hot, you know, and just popped on a slice of bread, when you
are cold and hungry” (Sweeney Todd 239). One can only ponder, through the literal resurrection
mindset, what may become of a human body that has been consumed by and passed through the
body of another human, then discarded as nothing more than bodily waste.

“The Body Snatcher”

The resurrection man, as an agent of a frightening new variety of secular
resurrection, retained a literary visibility well beyond the immediate wake of the Burke
and Hare scandal. Perhaps the fear of dissection was reinvigorated late in the century as
a byproduct of anxieties in regard to the collapse of the British Empire. Researcher
Patrick Brantlinger notes that the increased popularity and production of horror literature
after 1880 may have been connected to fears that civilization could easily revert to
savage, primitive state, as troubles within the far reaches of the Empire has seemed to
reveal (Brantlinger 229). Perhaps we may apply this interpretation to the human body
itself. The ruptures becoming visible in the image of Imperial hegemony may have been
transplanted to the ruptures in “civilized” death-rituals that grave robbing involved, and
even the ruptures in the human body created by the act of dissection. In both cases the
“whole,” be it an Empire or a corpse, begins to come apart. Coupled with anxieties about
burgeoning thinking in human evolution and natural selection which achieved
prominence from the 1850s onward, perceiving the human body as a coherent, hegemonic unit was becoming truly problematic.

   Namely, increasing late-century anxiety was evident in regard to what Resurrection actually might mean, as faith in the Christian context of the word began to erode as the century progressed. It is Robert Louis Stevenson’s short story “The Body Snatcher” (1884), though largely under-treated by literary critics, that provides perhaps the most recognizable literary reflection of the anxieties that medical school-inspired grave-robbing brought to the surface, and it does so nearly sixty years after the Burke and Hare case, indicating that, even if human dissection was not a direct concern toward the end of the century, it still remained enough of an anxiety to be written about. It is also through this literary work that the notion of body-snatchers as “resurrection men,” agents of a new kind of resurrection, may be most productively explored. The narrative describes the exploits of a pair of young medical students who become involved in schemes attached to the collection of human bodies for dissection. The story is meant, even though it was published almost six decades after the crimes and the trial, to be connected with the Burke and Hare murders. The subject matter resembles that of the Edinburgh Horrors, right down to the appearance of a Mary Paterson proxy, Jane Galbreath, an attractive young woman who appears as a “subject” and whose familiarity creates ill ease among the body traffickers and anatomists (Stevenson 167-9). The Burke and Hare case, though, is most directly referenced through the speaker’s recollections that the Edinburgh community wanted Doctor Knox to answer for his role in receiving the bodies of the murder victims for dissection (Stevenson 165).
Fettes, the speaker of the primary narrative in the story, himself a body snatcher, envisions the reaction of an exhumed human corpse that re-awakens to a very unexpected and unpleasant kind of Resurrection, and one not at all conducive to the sort of Christian thought that had dominated English culture for the last several centuries:

[to bodies that had been laid in earth, in joyful expectation of a far different awakening, there came that hasty, lamp-lit, terror-haunted resurrection of the spade and mattock. The coffin was forced, the cerements torn, and the melancholy relics, clad in sack-cloth, after being rattled for hours on moonless byways, were at length exposed to uttermost indignities before a class of gaping boys. (Stevenson 174)

This passage highlights the re-inscription of “resurrection” that such a label for body snatchers invited. The human corpse is not awakened by God to a Christian Judgment Day and an eternal afterlife for the soul, but, rather, in an entirely secular mutation of the traditional notion of Resurrection, is pulled from the earth by shadowy men to be used, illegally and without respect or dignity, as raw physical material in an anatomy classroom, butchered as a spectacle for “gaping boys.” In the particular case the story focuses upon, the grave-robbers, “[s]omewhat as two vultures may swoop upon a dying lamb” haul out their victim, and in doing so paint a posthumous portrait of an individual who had properly prepared in life for the possibility of a Christian resurrection and certainly did not deserve the secular resurrection she was, in the mind of the speaker, instead destined to receive:

The wife of a farmer, a woman who had lived for sixty years, and had been known for nothing but good butter and a godly conversation, was to be rooted from her grave at midnight and carried, dead and naked, to that far-away city that she had always honored with her Sunday’s best; the place beside her family was to be empty till the crack of doom; her innocent and almost venerable members to be exposed to that last curiosity of the anatomist. (Stevenson 174)
Here we see the literary deployment of the aforementioned new kind of Resurrection. The resurrection men in this piece bring about the removal of human bodies from their graves, but unlike the Resurrection of Christian belief, the judgment will be taken on the body, not the soul, and the judge will be an anatomist, not God the creator. One feels that “innocence” and “venerability” are useless attributes in the judgment of the anatomist, and, thus, that a life spent in pursuit of these virtues is a wasted one. It should be noted, though, that the indignities detailed in the passage above do not seem to be framed as those describing actions done to a corpse; instead, it seems they would be concerns more appropriate for a living human being. After all, one does not typically endow the human corpse with the capacity to feel “joyous expectation,” as is encountered in the first passage cited from this piece, for example. This type of horrific awakening, then, is compounded by the swelling cultural fears that the seemingly dead body might not be dead at all, and that, subsequently, as we have seen there existed a very real possibility of being buried alive. Connected with this is the horrifying fear, though there is no recorded evidence of this happening, that a seemingly dead body may awaken on the dissector’s table just before, or just after, the surgeon’s blade has carved the first incision.

It should be noted that the supernatural seems to accompany the task of grave-robbing in this storyworld at least. The last body exhumed by the speaker and his compatriot Wolfe Macfarlane, that of an old rural woman unearthed in pitch darkness from a cemetery lying ominously at a crossroads, appears to change its shape behind its shroud, becoming the form of Mister Gray, a dissolute acquaintance of Macfarlane that,
months earlier, he probably murdered before selling his carcass to the students of the dissecting table (Stevenson 177). It is impossible that the actual body of Gray could appear here, as he was allegedly dissected months ago and the dissection process left very little of the body intact or recognizable. However skeptical most of Victorian society may have been in regard to the existence of ghosts when Stevenson wrote, it is interesting that the practice of digging up human bodies, even as late as the 1880s, was still considered capable of activating the supernatural. The fact that the exhumed corpse shape-shifts underneath its shroud, assuming the form of a man recently murdered by one of the resurrection men, is significant, as it reinforces the notion that supernatural forces did intercede into the human sphere after the human died, in spite of the assumptions of scientists, and anatomists in particular, that the postmortem human body was nothing more than lifeless material, unequipped with any spiritual connections and only possessing value as material to be dissected. That the body would change into the shape of a man who had likely been murdered by one of the resurrection men is also significant, and activates an even older tradition in ghost-story literature: the theme, clearly a component of such early gothic works as Mathew Lewis’s The Monk (1799), of the murder victim returning from the grave to haunt its murderer. Indeed, this scene in many ways recalls earlier traditions in horror literature. The “Gothic moment” of the late eighteenth century. The dead body, while a very natural object, is nonetheless described as an “unnatural burden” (Stevenson 176), and “unnatural miracle” (Stevenson 177) and as an “unholy burden” (Stevenson 177); violent, late-night rain pelts the grave-robbers as stormy weather in Gothic fiction provides a backdrop for the approach of some
horrible supernatural occurrence (Stevenson 176-7). A “creeping chill” assaults “the soul of Fettes” just before the body morphs (Stevenson 176), echoing Gothic traditions in which a ghost’s appearance is preceded by a deep, frightening sense of coldness. “[T]he farm dogs accompanied their passage with tragic ululations” (Stevenson 177), recalling old folkloric traditions, very present in the Gothic, in which dogs were always agitated by the immediate presence of the supernatural; finally, the body snatchers are virtually incapacitated by a Gothic sense of fear that defies the ability of language to give it shape, as “nameless dread [. . .] tighten[s] the white skin about the face of Fettes” (Stevenson 177), making him resemble the very corpses with which he does traffic, and Macfarlane becomes almost cataleptic as “a fear that was meaningless, a horror of what could not be, kept mounting in his brain” (Stevenson 177). (Macfarlane has already been prefigured as a living corpse; his initial appearance in the story creates such a powerful, shocked reaction among the other characters that it feels to the speaker in this moment “as if a man had risen from the dead” [Stevenson 167]. Truly, this observation labels exactly what Macfarlane does witness here, at the climax of the piece.)

Here, though, rather than the incorporeal, disappearing phantom characteristic of the earlier Gothic, whose existence may be disbelieved, the murderer is confronted by a corporeal, physical corpse, which cannot be dismissed. The horror of the dead body of the murder victim late in the Victorian era is no longer a horror in which a spiritual entity merely appears and disappears to remind the murderer of his evil deed, but is now a horror in which a very real, physical body is left in the wake of the murder. It is, as the speaker describes, a fusion that confronts Fettes and Macfarlane here, as “something at
once spectral and human” rears up before them, an inescapable collision of the supernatural and the corporeal (Stevenson 177).

But this corpse-morphing is not only the resuscitation of old Gothic tropes here. The notion that the dead “subject” becomes someone familiar, a “ghastly comrade” (Stevenson 177) in the words of Fettes, either to those who have dug it up or, more often, to those who are preparing to dissect it, is a common idea in nineteenth-century culture. It would be impossible to erase thoughts of the individual identity of a corpse if the dissector had known that person when she or he was alive; the corpse in this circumstance could not be a “subject” or a “thing.” In at least one case the literary expression of this possibility concerns less a written work than the author. The corpse of author Laurence Sterne, whose owner died insolvent and was buried in a poorly-dug and unmarked pauper grave in 1768, allegedly appeared on a dissector’s table in Cambridge, where it was recognized and immediately reburied (Richardson 60).³⁸ This notion that a familiar corpse necessitated a different treatment than an unfamiliar one maintains a constant presence in the ever-complicated discourse that surrounds the issue of human dissection.

Perhaps, though, the primary anxiety conveyed in this short story is that, in spite of the cultural fears to the contrary, human dissection might not be the end and that dissected bodies may return to the world. There is no feasible explanation in an empirical universe for the corpse of Gray to appear in this moment, as Stevenson’s storyworld has to this point only hinted at the supernatural through images and hints but has not manifested it. Perhaps the implications are that the dissected corpse never leaves us,
haunting those responsible for its dissection like a ghost. In other words, if the body of “the dead and long-dissected Gray” (Stevenson 177) can appear in the climactic moment of this short story, years after its death and dissection (a process which often reduced the body so thoroughly that little was actually left to bury, when the time came to do so) and many miles away from where the murder and dissection took place, transformed under a blanket in a rainy darkness from the corpse of a frail old woman, then where might we not expect a dissected corpse to appear?

But dissection, even in the absence of a belief in a literal Christian Resurrection and even if the dissected body is truly dead, may still be very problematic for nineteenth century culture. Thomas Hood’s largely forgotten poem “Mary’s Ghost” (1826) reveals, through the speaking voice of a young woman addressing her lover as he mourns over her empty grave, how human dissection compromises the needs of nineteenth century mourning culture. After Mary’s ghost describes specifically where every part of her disassembled body has been taken, after grave robbers unearthed her corpse and “made a snatch at me” (Hood line 10) and how “from her grave in Mary-bone, / [t]hey’ve come and boned your Mary” (Hood 19-20), she concludes by cautioning her lover “[d]on’t go to weep upon my grave, / [a]nd think that there I be, / [t]hey haven’t left an atom there, / [o]f my anatomie” (Hood lines 45-8). The anatomist, according to this ghost, deprives the victim of her entire “anatomie”; the act of dissecting obliterates the thing being dissected and leaves nothing. True, Mary’s ghost does not need these body parts any more, as she has shed her corporeality, but the poem implies that it is the mourning lover who needs something of her in order to mourn properly. The cemetery, with its memorial
headstones, loses its symbolic meaning for mourners if they become aware that the body whose presence it allegedly marks is not actually resting underneath it. Unique to nineteenth century literature is Mary’s ghost, who calls attention to this issue when she returns to her empty grave to lament the loss of her physical body to the body-snatchers and human dissectors. It is fascinating that science is confronted here by an emblem of the very superstition it was supposed to be “exploding” and replacing.

The resurrection trade did not figure heavily in the literature that would become recognized as contributing to the literary canon, but exhibited more of a presence in peripheral works, those which are largely unknown in current critical discourse, and which have often not come down to us cleanly, instead sometimes in scattered fragments and battered texts of books long out of print. It is beyond the scope of this project to speculate as to what sorts of cultural forces might have played a part in keeping resurrection-literature from flourishing in a culture in which it was certainly a palpable concern among the people. One of these lesser-known texts, Alexander Leighton’s entertaining but wandering *The Court of Casus: or, the Story of Burke and Hare* (1861), however, offers a useful glimpse into how the presence of the resurrection man may have been perceived as late as the middle of the century. Leighton’s text, it should be mentioned, is not considered by most twenty-first century historians to be very accurate in the purely historical sense, frequently speculating as it describes, in depth, moments that have been unrecorded in any other source, as well as occasionally exaggerating the more gruesome and shocking features to heighten the sense of horror and evil, and sometimes inventing details and characters altogether. It is more a literary than historical
document and has more value when read as a collection of folktales, active and influential in the nineteenth century, than as a record of actual occurrences.

It is then the cultural presence of thoughts of resurrection men and their trade that concerns us here, coupled with the awareness that not every cultural anxiety it rooted in a response to “factual” occurrences and not the veracity of the empirical details contained in the text. Specifically, Leighton provides a series of folkloric narratives about resurrection men and human dissection that illuminates many of the concerns working their way through the culture at the time. These narratives are balanced unsurprisingly between the darkly comedic and disturbingly grotesque. A few examples will suffice. A case is described, for example, in which a pair of grave-robbers carrying a fresh corpse seek a night’s stay at a widow’s house but are forced to flee in the middle of the night when investigating officers arrive looking for house-breakers. In their hurry they leave the corpse behind, in the bed for some reason, and the widow, later, discovers it as she makes up the room and is horrified to find herself staring at her husband’s body, still wearing the grave-clothes she had sewn for it (Leighton 9). In another story, which Leighton claims to be verifiable because it came from “the brother, still living [in 1868] of the young student who figured in it” (Leighton 41), a young Edinburgh farmer (perhaps the “student” to which Leighton refers?) who had just lost his wife encounters a woman’s corpse on a lonely road, discovers it to the body of his wife, and envisions her having been buried alive, exhumed herself and was attempting to return home when she actually did truly die. (This anecdote provides another good example of the type of story told in anti-premature burial propaganda, discussed in depth above.) The man is
eventually convinced by a friend that he has, instead, stumbled upon a body-snatching
which had been interrupted in progress, and, though still inconsolable, is at least able to
bury his wife a second and final time (Leighton 41).41

“*The Victim*”

The theme of the “subject’s” discovery by loved ones before it reaches the
anatomist is taken up a notch by narratives in which the loved one and the anatomist are
one and the same. Leighton, for example, offers the tale of a young Edinburgh medical
student named Burns who, believing he sees the corpse of his mother on the dissection
slab one day, speeds home to Dumfries and enlists the help of his grieving father to
ensure that the family matriarch’s eternal rest has not been so grossly violated.42

Through a layer of heavy snow they exhume the grave, “and there lay, exposed to the
eyes of the husband and the son, the body of the endeared one - the centre once of so
many loves, and the source of so many domestic joys - calm in the stillness of death”
(Leighton 8). Though it seems paradoxical in the absence of context, confronting the
decomposing corpse is here a tremendous relief, and the feeling is not at all inexplicable
when it is remembered that the alternative to rotting in the ground here is to be subjected
to dissection. Leighton is, significantly, not the only source of such narratives, as these
stories may be found much earlier in the literary record. “The Victim,” an anonymous
1831 short story published on the heels of the Burke and Hare murder trials, and
obviously drawing from it, under the title “A True Story: By a Medical Student” in the
*New Monthly Magazine* (Morrison and Baldick 265), offered a complication to the
discourse concerning the grave robber. This short piece is almost entirely forgotten, and
has not been treated at all by literary criticism, but it does offer interesting commentary on how early to mid-nineteenth century culture thought about the trade in human bodies. Even in its title, this piece attempts to shift the corpse from the status of “subject” to “victim,” effectively re-humanizing the corpse and taking back the humanity that scientific discourse had attempted to strip from it. In the story, a young medical student, Melville St Claire, in search of a corpse to dissect, secures a “object” for this purpose from a shadowy resurrection man. St Clair fails to connect the appearance of this as-yet unseen corpse to the disappearance of his fiancé, and it is only when he is confronted with the lifeless body of his beloved Emily Smith on the dissection table that he loses his mind, realizes what evil he has been party to, and screams that “‘it must be so! It must be so!’” (Morrison and Baldick 94). In his mind, because of the deaths he has caused, he deserves this appropriate fate. Importantly, the narrator of the story, one of the dissector’s colleagues, is present for this scene and years later has with an encounter with a poor patient, who turns out to the be resurrection man responsible for Emily’s death, and who is now delirious with guilt and demanding that the young surgeon dissect, or vivisect him, at least in part, for his crimes; he wants his right hand amputated (“cut it off!” he screams repeatedly [Morrison and Baldick 95]), as it is the member that, biblically-speaking, has offended him (Morrison and Baldick 95). These events traumatize him to the extent that he renounces his scalpel forever.

This scenario of confronting the lifeless corpse of a loved one on the dissecting table is perhaps set out by the author to reinforce what Ruth Richardson identifies as a profound anxiety attached to the difficulties early human dissectors encountered when
attempting to achieve a sense of “clinical detachment” to protect them from identifying too strongly with the materials they were charged to disassemble (Richardson 31). In other words, this short story may have intended to highlight the painful separation that a medical student had to make between himself and the bodies he was dissecting. Ultimately, here, the “subject,” as the corpse of the dissector’s beloved Emily Smith, cannot effectively be severed from the identity of the “victim,” and, as a result, the detachment needed to dissect human bodies was not, at least in this storyworld, possible.

This disturbing notion of confronting the familiar female body reduced to the position of “subject” is not confined alone to fiction, and the hypothetical scenario was a frequent part of the nineteenth century’s discourse on human dissection. In 1825, for example, Ann Millard, the wife of a known resurrection man, asked the readers of *Punch*, “[w]ho, even among the practitioners of medicine, does not shudder at the mere contemplation that the remains of all that was dear to him, of a beloved, wife, sister, or daughter, may be exposed to the rude gaze and perhaps the INDECENT JESTS of unfeeling men, and afterwards be mutilated and dismembered in the presence of hundreds of spectators” (Richardson 95, capitalization Millard’s). The male gaze upon the female corpse is all the more horrible, and the lecherous, unfeeling and seemingly unscientific nature of the jesting dissectors ever more so, when the corpse is the body of someone related to the observer.

More specifically, though, the unknown author of “The Victim” was perhaps channeling one of the more disturbing anecdotes from the Burke and Hare case with this detail of the dissector confronting a familiar corpse on his table. Most of Burke’s and
Hare’s victims were selected from among the destitute, perhaps because their absence would not create attention but because they were vulnerable to offers of shelter, companionship and alcohol, not knowing that these were extended only as a ploy to get them into a “safe” environment” in which they would be murdered. The killers did select a few victims that would have been recognizable on the streets of Edinburgh, and these well-known victims, specifically the mentally-impaired 18 year old giant “Daft Jamie” and the apparently beautiful, 18 year old, burgeoning prostitute Mary Paterson, actually generated the attention that brought Burke and Hare to justice and helped at least to convict Burke, define Hare as a ghoulish, subhuman villain and implicate the increasingly reviled Dr. Knox.

**Mary Paterson**

In fact, a close examination of the surviving documentation that surrounds the Burke and Hare case, specifically the memoirs of Dr. Knox’s former student Henry Lonsdale, *A Sketch in the Life and Writings of Dr. Knox, the Anatomist, by His Pupil and Colleague Henry Lonsdale* (1870), reveals interesting attitudes about the treatment, in particular, of the postmortem female body as it pertains to the case of victim Mary Paterson. As aforementioned, Paterson was a well-known prostitute who allegedly possessed an inspiring physical beauty: “The body of the girl Paterson could not fail to attract attention by its voluptuous form and beauty; students crowded around the table on which she lay, and artists came to study a model worthy of Phidias and the best Greek art” (Lonsdale 101). One drawing of Paterson’s body survives, a pencil drawing by a student known only as J. Oliphant, that emphasizes her female form while downplaying...
any visual hints that a corpse is his model (Bailey 50). The corpse is depicted to look as though it is still alive. Nonetheless, it should be remembered that this “voluptuous form and beauty” belongs to a corpse, and the gawking students, jockeying for position to stare at it in a manner that seems to speak much more to prurient than scientific interests, remind us very much of the imagined “resurrection” scene described in Stevenson’s “The Body-Snatcher.” It should also be noted that in life this young woman was reduced by poverty to prostitution at a very early age, while in death she “could not fail to attract attention”; neither can any of the crowding students attract her attention, so, though this is an obvious observation, the relationship between the gaze of the observer and the corpse can never be reciprocal. She can never look back at these crowding admirers. It is the dross, her corpse, void of agency and humanity, that attracts in this situation. She is an “object” in every sense of the word, a thing without any power under the male gaze, to be stared at, drawn, and eventually dismembered and disemboweled.

And neither should the reference here to Phidias be discarded as a productive figure. A Greek artist, born around 500 BCE and dying in 432 BCE in prison after being accused of “impiety” for depicting his own likeness on the shield of a sculpture of Athena he created for the Parthenon, his work is now largely lost except for his marble sculptures of the Parthenon. These were on display at the British Museum, and were perhaps familiar at least as points of reference to Lonsdale. Furthermore, it was claimed that the quality of Phidias’s work allegedly revealed to his contemporaries that “he alone had seen the exact image of the gods and revealed it to men” (Seyffert 477). Such an image would certainly seem to help Lonsdale’s readers appreciate the goddess-like beauty of
Mary Paterson’s corpse and perhaps even emphasized that her beauty was even more otherworldly when her body was no longer alive but instead became raw materials for the dissecting-room men to work with, as she was “reconstructed” by them as a corpse on the dissecting table. This idea is supported by the comment that “artists,” presumably students, came forward to “study” this deceased “model.” Her beauty was no longer her own, at this point, nor did it belong to science, as she was not immediately dissected. Instead, the corpse of Mary Paterson, vacated of her agency, seemed to become the property of art.

This notion of Paterson’s beauty falling under the control of Knox and his students, who were able to re-inscribe her femininity according to how they wanted to present it, echoes the concerns that many poor nineteenth century people had after the establishment of the Anatomy Act in 1832, which essentially gave control over the bodies of the poor over to medical colleges and dissectors, instilling into these corpses a value they never had in life, and that their owners could never access when they were alive and desperately needing such lucre. Paterson’s vocation in life as a prostitute becomes a part of the story. Leighton’s *The Court of Casus*, while not necessarily reliable as a historic document, is more productively considered a work of popular literature, and as such is a useful indicator of how the author’s culture felt about the case. This text offers that, concerning Paterson’s body, to whose name he appends “the study for the artist,” “there was a recognition of the individual as having been seen and conversed with by him, in terms of more than ordinary intimacy, only the night before, or at least a very short period, countable by hours” (Leighton 224). Mary Paterson’s body, even in life, was a
commodity, and a very well-known one at that, at least within the community of Edinburgh. The point is that dissection has made her accessible; whereas in life these students would have had to pay for access to Mary’s body, in death her body has become unconditionally available to them.

In a moment that recalls and perhaps directly inspired the climactic scene in “The Victim,” Lonsdale continues, recognizing that “a pupil of Knox’s, who had been in her company only a few nights previously, stood aghast on viewing the beautiful Lais stretched in death, and ready for the scalpel of the anatomist” (Lonsdale 101). It is impossible not to read this language in a sexual context, with the postmortem female body “stretched” and “ready” for the anatomist’s “scalpel.” The image of intercourse this imagery invites, though, is one in which all of the power is consigned to the male, and the very act, in this case dissection, confirms that the female is not a sentient or willing partner in the act at all. Paterson’s corpse was further preserved for the male gaze, as, unlike any of the other “subjects” that came to Knox, her body was preserved in spirits instead of being quickly dissected. This attempt to enhance and prolong its value as spectacle was in fact especially dangerous for Knox, as, typically, corpses were mutilated prior to dissection so that their identities could not be determined. Rather than destroy the face and identifiability of Paterson, though, Knox chose to keep her in a dangerously recognizable condition.44

**Robert Browning**

A thematic connection to Robert Browning’s “Porphyria’s Lover” (1836) may be made here. This poem’s speaker narrates the murder of his lover, then describes how her
corpse, in his mind, continues to generate affectionate, lifelike responses to him. The
lover’s voice vanishes after her murder, of course, but when her killer opens her dead
eyes “again / [l]aughed the blue eyes without a stain” and “her cheek once more /
[b]lushed bright beneath my burning kiss” (Browning 102, lines 44-5, 46-7). A corpse is
capable of neither of these actions and the interpretations of their manifestation further
establishes the murderous speaker’s mental instability. What is significant here is that the
speaker changes his lover from an active to a passive entity, and, as the act of murder has
robbed her of voice and agency, he assumes control of body and re-inscribes her love for
him entirely through his own terms. The speaker reinforces his status as the dead lover’s
puppeteer, manipulating her body to support his assumptions of its devotion; he “prop[s]
her head up as before, / only this time my shoulder bore / [h]er head, which droops upon
it still” (Browning 102, lines 49-51). He interprets this position, which he himself has
staged, as posthumous acquiescence of her love, finding that “[h]er smiling rosy little
head. So glad it has its utmost will” (Browning 102, lines 52-3). The speaker’s
incorporation of the “voice” and intentions of his lover’s corpse, made void of agency by
murder, here provides a poetic echo those of the Edinburgh medical students and
practitioners who manipulated Paterson’s body to support their own interpretations of
her.

However, Browning’s work channels even more use here in regard to its depiction
of poetic reactions to the artistically-rendered corpse of the lover. Specifically, the
artistic renditions of Paterson’s postmortem body by J. Oliphant and other medical
students recalls the gloating speaker in Browning’s “The Last Duchess” (1842), fawning over a painting of his former wife, who seems to have been murdered by the speaker because he chose “[n]ever to stoop” (Browning 84, line 43) in regard to deferring to his wife’s behavior. He was infuriated that “her looks went everywhere” (Browning 83, line 24), the fact that “she ranked / [m]y gift of a nine-hundred years-old name / [w]ith anybody’s gift” (Browning 83-4, lines 32-4) and that “she smiled, no doubt, / [w]hene’er I passed her; but who passed without / [m]uch the same smile?” (Browning 84, lines 43-4). (This wandering female gaze may be aligned with that of Patterson whom, if indeed a prostitute, would have directed her gaze to any males she thought would be likely clients; “anybody’s gift” would have been her payment.) The poem’s speaker appears to have her killed as a means of controlling her gaze, her lack of respect for his family’s standing, and her propensity to smile at everyone; he succeeds, then, in removing her agency by murder and is left with the painting, which he demands that his listener admire. This notion of lording over the woman’s posthumous image, after her life has been destroyed and all her power in the world removed seems to resemble the treatment given to the drawings made from the murdered body of Mary Paterson. The primary difference here might be that the last Duchess was painted from life, “as if alive,” the speaker tells us, while Paterson was rendered by a group of student artists postmortem.

Not always was the familiar corpse of the “subject” that of a familiar person, though. “The Man of Science” (1892) by Jerome K. Jerome, is, like Stevenson’s “Body Snatcher,” written six and a half decades after the Burke and Hare case, but clearly
informed by it; this story, like Stevenson’s, illustrates that anxieties about the human
corpse as an illicitly acquired “subject” were certainly not extinct more than sixty years
after the Burkers were arrested and tried. This piece does not focus on human dissection
specifically, but rather on the human corpse as a “subject” of scientific study. Here, an
unnamed young scientist is haunted by the human skeleton he has purchased from a
“dingy” old shop to display in his home laboratory. It is evident to everyone but the
protagonist that the skeleton is that of a man he had wronged years before (the details of
this infraction are unknown to the speaker of the story), who had cornered the young man
in a cathedral but collapsed and died moments before he could affect his revenge. The
young scientist is profoundly disturbed by the skeleton, and even observes it seeming to
breathe on one occasion. He cannot escape the feeling that “the empty sockets in that
grinning head seemed to be drawing him toward them” (Jerome 383), so pushes a curtain
across it to hide himself from its gaze. Later, he passes out in terror when he sees what
appears to be a bony hand pulling the curtain aside. When he is discovered dead in his
bed, the witnesses see “the livid marks of bony fingers round his throat, and in his eyes
there was a terror such as is not often seen in human eyes” (Jerome 384). The skeleton
here is capable of behaving as a living, apparently breathing creature, and can reanimate
itself in order to get revenge on the man it had sworn in life to destroy. This is perhaps
the only case in the literary record of the nineteenth century in which an apparently
anatomized collection of human remains is capable of more than simply haunting those
who should feel guilt for its death (as does the body in Stevenson’s “The Body Snatcher,” for example), but is actually able to exact a physical act of vengeance.

**Conclusion**

As we have seen, in many cases death for nineteenth-century culture was only the first step in the tribulations the human corpse, vacated of life, was forced to undergo. As scientific discourse identified the corpse as the new locus of crucial medical knowledge, it became an increasingly valuable commodity. Grisly descriptions, both observed and imagined, of the process of human dissection as well as the shady nature of the burgeoning trade that supplied corpses for the anatomist’s dissection table stimulated a surge in the kind of folkloric and religious thinking that such scientific developments hoped to push out of the culture altogether. With the human corpse as the centerpiece, though, literature and ephemeral culture unleashed a torrent of supernatural forces upon the anatomist and the resurrection man. We have examined what nineteenth-century culture believed happened to the human being after death when subject to the gaze and actions of the scientist and the criminal who supplied him. Continuing to follow the trajectory of the postmortem human, we now move beyond the physical body to illuminate further evidence as to the persistence of folkloric and religious beliefs in a culture that denigrated these in favor of science by exploring the figure of the corpse that still actively participates in the nineteenth-century world: the ghost.
CHAPTER THREE: THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY GHOST

While body disposal rituals and practices, whether centered on cremation or burial, remained disturbing fears and dissection emerged as a deeply-entrenched cultural concern, an increasing segment of Victorian society became interested, even obsessed, with the desire to bring themselves closer to the dead, in spirit and not in body, to establish meaningful contact with those who had passed away into the mysterious realm of death. Long a presence in English culture, the figure of the ghost was adapted to become the avatar for these endeavors. The ghost in the nineteenth century was very much a specific product of its culture and while it stood upon the shoulders of its ancestors, literary and popular culture interacted with these older folkloric beliefs to shape the ghost in unique and significant ways. Nineteenth-century ghosts, participating in a milieu in which scientific discourse worked diligently to push them geographically and culturally to the margins, took on a specific collection of characteristics. These ghosts defied and embraced the very science that waged a cultural war against them, and created a resilient, recognizable ghost-figure that survives to this day. Armed now with the context offered by an understanding of the corpse, death and death rituals meant to those living in nineteenth-century England, this project moves on to an examination of the specific evolution of the nineteenth-century ghost as manifested through its appearance in literature and ephemeral culture.
The nineteenth-century ghost figure can claim myriad roots. Cultural obsessions with the possibilities of meaningful encounters with the dead abounded, including older influences such as the lingering interest in the eighteenth-century “knocking ghosts” of Cock Lane (1762) and other locales, as well as newer influences such as the development of and increased interest in spirit photography. These were augmented by fears of being buried alive, even culminating in the morbid interest in the visual and narrative reconstructions of the victims of the murders committed by the Whitechapel killer who became known as Jack the Ripper, all draw attention to this prevalent concern. Nineteenth-century culture’s attention to these death-centered issues was responsible for the production of a series of attempts to colonize the space of death or to extract some sense of meaning from its mysterious territory. In exploring death and using the human corpse as the vehicle of this exploration, nineteenth-century writers produced a specific nineteenth-century type of reanimated entity, one that resembles the tumultuous culture which birthed it. Scientific advances spearheaded many of these attempts to render death understood, but a sense of uneasiness seemed to remain throughout the century, particularly evident in literature and ephemera, that perhaps science was ultimately an insufficient vehicle toward these endeavors of illuminating the space of death.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle embodied this tension, as simultaneously a proponent of new scientific discoveries and the scientific method (he invented Sherlock Holmes, of course) being at the same time an ardent Spiritualist and séance attendee. The speaker in his “Lot No. 249” (1894), which concerns the reanimation of a vengeful Egyptian mummy and uses the human corpse as a central figure for this discussion of science’s
conceptual shortcomings, usefully encapsulates this anxiety that science may not be equipped to define, classify and understand the natural world:

when we think how narrow and devious this path of Nature is, how dimly we can trace it, for all our lamps of science, and how from the darkness which girds it round great and terrible possibilities loom ever shadowly upwards, it is a bold and confident man who will put a limit to the strange by-paths into which the human spirit may wander. (Doyle 109)

And it is the human corpse, as both a bodily and spiritual entity, that appears to be the primary vehicle through which this ill-ease was expressed in the nineteenth-century.

The rise of Spiritualism

The eruption and increasing popularity of the supernatural culminated in a series of movements that would be labelled Spiritualism. This movement migrated to English culture quickly after taking shape in America in the late 1840s, on the heels of stories about the Fox sisters in rural New York and their widely-publicized ability to converse with a series of ghosts which communicated by tapping and knocking. A séance culture emerged, in which ritualized conditions, usually overseen and controlled by a medium, allowed for people to ask questions of the dead, who would respond with a series of knocks, table movements, or sounds; these message could be very specifically interpreted by the medium. British culture adopted this movement so rapidly perhaps because the infamous Cock Lane incident of the previous century had remained within the cultural imagination. These “knocking ghosts” brought to life the notion that one could communicate with the dead in a structured, coherent manner. This possibility allowed for the development of a belief that the boundary between life and death was fluid and could be crossed.
While Spiritualism grew enormously popular it was not embraced universally by nineteenth-century British culture. Contemporary evidence reveals multiple angles of criticism. For example, it was described as the devil’s work in N.S. Godfrey’s *Table-Moving Tested, and Proved to be the Result of Satanic Agency* (1853), “an epic delusion” in Leslie Stephen’s “The Skepticism of Believers,” an article in the *Fortnightly Review*:22 (1877), and “a wretched superstition” in William Benjamin Carpenter’s “Mesmerism, Odyism, Table-Turning and Spiritualism, Considered Historically and Scientifically in *Fraser’s Magazine*:15 (1877) (Noakes 26, 41). The *Illustrated London News* in June 1853 questioned the appeal of Spiritualism in an age of technological advances:

> Railroads, steam, and electricity, and the indubitable wonders which they have wrought, have not proved powerful enough to supersede and destroy that strong innate love of the supernatural which seems implanted in the human mind. Thousands of people are turning tables, and obstinately refusing to believe that physical and mechanical means are in any way connected in the process. Hats, too, are turned, as well as the heads that wear them. (Noakes 25-6)

The strongest skeptical voices, though, radiated from the scientific community, despite the fact that Spiritualism initially carried a modicum of scientific support. In 1894 London physics professor George Carey Foster summarized the concerns of many of his brethren when, concerned about the influence of Spiritualism on his own discipline, he asked Spiritualist Oliver Lodge “is not the whole progress of physics based on the assumption that these [Spiritualistic] things do not happen?” (Noakes 24).

Many of the participants in the Spiritualism movement interested themselves in defining its parameters themselves, rather than permitting skeptical critics to label
séances as a collection of charlatans preying on the curious and the mourning by orchestrating increasingly complicated hoaxes. For example, Spiritualist William Howlitt in *The History of the Supernatural in All Ages and Nations* (1863) encapsulated the movement and its meaning for Victorian society more cogently than any of his equally enthusiastic contemporaries. It is worth quoting in full:

> Everyone who enters into Spiritualism very soon becomes aware of how perpetually he is under the observation of invisible eyes and ears, and I have had different persons say they never realized this in any degree before. The assertion that we had angels and spirits about us, was a sort of indifferent or poetical idea in the mind, but was not a living truth. Spiritualism at once makes it palpable, and awfully real, and people begin to say, “I can no longer say and do things as I did before. My whole being is open to spiritual realities. A fair outside will no longer do, I see that I must be genuine and pure all through and through.”

(Howlitt, from Melechi 191)

A more concise but similar definition may be found in the 1861 book *The Natural and Supernatural, or Man Physical, Apparitional and Spiritual*, in which author John Jay defines the movement as “the belief in the existence of SPIRIT AS PERSON, endowed with mental perceptions and powers of force; by which he can, though invisible, act according to his invisible physical powers, as man can with his visible physical energies” (Jay, in Brown, Burdett and Thurschwell 7; capitalization Jay’s). It was important for these definitions to situate the elements of Spiritualism outside the realm of the empirically-verifiable sciences. The act of inscribing the movement through filters that could not necessarily be tested or measured removed it to a space outside of conventional scientific discourse. Subsequently, it was rendered essentially immune to scientific methods of investigation.
Spiritualism was difficult to define clearly because of its being widespread and containing many sub-groups which existed at odds with one another. It may however essentially be understood to involve the pursuit of any practices dedicated to communicating with the dead. The underlying thought that motivates this movement, or series of movements, is significant: the sincere belief that the dead were present and sentient, that it was possible that the dead could speak with the living, and that more importantly the dead had information that was useful for the living to hear.

Spiritualism evolved through several phases before the notion of the self-manifesting ghost took the forefront position. Spiritualism originated as a fascination with mesmerism, which entailed the belief that a “superfine fluid,” originally discovered by Franz Anton Mesmer in Germany in 1778 (Darnton 3) but quickly spreading to British culture, pulsed through and surrounded all living bodies. This fluid formed auras of “animal magnetism” around and within all living things, which experienced mesmerists could tap into, and so render the patient’s body virtually catatonic and subsequently extremely responsive to suggestion. Patients’ reactions were diverse, but some mesmerized patients seemed to be able to foretell tragic events and converse with the dead (Darnton 8). In a series of performances that prefigured the popular of last part of the nineteenth century, this early iteration exists in which dead people could be contacted by a mesmerized person who appeared to be dead. Largely, the manipulation of this animal magnetism was believed to be enormously therapeutic. Communicating with the dead was performed less to channel specific messages from beyond the world of the living as it was to validate the legitimacy and the transcendent receptivity of the
Mesmeric state. Public exhibitions of mesmerism became wildly popular though conventional scientists were increasingly critical of its practice as the century progressed.

Mesmerism grew to encompass other practices that would become wildly popular, while at the time being derided by critics as dangerous “pseudo-science.” One of the new “sciences” thus critiqued was galvanism, the belief that invisible electric fields could be used to cure diseases and, in extreme cases, restore life to dead tissue. These notions did find their way into literary culture; a spirited series of discussions on galvanism between Percy Shelley and Lord Byron that Mary Shelley allegedly overheard helped her form the ideas for how her protagonist Victor Frankenstein would bring his monster to life.

The notion, highlighted in *Frankenstein*, of Spiritualism’s connection to the dead (or apparently dead) human body should not be disregarded. All of the components of Spiritualism involved the postmortem human body or a constructed perception of the postmortem human body, in some way. Mesmerism induced a cataleptic state that for many subjects of the procedure represented death. Rhoda Broughton’s short ghost story “The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth” (1868), for example, offers a characteristic description of catalepsy that paints it as synonymous with death and rendering a living body, if only temporarily, into the state of the corpse. “Betsy” writes in a letter of her cataleptic cousin who “immediately on being attacked his whole body becomes rigid, his eyes glassy and staring, his complexion livid” (Broughton 79-80). Perhaps in a more direct way, mesmerism was designed to diagnose and treat medical conditions that had been undiscovered or misdiagnosed by traditional medical professionals, thus at least in theory preventing a living human body from becoming a
corpse by eliminating the diseases that infest it. Galvanism involved the animation of
dead animal and human tissue by electricity; the stimulation of muscles and nerve
responses allowed the dead at least to appear to behave, if even in the barely perceptible
or most grotesque sense, still to be alive. The state of galvanic influence, or catalepsy,
also describes the condition that conductors of séances, decades later, would frequently
lapse into while attempting to establish contact with the dead. Séances, of course,
allowed for a portal to be opened “from the other side,” through which the dead might
return to communicate, usually through the altered voice of the medium or through
knocks and other indistinct noises, but occasionally in the form of fully-formed ghostly
manifestations. The human body returns in spiritual form, sometimes visible and
sometimes immaterial, to attend these successful séances.

Literary contributions to this discourse focused on the notion that the dead and even
galvanized human body might achieve a true state of living death. It was believed that,
while maintaining its role as lifeless dross, the corpse might be made to attain a sort of
agency that could place it outside of human control. In other words, the corpse might not
actually be a thing that, even with the apparatus of rationality and emerging science, is
susceptible to the human will and desire for understanding.

Mary Shelley was clearly connected with her culture’s discussion of galvanism,
the theory by which electricity might be used to return life to dead animal or human
tissue. Experiments toward establishing this theory, performed on the Continent during
the middle of the eighteenth century and occasionally touring through England, were
familiar to nineteenth century British culture. Though the majority of these experiments
had been performed upon thousands of frogs, a handful of experiments with the corpses of executed criminals had produced a few electricity-induced postmortem muscle reactions and so the notion of reanimating a dead human being existed within the cultural discourse. In her introduction to the 1831 edition of *Frankenstein*, Shelley describes the role of her exposure to such ideas and how these shaped the novel she had, for the first time, taken direct credit for having written:

Many and long were the conversations between Lord Byron and [Percy] Shelley, to which I was a devout but nearly silent listener. During one of these, various philosophical doctrines were discussed, and among others the nature of the principle of life, and whether there was any possibility of its ever being discovered and communicated. [Erasmus Darwin’s experiment, in which a “piece of vermicelli” was placed in a glass case and began to move independently, is described here. This passage is worthy of mention, though, mostly because it contains the only time Shelley refers to herself in the first person as anything other than an observer of Byron and her husband’s conversations.] Perhaps a corpse could be re-animated; galvanism had given token of such things: perhaps the component parts of a creature might be manufactured, brought together, and endued with vital warmth. (Shelley, 1831, 22)

As Mary Shelley’s role in these conversations is never detailed in the writings of the other participants, we can never really know if she was as “silent” a listener as she claims to have been. But she was clearly “devout.” She took note of the subjects of these conversations, as the description of how galvanism might “re-animate” a corpse seems very much in keeping with the tone and the technique of reanimation in the novel itself.

Shelley’s use of her curiosity about galvanism to achieve a literary end is instructive, as it is productive to consider that an unquestioned faith in Spiritualism was not necessarily the aim of even the most ardent Spiritualists. An adherence to the tenets of Spiritualism did not entail unconditional acceptance of all things supernatural, any
more than did its opponents universally reject everything it brought forth.\textsuperscript{48} Florence Marryat offers an erudite defense of Spiritualism, as well as a detailed collection of anecdotes from some of the more successful séances in which she participated, in her expansive treatise \textit{There Is No Death} (1891).\textsuperscript{49} She skewers as unworthy members within the Spiritualism conversation those who hold both ideological extremes, the unquestioningly credulous as well as the close-minded skeptic. The first group, those who believe, without examination, anything presented to them,

\begin{quote}
[w]ithout giving themselves the trouble to obtain proofs of the genuineness of the manifestations [instead] rush impetuously from one acquaintance to the other, detailing their experience with so much exaggeration and so much unbounded faith, that they make the absurdity of it patent to all. (Marryat 50)
\end{quote}

In other words, those too-exuberant Spiritualists serve mainly to discredit the entire movement. On the other hand, skeptics “are, as a rule, so intensely bigoted and hard-headed, and narrow minded, that they overdo their protestations, and render them harmless. The sceptic refuses to believe \textit{anything}, because he has found out \textit{one} thing to be a fraud” (Marryat 50-1, italics and spelling Marryat’s). An adherence to scientific thinking has blinded these skeptics to such an extent that the discovery of any imposture serves unhesitatingly to invalidate the entire Spiritualist movement.

Spiritualist thinkers were careful to acknowledge that fakery was possible, and even rampant, and so devised theories to help shape a sense of structural legitimacy for their endeavors. For example, chemist Karl von Reichenbach claimed to have discovered a ghostly substance he called “odyle,” accessible non-consciously and only by certain “sensitive” individuals, which could be used as a vehicle for mediumistic communication
with spirits. The source of the “odyle” was directly connected to the human body, both the living and the decomposing, which allegedly emitted a “delicate, fiery” light “as it were a breathing flame” (Morley 405) that was not visible to every human observer. Interestingly, for Spiritualists the human corpse seemed to be preferred as a vehicle for “odyles” much more than the living human body. Henry Morley, in the *Household Words* article “New Discoveries in Ghosts” (1852), reported that one of his supernaturally-perceptive “sensitives,” Mademoiselle Reichel, was able to perceive “odyllic” flames hovering over the gravestones marking recent burials, but not older graves, as the odyllic energy there had long decayed away to nothing. Furthermore, Morley claims that “[t]here can be no doubt that in our minds and bodies, there are powers latent, or nearly latent, in the ordinary healthy man, which, in some particular constitutions, or under the influence of certain agents, or certain classes of disease, become active and develope themselves in an extraordinary way” (Morley, in Brown, Burdett and Thurschwell 53, archaic spellings Morley’s). In other words, due to differing levels of receptivity to “odyllic” energy, not everyone could access the spirit world and communicate with ghosts. As a result, a culture of elitism could thus develop around investigations of “odyllic” energy, one that could categorically exclude the skeptic as one who was incapable of participating.

This attempt to infuse Spiritualism with scientific-sounding language did not allow for its acceptance by the conventional scientific community. Ultimately, such theoretical proposals were quickly filtered out of scientific discourse and labeled “pseudo-science,” based largely on aforementioned mainstream scientific concerns that
Spiritualist ideas were essentially empirically untestable (Lyons 143). Odyllic energy, for example, could not be measured (or even visibly perceived by most people, for that matter). Furthermore, skepticism was fueled by the control Spiritualist practitioners exerted over the environments in which manifestations took place. In dark rooms chosen by the medium and with rigid seating arrangements and rules of behavior established, testing could not be performed by outside agencies, and fraudulence was, of course, always possible. It is not surprising that the language of performance was more often used to frame the discussion of the séance, by skeptics and practitioners alike, than was the language of the laboratory. However, there was no true consensus on whether the theatrical nature of these performances created the séance itself, as the skeptics believed, or merely acted as guides and interpreters for the spirits themselves, as the believers insisted.

**Skepticism**

The issue of belief in the supernatural tenets of Spiritualism was highlighted by these untestable conditions and by the resultant inconsistencies that seemed to accompany any attempt to comprehend their manifestations. However, writers who embraced the supernatural, both through fiction and philosophic tracts, consistently demonstrated the ability to textually position the ghost in the place that was rhetorically immune to assaults from scientific discourse. Charles Kingsley’s largely-forgotten children’s novel *The Water-Babies* (1862) ultimately offers us a productive literary filter through which to understand how Spiritualism flourished in a society that largely wished to abandon its previous attachments to the supernatural by assigning them to the status of

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antiquated, “exploded” beliefs and locating them only among isolated uneducated, rural or Irish populations. Kingsley’s text presents a world in which all these “exploded” beliefs in fairy-kind and in the sentient capabilities of all things in the natural world are validated in the midst of London, and specifically at the unpleasant heart of the Industrial Revolution. A race of underwater-dwelling human babies may of course be read as a very interesting reaction to scientific beliefs that were emerging in the nineteenth century, which explored the possibility that all life on earth evolved from creatures which originally lived in the oceans and slowly adapted to terrestrial life. If humanity, or the organisms that eventually evolved into the shape of the human, came from the water, then it is a compelling maneuver toward cyclicity that these humans, in the shape of water-babies, were returning to the place of their evolutionary origin. Moreover, the water-baby might be interpreted as a “survival” from deep time, a reminder, now embedded in superstitious thought and lambasted by the scientifically-minded skeptic, that in the developmental infancy or “baby-state” of its species, humanity was comprised of water-babies.

But it is less the characters in this children’s novel that concern us as the philosophy that validates their appearance in the storyworld. In the end, Kingsley’s speaker offers that the supernatural can never be proven not to exist through its failure to manifest itself every time it is searched for. In regard to the fairy-like water babies, the speaker claims that “no one has a right to say that no water-babies exist, till they have seen no water-babies existing; which is quite a different thing, mind, from not seeing water babies; and a thing which nobody ever did, or perhaps ever will do” (Kingsley 77).
To translate this rationale into a context that intersects with Spiritualism (and Darwinism), we may use it to supplement Marryat’s aforementioned attack on skepticism. To assert that a séance has failed or that a medium has been exposed as a fake does not constitute irrefutable evidence that the entire system of beliefs and the practices motivated by those beliefs can be classified as “exploded” and the supernatural entities upon which they depend be considered categorically nonexistent. A ghost may be seen or not seen, and a medium displaying a ghost may even be exposed as a fraud, but a “true ghost” cannot be seen “not existing.” In accordance with this line of thinking, Victorian empirical science, itself based on shifting, unproven hypotheses and constant revisions of dogma that new discoveries and interpretations were forcing upon it in the nineteenth century, cannot prove a negative. Furthermore, it cannot proclaim with certainty that a thing, no matter how unlikely it may be and no matter how strong a challenge it might present to dominant scientific paradigms, cannot exist. (Such a notion was especially salient when applied to emerging theories of evolution; the absence of a clearly-interpreted fossilized “missing link,” for example, did not invalidate the prospects of the entire theory of evolutionary development.) Thomas Huxley would seem to support this claim, offering in a discussion about the existence of demons in *Science and Christian Tradition* (1893) that “I am unaware of anything that has the right to the title of ‘an impossibility,’ except a contradiction in terms. There are impossibilities logical, but none natural” (Huxley 197). Huxley was, however, troubled that Spiritualism was ultimately incapable of illuminating uniform laws of nature through repeatable empirical observations, which he felt was a crucial feature for any scientific discipline (Lyons 107).
But it was again this very problem that skeptics acknowledged through their own filters of understanding: positive evidence, which was fundamentally inextricable from the practices of professional Spiritualists, would always be more productive than this “negative evidence.” Even the skeptic’s claim that human observation was a flawed method for confirming the validity of any phenomena was inherently troublesome. Robert Chambers, a skeptic who became a believer after attending an American séance in 1856, notes that “[t]he scientific scepticism of our age [. . . ] professes to spring from a sense of the extreme fallaciousness of the human senses” (Chambers, in Lamont 910). This assertion is also an attack on the proponents of conventional nineteenth-century scientific discourse, though, which claimed that it could validate evidence based on empirical observation. In many cases, the societal status of the observer and where that observer was situated within the hierarchical discourse community of scientists determined the overall worth of the observations concerning Spiritualism and ghostly activity in general.

This crisis of evidence played out in the literature of the era, too. Authors of Victorian-era ghost stories often acknowledged how implausible some supernatural narratives could be, especially when these narratives were unaccompanied by traceable empirical evidence. The conversation that begins Mary Louisa Molesworth’s “The Story of the Rippling Train” (originally published in 1887), for example, even highlights what in the absence of empirical evidence might constitute “proof” for an orally-transmitted ghost story. A character at the opening of this piece complains that ghost stories are currently ubiquitous in her culture and that “they’re all ‘authentic,’” really vouched for,
only you never see the person who saw or heard or felt the ghost. It’s always somebody’s
sister or cousin, or friend’s friend” (Molesworth 319). This describes a pattern in the
telling of the nineteenth-century ghost story, which often features a “frame” around the
narrative that allows it to function as a retelling of a ghost story at some point told to the
speaker who now presents it. In addition to “The Story of the Rippling Train,” this
pattern is also featured in J.Y. Akerman’s “The Miniature” [1853], R.S. Hawker’s “The
Botathen Ghost” [1867], George MacDonald’s “Uncle Cornelius His Story” [1869],
Thomas Street Millington’s “No Living Voice” [1872], Wilkie Collins’s “Miss Jeromette
and the Clergyman” [1875], Jerome K. Jerome’s “The Man of Science” [1892], W.W.
Jacobs’s “Jerry Bundler” [1897], F.G. Loring’s “The Tomb of Sarah” [1900] and M.R.
James’s “The Mezzotint” [originally published in 1904]. It may be argued that narratives
framed by epistolary statements also displace access to the first-hand storyteller through
the mediation of the letter-form. It should be noted that is not a universal pattern, as first-
hand ghost-sighting accounts are popular in this era as well. Here, the frustration is not
centered on a lack of verifiable physical evidence, but rather on the lack of access to the
“authenticating” presence of the first-person witness of the ghost story. The notion that
the storyteller’s presence alone constitutes evidence in favor of the story invokes much
earlier traditions, perhaps even pre-literate traditions, in which empirical validation was
not required in order for a story to have value. However, this character’s claim is argued
by the person with whom she converses, who offers that

‘I don’t know that [the lack of access to the first-hand witness] is quite a
reasonable ground for discrediting them en masse [. . .] It is natural enough,
indeed inevitable, that the principal or principals in such cases should be much
In other words, the ghost story, and, by extension, belief in the existence of the ghost, cannot be denied simply because it travels in the manner of oral literature. In being thus transmitted it announces itself as belonging to an older tradition, one in which a story did not require empirical evidence to be disseminated. The story does not lose its value as it travels away from the storyteller. More important, though, is the ability of the nineteenth-century ghost-believer to outmaneuver the emerging rhetoric of science by positioning the ghost into a space that science is not equipped to conquer.

**Shaping of the “new” ghost**

An active ghost was required in order to support this notion that the spirit, essentially an embodied corpse, can be real, as at least an element of oral literature and entirely in spite of contemporary scientific discourse, and that through its appearances it had something to tell the living. The discussion and representation of such entities ended up motivating much of the cultural energy that built and sustained the Spiritualist movement. This migration, crucial to Spiritualism, of the ghost-figure from a frightening, unknowable apparition to that of an entity one may at least partially control and with which one may communicate was not universally celebrated by all of Victorian culture, though. At least one anonymous writer for *Punch*, in 1872, offered a comparison of “Old Ghosts and New” in a poem titled the same. The poet laments that “[t]he Ghosts with eyes of flame and saucer / [a]re now as obsolete as Chaucer” (“Old Ghosts and
New” lines 9-10), placing the pre-Spiritualism ghost in the literary realm and, interestingly, within the territory of what was respected as great literature. The poet further invokes the bygone imagery that attached to ghosts in the older tradition, and it is difficult not to imagine the shade of Marley from Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* being eulogized here: “[n]o ghosts now rattle chains, nor blue light / [e]mit, but ‘Spirit Lights’ - a new light. / [w]hite sheeted ghosts have grown mere fables. Instead of groaning, Ghosts rap tables” (“Old Ghosts and New” lines 11-14). The speaker is not pleased that the old, familiar “white-sheeted ghost” has been forced to retreat to the space of superstition and that the ghostly groan, terrifying but ultimately unreadable, has mutated into the very pedestrian table-rap, which from the earliest days of Spiritualism provided a very decodable series of messages. The “old ghosts,” whose identities and purposes were impenetrably mysterious and could only previously have been guessed at by those to whom they manifested themselves, were now “new ghosts” who communicated clearly their names and intentions to the living, and sometimes these messages were disappointingly very mundane indeed. The poet concludes: “[t]he grisly ghosts of old have vanished; / [t]he ancient Bogies are all banished. How much more credible and pleasant / [t]han the old Spirits of the present!” (“Old Ghosts and New” lines 37-40).

In order to understand the importance of the shift from the “old” ghost to the “new,” it is instructive to consider what a ghost looked like prior to and within the Victorian era. Emerging from a long folkloric medieval tradition of wandering corpses, from which the more corporeal vampire figure would separate itself as a distinct species by the early eighteenth century, the ghost tends to be a largely incorporeal remnant of a
specific deceased human being. In fact, the incorporeal human corpse has long been the
archetypal figure for the ghost in British culture. This figure became extremely popular
during the late eighteenth century throughout the corpus of Gothic horror fiction, whose
plotlines often involved the presence of a ghost, rarely central but always important,
which typically carried a message from beyond the grave for the living. The cowled
hermit-ghost, with the “fleshless jaws and empty sockets of a skeleton” (Walpole 157),
that appears to warn Manfred in Horace Walpole’s *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) about an
impending prophecy, is a good example of this type of supernatural figure, as is the more
grotesque Bleeding Nun in Matthew Lewis’s *The Monk* (1796); “[h]er countenance was
long and haggard; her cheeks and lips were bloodless; the paleness of death was spread
over her features; and her eye-balls, fixed steadfastly upon me, were lustreless and
hollow” (Lewis 170). She is in appearance a very direct reminder of death, a true
“animated corse” (Lewis 170, archaic spelling Lewis’s), and she requires the assistance
of the living in order to expose the vile circumstances of her own murder. The ghost in
the eighteenth century would frequently appear in this way, as a likeness, often terrifying
in some way, sometimes partially decomposed but occasionally invisible, of a formerly
living person.

**Origins of the nineteenth-century ghost**

The pre-nineteenth century ghost in English culture tended to be less gruesome
and almost entirely incorporeal and invisible. Possibly this is the result of Restoration-
era cultural norms which criticized and banned grisly bodily representations in literature
and on the stage and furthermore demonized the supernatural as a by-product of
Catholicism, pushing the ghost even further away from literary discourse. Ghosts would continue to manifest themselves in this culture, though. The infamous Cock Lane ghost provides a good case study for this type of ghost-form. In 1762, a London apartment was reported to be haunted by the ghost of a former tenant, Fanny, whose ghost produced a series of knocking and scratching sounds. These were interpreted as messages from the departed “Scratching Fanny,” a ghost who quickly revealed that she had been poisoned by her fiancé William Kent, who apparently owed his former landlord a significant sum. The séances that took shape around this phenomenon drew a considerable amount of popular attention, and it was amid this frenzy that Samuel Johnson and a team of investigators uncovered the affair as a hoax perpetrated by the frustrated, vengeful landlord Richard Parsons, performed by his artful daughter Elizabeth and embraced by ever-increasing audiences of enthusiastic Londoners (some of whom continued to stand outside the house, listening for ghostly scratches and knocks, long after they were aware that the entire scenario was fraudulent).

Eighteenth-century graveyard poet Thomas Parnell’s “A Night-Piece on Death” (published, interestingly, posthumously in 1722) offers a representative image of the expected form of the ghostly revenant at this time. The speaker night-wanders through a cemetery and after describing the graves he sees as a repository for “a middle race of Mortals” (Fairer and Gerrard 61; line 37, italics and capitalization Parnell’s), he is confronted by a parade of ghostly revenants as the “bursting Earth unveils the shades! / All slow, and wan, and wrap’t with Shrouds, / They rise in visionary Crouds / and with their sober Accent cry, / Think, Mortal, what it is to dye” (Fairer and Gerrard 61; lines 48-
52, italics and capitalization Parnell’s). These ghosts appear as shrouded and incorporeal and deliver a very conventional Christianized *memento mori* type of message. As a “middle race,” though, they are trapped in their liminal space and are not apparently capable of interacting with the living beyond their ability to “unveil” their own shapes and offer a warning “cry” to those still on the earth. In a way, the message these ghosts carry is not conveyed through either their words or actions, but rather through their very presence. They adopt the shape of a human form that is no longer a part of the physical world, and their ghostly presence, as a reminder of the dead person’s absence in the world, embodies the message that they bear for the living.

**The ghost in the nineteenth century**

Emerging from these earlier ghost-traditions, the nineteenth century provided the backdrop for a fundamental shift in the ghost figure. Even without considering the Cock Lane ghost and the work of the graveyard poets, one can see that the supernatural had blossomed in the late eighteenth century in the literary sense, blazing across the culture on the pages of wildly popular Gothic novels. *The Castle of Otranto* and *The Monk* were seminal texts of this period. However, this burgeoning genre quickly became defused by literary works that offered an “explained supernatural,” spearheaded by Ann Radcliffe’s *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794), which revealed its terrifying veiled skeletal specter to be nothing more than a wax mannequin dressed to scare people, later thoroughly parodied by Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (published posthumously in 1818), which lampoons the supernatural leanings of the entire genre by offering pedestrian explanations for any occurrence that might have the slightest possibility of being mistaken for the
supernatural. To “explain” the supernatural was essentially to de-fang the Gothic and the older traditions it purported to represent. Put another way, to “explain” the supernatural was to “naturalize” it, or “explode it,” in this context.56

Truly, the participant in nineteenth-century culture was expected to inherit this skepticism about the existence of ghosts and would be likely to marginalize the supernatural, or specifically to assign belief in them to a primitive place, geographically (such as Ireland), historically (such as the medieval period) or intellectually (such as the malleable psychological space of human childhood). Even some of the characters in nineteenth-century ghost stories expressed concerns with the inherited cultural legacy of the eighteenth-century ghost; the “materialist” Dr. Porter, for example, in Grant Allen’s “Pallinghurst Barrow” (1892), notes:

[i]t’s a very odd fact [. . .] that the only ghosts people ever see are the ghosts of a generation very, very close to them. One hears of lots of ghosts in eighteenth-century costumes, because everyone has a clear idea of wigs and small-clothes from pictures and fancy dresses. One hears of far fewer in Elizabethan dress, because the class most given to beholding ghosts are seldom acquainted with ruffs and farthingales; and one meets with none at all in Anglo-Saxon or ancient British or Roman costumes, because those are only known to a comparatively small class of learned people. (Allen 158)

The implications here are that ghosts are invented by the relatively uneducated who borrow from the nearest historical sources with which they would be at least vaguely familiar, that the previous generation’s ghosts are subsequently the only ones capable of “haunting” the sort of unsophisticated person who would believe in ghosts in the first place, and that the educated elite’s lack of interest in ghosts is apparent because no ghosts are generated from their vast and deep historical knowledge. While many nineteenth-
century ghosts, however, do indeed borrow from much deeper historical roots than the eighteenth century, it should be noted that “Dr. Porter’s” insight is valuable in that it aligns the ghost with the uneducated and the eighteenth century, neither of which are thought to be worthy sources in the speaker’s “educated” nineteenth-century culture. Satirical figurative deployment of the ghost as a living human corpse was also seen within elitist characters in nineteenth-century ghost stories. Perhaps the most notable of these is “Andre Frobisher” in Jean Lorrain’s “Magic Lantern” (1891), who claims, at a large social gathering of wealthy Victorians, that humankind continues to be plagued by a world in which “the Fantastic surrounds us; worse than this, it invades us, chokes us and obsesses us” (Lorrain 172) and that, among the partygoers present, he could “point out to you and name more than fifteen people who are absolutely defunct, but whose cadavers have every appearance of life” (Lorrain 173). He goes on to describe the ghastly behavior and vile accomplishments of these allegedly elite people. The animated human corpse is, in this text, less a folklorically-driven ghost and more a joke, or an amusing metaphor. One is reminded of the ghost whose spectral footsteps allegedly haunt the Ghost Walk at Chesney Wold in Bleak House. While this ghost is never seen its existence is assumed by the aristocratic Mrs. Rouncewell, who “regards a ghost as one of the privileges of the upper classes; a genteel distinction to which the common people have no claim” (Dickens, 1852, 90). The ghost is a coveted possession and a marker of wealth, almost a piece of spectral furniture used to validate a societal positon of privilege, and whether it actually appears or not (and in the novel it does not) is as immaterial as the ghost itself. What matters is that the ghost’s presence indicates a connection to glorious
antiquity and, more practically, the deeply-entrenched nature of the family to which it is attached. Possibly the presence of a ghost could mark a family as older and aristocratic, compared to the ghostless newly-risen middle classes. The story attached to the ghost may even be thought of as a valuable “conversation piece.”

The ghost could also be used as an accessible visual metaphor. Perhaps the most recognized visual satirical representation of the nineteenth-century ghost can be found in the 29 September, 1888 issue of *Punch*. Here, the murders in Whitechapel that would become attributed to a killer called Jack the Ripper, and the horrific slum conditions that were thought to breed and shelter the murderer, are commented upon in “The Nemesis of Neglect” in the form of a terrifying phantom labeled “Crime.” “There floats a phantom of the slum’s foul air, / shaping, to eyes which have the gift of seeing / into the spectre of that loathly lair” (“Nemesis of Neglect”), reads the caption beneath. This description, of a “spectre” carried on the filthy miasma of the “slums” is visible, as Spiritualists claimed of ghosts, only to those with the “gift of seeing,” certainly matches that which would be expected of the nineteenth-century ghost. This particular phantom looks like one would expect a ghost to look like; it is familiar to the viewer in that it is draped in a flowing cloak, floats above the ground and wears a demonic, malevolent expression on its face. Further, it displays a fusion of incorporeality (in its translucence and levitation) and corporeality (in its very humanlike, grasping hands and through the knife it carries) that characterizes the specific kind of bodied-disembodied liminality possessed by the nineteenth-century ghost. The knife, in particular, indicates that this ghost, like the “Crime” it stands in for, represents a physical threat to the human body. The “Nemesis of
Neglect,” in this way, illustrates the use of the ghost to draw attention to the deplorable urban conditions that many in the nineteenth century, including the artist here, felt needed to be addressed. The “spectre” of “Crime” is here treated in the same way that nineteenth-century intellectuals wanted stories about ghosts treated: they should be removed from the heart of the nation’s cultural capital. This message would lose much of its power if the figure of the ghost, however problematic, were not so familiar.

Another value that non-skepticism embodied was its ability to draw people who had strayed back toward religion and penitence. Sir Walter Scott describes, in his lengthy treatise *Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft* (1830), how a credulous approach to the supernatural can always allow believers to find what they are looking for;

> [t]hose who are disposed to look for [evidence validating ghosts specifically and superstition in general] may, without much trouble, see such manifest signs, both of superstition and the disposition to believe in its doctrines, as may render it no useless occupation to compare the follies of our fathers with our own (Scott 274).

In this way the “follies” of the past will be immeasurably difficult to conquer. He continues to outline how the belief in a ghost story and “the influence of superstitious fear may be the appointed means of bringing the criminal to repentance for his own sake, and to punishment for the advantage of society” (Scott 254), inspiring a guilty man through terror to confess to his crime. In a similar fashion, Jude Fawley in Thomas Hardy’s *Jude the Obscure* (1895) uses the belief that ghosts haunted the spaces they used to occupy to connect himself to much-admired early practitioners of Christianity. As he experiences his long-anticipated immersion in the presence of the ancient religious architecture of Christminster, he envisions the ghosts of long-dead Christian scholars who inhabit the structures and joins them by becoming a ghost himself. He imagines himself, amid these religious ghosts, as “a self-spectre, the sensation being that of one who walked but could not make himself seen or heard” (Hardy 81), “seeming thus almost his own ghost [and giving] his thoughts to the other ghostly presences with which the nooks were haunted” (Hardy 82). Contemplation of oneself as a ghost, here, operates as a portal, or
an invitation toward a connection with long-dead luminaries of Christian thought and philosophy. It becomes clear how the lingering presence of the supernatural, and its attendant belief in the ghost as an active, unquiet human corpse, was almost impossible for skeptical nineteenth-century culture to discard wholesale, but efforts, at least from the “educated elite,” to displace its cultural centrality were unceasing.

What is important for the nineteenth-century culture’s elite is this displacement of the supernatural from the cultural center, so that superstitious thinking is not located within those who occupy the top of the hierarchy. Even the aristocratic young Victor Frankenstein claims that his father had protected him from access to information about “supernatural horrors” and that “I do not ever remember to have trembled at a tale of superstition, or to have feared the apparition of a spirit” (Shelley, 1818, 79; Shelley, 1831, 53). (Significantly, Frankenstein does not allude to encounters with “supernatural horrors” but rather to “tales” about such, further distancing him from this material and implying that it is only in the form of the story that “supernatural horrors” exist at all.) It is this absolute lack of fear that allows him to procure the corpse parts he needs to fashion his creation, as he can scour charnel houses and graveyards at night without any concern that dead bodies he disturbs possess any supernatural abilities, and is confident in his knowledge that they are in fact nothing more than lifeless matter. He believes that he can bring life to this dead matter through science while the supernatural realm, about which he learned nothing during his formative childhood years, is not considered as another means through which life can be returned to dead material.59
Perhaps Frankenstein’s childhood, in which he was sheltered from “supernatural horrors,” embued him with the courage, via ignorance, to pursue the science of bringing life from death. Other nineteenth-century texts reveal how collisions between fear and skepticism typically resulted in the former conquering the latter. Fear, in other words, could chase away skepticism very quickly, and Sheridan LeFanu’s speaker Reverend Thomas Herbert in the short story “The Familiar” (1872) illustrates how tenuous a grasp the skeptical mindset truly had in the nineteenth century. Alarmed by ghostly echoes and shadowy forms that seem to follow him on his after-midnight walk home, he comments how “[s]o little a matter, after all, is sufficient to upset the pride of scepticism and vindicate the old simple laws of nature within us” (LeFanu 213). Importantly, “superstitious fear” is the “old simple law of nature” and as such can easily nudge modern scientifically-infused skepticism aside, when a frightening situation presents itself. Another example may be found in Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White* (1859), which provides a scene in which a Limmeridge schoolboy is punished by his teacher for claiming to have seen a ghost and, though he knows his punishment will end if he admits he was mistaken, he tearfully refuses to do so. There is no place for the ghost in the classroom, but the ghost cannot be exorcised by punishing its witnesses. Furthermore, his teacher, fearing the ghost story will flourish among the other students, threatens that “if the thing spreads among any of the rest of you [students], I mean to go a step further, and cane the ghost out of the whole school” (Collins, 1859, 80-1); significantly, here one suffers punishment upon one’s own corporeal body unless he denies his belief in the existence of the incorporeal human body. Ghosts, then, continued to exist in these
Spiritualism-infused environments, defying the culture of skepticism that would have liked to have erased them as the embarrassing superstitious detritus of a less-civilized, bygone era.

Even ghosts could become outdated, though. The passive, ethereal ghost-figures that had dominated Gothic fiction in the eighteenth century had essentially vanished by the dawning of the nineteenth century or, if they appeared, it was only to mock the Gothic tradition as does the supernatural in Jane Austen’s *Northanger Abbey* (published in 1818, but written much earlier). A new ghost was needed for this culture, one which reflected the new understandings of the supernatural which were blossoming at the time. As illustrated in Jennifer Bann’s “Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency: The Changing Figure of the Nineteenth Century Specter” (2009), Spiritualism likely helped as literary ghosts transitioned as the century progressed from the limited specters of Gothic fiction, which were trapped and constrained by death and unable to interact productively with the living world beyond providing themselves and frightening visions. The rise of Spiritualism, Bann argues, may have been responsible for this shift, as there emerged “conviction that the dead were willing and able to communicate with the living, and that what they had to say was worth listening to” (Bann 667). Bann uses the figure of Jacob Marley’s ghost in Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843) to indicate the appearance and behavior of an early-nineteenth-century ghost; he is like Parnell’s cemetery spirits, essentially ineffectual in the world of the living, and is marked symbolically through his entirely transparent body (Dickens, 1843, 17) and by lugging a series of chains around with him but, more importantly, unable to repair the damage done by the sins he committed when he was
alive. In the end, he is consigned to wringing his hands miserably, and unable to resolve
his own situation, he must attempt to persuade the still-living Ebeneezer Scrooge and
other living sinners, perhaps even including the readers, through his cautionary example,
“to change their ways that his eternal soul can be freed” (Bann 663).

Another series of ghosts in this liminal position can be found in Amelia Edwards’
“The Phantom Coach” (1864). These ghosts are locked into perpetually re-enacting the
horrific coach accident that cost them their lives. Such a performance is a relatively new
feature to ghost-lore, as complicated re-enactments did not tend to be part of the
repertoire of eighteenth-century ghosts. The speaker unwittingly climbs into the haunted
eighteenth-century coach and meets its doomed cadre of ghosts, whereupon her description of their
appearance offers them as entities that are truly in-between. As ghosts they are clearly
dead, but their incorporeality is compromised by their retention of decomposing features
and other markers of corporeality; “[a] pale phosphorescent light – the light of
putrefaction – played upon their awful faces; upon their hair, dank with the dews of the
grave; upon their clothes, earth-stained and dropping to pieces; upon their hands, which
were as the hands of corpses long buried” (Edwards 42-3). Bodily decay is clearly
mapped upon these non-bodily entities. But perhaps it is the gaze of these ghosts that
most potently situates them as creatures between life and death. She is horrified when a
ghost she addresses looks at her with “eyes [that] glowed with an unnatural lustre”
(Edwards 42) and notes with terror that “[o]nly their eyes, their terrible eyes, were living;
and those eyes were all turned menacingly upon me!” (Edwards 43), she claims. In this
instance the speaker has become the spectacle and the ghosts have become the observers
and, significantly, the ghosts use a “living” gaze to establish this relationship. (If the
ghost is truly a mirror then a ghost that meets the gaze of a living person is essentially
christening that person as dead and, possibly by extension, as a ghost herself. As the
speaker, here, is forced to participate in re-enactment of the ghost coach’s deadly plunge,
perhaps the invitation implied through the ghost’s mirror-eyes is enhanced even further.)
These ghosts, similar to many nineteenth-century ghosts, defy easy classification when
the terminology of older traditions is used, as their balance between appearing as rotting
human corpses and glowing spiritual entities allows them to be seen as unequivocally
transitional. Broughton’s narrator from the aforementioned “The Truth, the Whole Truth,
and Nothing but the Truth” perhaps sums up most productively the anxieties stirred up by
confronting a ghost, as a body without a body, in essence:

  You know how firmly I believe in apparitions, and what an unutterable fear I have
of them; anything material, tangible, that I can lay hold of – anything of the same
fibre, blood and bone as myself, I could, I think, confront bravely enough; but the
mere thought of being brought face to face with the ‘bodiless dead,’ makes my
brain unsteady. (Broughton 78)

Another ghost-in-transition figure, which exhibits the shift from the passive to
active ghost, is found in Fitz-James O’Brien’s short story “What Was It?” (1859). In this
piece, the protagonist is attacked in his sleep by a malevolent entity which he is able to
defeat and capture; this supernatural creature, in spite of its ability to nearly strangle the
protagonist and the fact that it can be physically restrained, remains completely invisible
to the human eye. The protagonist is terrified by his encounter, even though he wins the
physical confrontation:
I had one arm firmly clasped round a breathing, painting, corporeal shape, my other hand gripped with all its strength a throat as warm, and apparently fleshy, as my own; and, yet, with this living substance in my grasp, with its body pressed against my own, and all in the bright glare of a large jet of gas, I absolutely beheld nothing! Not even an outline - a vapour! (O’Brien 108)

It is real but it cannot be seen; the connection to the manifestations perceived, or felt, during Victorian séances is obvious. In fact, while the protagonist and his friend discuss how this “Something” is “such a thing [that] has never occurred since the birth of the world” (O’Brien 110) and liken it to the invisible hands that can be felt in “spirit circles,” they stop themselves in mid-sentence just before they actually call it a ghost. Eventually, the men decide to create a plaster cast of the “Invisible,” as they call it, and the result reveals that “it was shaped like a man - distorted, uncouth, and horrible, but still a man. It was small, not over four feet and some inches in height, and its limbs revealed a muscular development that was unparalleled. Its face surpassed in hideousness anything I had ever seen” (O’Brien 111). More specifically, it possessed “the physiognomy of what I should fancy a ghoul might be. It looked as if it was capable of feeding on human flesh” (O’Brien 111-2). The devilish, or demonic, apparent appearance of the “Mystery,” as it was also called, might serve as an attempt in the text to reconcile how a real, living creature might also be invisible. Perhaps such a demonic phrenology hearkens to a more distant time, in which Christian superstition posited the devil and his evil minions as very real, if not entirely visible, ghoulish creatures which could infiltrate the world, and were certainly capable of eating human flesh, among other atrocities.

Here, then, within a short story published the very year that Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* was published (though ideas about evolution and natural selection were in
cultural circulation decades prior to this point), the reader finds that the way to understand how a ghost might simultaneously be corporeal and unseen involves a reacquaintance with the old, heavily criticized and ridiculed, “exploded” thought processes. These beliefs had for centuries populated the shadow world with monsters and fueled these through superstitious belief and practice.

**Folklore feeds the “ghostly environment”**

For the conventional nineteenth-century British mind, the implication that superstition and folklore, not science and rationality, were the ways to understand the supernatural was difficult, especially within such a class-based society. As the nineteenth century progressed, these ghosts of folklore, though long entrenched, were being increasingly marginalized by a society that emphasized science and empiricism over old stories, so to speak. Most mediums were women, and the opportunity to take on the role of the medium provided “one of the few avenues available to women of any social class that authenticated public speaking” (Cheryl Reed, in Branca 207). It should not be underestimated that the presence and power women seemed to wield within this emerging practice was likely threatening to those entrenched within the traditional male-dominated scientific and literary communities. Misogynistic backlash at the perceived female domination of Spiritualism, for example, may be typified by “ghost grabber” (professional skeptic) L. Forbes Winslow’s claim in his book *Spiritualist Madness* (1877) that increasing rates of reported insanity in Britain were the direct result of Spiritualistic influences upon “weak-minded hysterical women” (Walkowitz 174).
Even more specifically, though, credulous feelings toward ghosts and the supernatural were very frequently aligned with servants, whose lack of education or rural roots allowed the germs of folklore to fester. When Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s speaker in “At Chrighton Abbey” (1871) claims that “it is natural for an old servant to believe in such things [as the ghost stories that swirl around the ruined abbey] but for me - an educated woman of the world – preposterous folly” (Braddon 182) she echoes the sentiment of many educated Britons in the nineteenth century. (It should be added that the unfolding of the plot completely destroys her skepticism by the story’s end, though.)

Charles Ollier’s short article “A Few Passages on Dreams, Night-Noises, and Phantoms” (1844) walks through a series of explanations for apparent supernatural phenomena, assigning most nocturnal sounds to cats and rats, but enthusiastically affixes the blame for disseminating ghost stories predominantly on servant girls, whose “[w]ant of education is at the root of the mischief” because “[w]ith the dense stupidity in which the majority of girls who go out to service are brought up, is combined a large portion of cunning” (Ollier 507). He posits that:

Servant girls, indeed, are very industrious and very effectual propagators of wonderful stories. They delight in them: such tales constitute the food in which their minds exist; and they are angry with any one who should snatch them from a dark and ‘fearful joy,’ and place them in the light of reason. (Ollier 507)

The servant girl is a threat to Ollier and ostensibly his audience in *Charles Ainsworth’s Magazine* because she “fearfully” delights in these stories and, in using these stories as “food” she is actually biologically sustained by them. Furthermore, she defends this archaic tradition by circulating ghost stories and ferociously protecting them from the
“light of reason” which would explode them. That such power could be held by the uneducated, and female, must have been terrifying to those such as Ollier who believed themselves alone entitled to steer the direction of cultural discourse.

Largely, too, ghosts in general were thought to be remnants of older traditions, “exploded beliefs” that were increasingly confined to rural and Irish environments, or anywhere that was associated with archaic thinking and attachments to superstition. A short article in the *Dublin Penny Journal*, “The Haunted Chamber” (1835), for example, describes in vivid detail how receptive the Irish were thought to be to ghost stories, and how empowering they might have been for a weary, laboring person:

> Give an Irish peasant, after the labours of the day, a comfortable turf fire – place him around it with all the young and old of his acquaintances – let the tale of ghost and goblin go around – let him listen to the garrulity of old age, as it records the wondrous adventures that happened while the bloom of youth were yet upon his cheek, and he will deem himself happier than the sons of the noble and the wealthy of the land. (W.R. 58)

Early folklorists, in fact, focused on Irish and rural communities in their attempts to collect narratives to help them connect with and understand the long-lost world of ancient Britain. Never was it thought that such superstitious content might also be generated and circulated in progressive, urban settings where science and technology were pushing “exploded” traditions aside. The speaker in Sheridan LeFanu’s novel *The Haunted Baronet* (1871) articulates the pervasiveness of superstition in the face of rationality and religion by describing of his protagonist that “[t]here is a faculty in man that will acknowledge the unseen. He may scout and scare religion from him; but if he does, superstition perches near” (LeFanu 86). In other words, the need to look for the
supernatural lies deep within humanity and is essentially a default response to the presence of the unknown. As such it is not a “faculty” which can be forcibly outgrown by exposure to new cultural trends.

Push-backs against the trend toward burying older traditions existed, though, and the resuscitation of folklore, and myth, against the nineteenth-century’s drive to push it aside are not difficult to find in literature. David Armitage, in “Monstrosity and Myth in Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein,*” explores how Shelley’s narrative essentially brings myth back to life within the milieu of the nineteenth century after it had been marginalized to death amid the cultural understanding that “[m]odernity should always be inhospitable to myth, that residue of primitive rationality; myths should dissolve at the approach of modernity’s demystifications” (Armitage 201). Shelley’s work, however, not only reclaimed the “dead matter” of myth for prose after eighteenth-century literary thought had consigned it to the space of poetry, but it also resuscitated the specific Prometheus myth, housing this new iteration in the reanimated human corpse of Frankenstein’s unnamed monster. Both Prometheus and Frankenstein’s monster are resurrected corpses and both discover the secrets of how fire works, though the monster does so without access to the divine (Shelley, 1818, 130). But the monster, unlike Prometheus, uses this discovery to shape the means to conceive of his own destruction, by way of self-immolation. Perhaps an implication is carried here that the resuscitation of older mythic traditions, like the resuscitation of the human corpse, is ultimately doomed to fail.

Mary Shelley also provides a further complication to this nineteenth-century impulse to marginalize the ghost story in her essay “On Ghosts,” claiming that *kairos*
matters in terms of the Victorian ability to accept the ghost story. Here, a narrative concerning a frightening supernatural entity may be told at noon and scoffed at as entertaining superstition, but if the same tale is presented at “twelve at night in a lone house” amid an environment that includes “flapping curtains, rushing wind, a long and dusky passage, an half open door - O, then, truly, another answer may be given” (Shelley, 1990, 335). In other words, tapping into older literary traditions which could provide a properly Gothic setting, and thereby allow the reader to enter the storyworld from which the ghost comes, lends such stories the credibility that the light of day, even in the intellectual “brightness” of Victorian culture, disallows. Even skeptical writers toward the end of the century acknowledged that an allegedly “haunted” location could be powerful enough to produce the likelihood of a ghost sighting; Lionel Alexander Weatherly claimed in *The Supernatural?* (1891) that “the medium of terror, a superstitious and ignorant mind, will, indeed, lead people to fill with spectres, all places with a history of some past crime and wickedness” (Weatherly 93).

Dickens’s speaker in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870, incomplete) comments on the importance of the appropriate environment as a means to stimulate the belief in ghosts for a person who would otherwise be prone to a healthy sense of Victorian skepticism. In regard to some of the darker and more secluded nooks of Cloisterham, the speaker claims that the reader might

[a]sk the first hundred citizens of Cloisterham, met at random in the streets at noon, if they believed in Ghosts, they would tell you no; but put them to choose at night between these eerie precincts and the thoroughfare of shops, and you will find that ninety-nine declared for the longer round and the more-frequented way. (Dickens, 1870, 128)
In other words, as the speaker encapsulates in this unattributed (ghostly?) reflection, "[i]f
the dead do, under any circumstances, become visible to the living, these are such likely
surroundings for the purpose, that I, the living, will get out of them as soon as I can"
(Dickens, 1870, 128). In short, the living do not want to find themselves in the presence
of the supernatural dead. Those living in nineteenth-century England, even those in as
rural a place as Cloisterham in which superstitions still allegedly reigned, knew they
should not believe in ghosts; in the daytime and on a busy thoroughfare they did not, but
could not suspend that disbelief when finding themselves in an environment in which
tradition had trained them to expect that a ghost might appear. The ghost of superstition
here continues to haunt a society that in many quarters wishes, to outgrow it.

The time of year may be added to this equation as a method of enhancing the
appeal of the ghost story in Victorian culture. The longstanding tradition of telling ghost
stories at Christmastime, for example, establishes the ghost story as being particularly
more present and welcome during the cold and dark month of December. (In the ancient,
rural environments in which many of these stories originated, December was a time in
which little agricultural labor was possible and therefore provided ideal quiet spaces for
storytelling. Urbanization reduced the availability of such spaces, perhaps helping to
push the ghost story into written form, which required fewer sustained periods of time in
order to experience.) Literary voices acknowledged that there was a clearly-defined
proper time-of-year for the ghost story, frequently situating their plotlines around
Christmastime. A group of enthusiastic young people in Thomas Street Millington’s
short ghost story “No Living Voice” (1872), for example, direct their potential ghost-
storyteller’s efforts toward appropriate subject matter:

‘[n]ow we don’t want theories, and we won’t have naked facts; they are hardly
proper at any time, and at this period of the year, with snow upon the ground, they
would be most unseasonable; but we must have that story fully and feelingly
related to us, and we promise to give it a respectful hearing, implicit belief, and
unbounded sympathy.’ (Millington 191)

“Theories” and “facts” in regard to the ghost story are absolutely unwelcome at this time
of year and so long as the storyteller avoids them in the course of his storytelling and tells
“fully” and “feelingly” his ghost story, his audience promises to “listen,” “believe,” and
feel “sympathy” toward it. In other words, as long as there is “snow on the ground,” the
ghost story is in its element.

Even the skeptic is sometimes forced to admit the importance of specific
environments conducive for contact with the supernatural. For example, “On Ghosts,” a
short, late-Enlightenment-fueled article by Alexis in The Belfast Monthly Magazine
(1812) which attempts to apply rationality as a means to defeat the superstititious fear of
the supernatural, confesses that “[s]ome roads and places are still somewhat famous for
the appearance of spirits, especially those near ruins or plantings” and that “[m]idnight,
agreeably to every information, is the chief time that spirits make their appearance”
(Alexis 100). It should be added that not even daylight unconditionally offered
protection from the fears that were supposed to belong to the darkness. A literary
example of the diurnal presence of supernatural fear is expressed by Sheridan LeFanu’s
speaker in “The Familiar” (1872), who notes his surprise at the strong reaction he feels to
a ghost account just told to him; “though it was broad daylight, there was nevertheless
something disagreeably contagious in the nervous excitement” suffered by the storyteller (LeFanu 227).

Nonetheless, the issue of setting (especially as it pertains to darkness) is a very important one, as the performers of spectacles of Spiritualism, through the séances in particular, almost without exception provided a very controlled setting in which to frame their rituals. The séance, essentially a ritual performed as an attempt to communicate with ghosts, almost always took place in a completely or virtually dark room, typically on the property of the séance’s conductor, seating arrangements for attendees were usually enforced, and strict rules of behavior for the participants were expected to be followed.63 In other words, the proper environment, similar to that described above by Shelley, was constructed and maintained, so that the human mind would be more likely to be open to the idea of seeing a ghost or other supernatural manifestation.64 The human corpse could return as a ghost but could only be seen if the proper ritual was practiced.

**Victorian body-part totems and spirit photography**

However, in some cases the presence of the human corpse, or at least parts of it, was largely considered almost universally acceptable and its totemic value was not assailed by skeptics.65 Not all of the human corpse of the loved one was always disposed of, in short. For example, nineteenth-century mourning practices often involved collecting a small amount of material from the body of the deceased, usually a lock of hair but occasionally a tooth, which would then be fashioned into some sort of jewelry to be worn by the bereaved as a physical reminder of the human being who was now a corpse. These were relatively stable body parts to use here, as neither hair nor teeth
would decay quickly, and thus would serve as a reminder of the person who had died. It was a corporeal authentication of the person’s existence in life, rather than as a reminder of the process of bodily decomposition. These relics gave shape to the incorporeal, in a sense, and could be read as comprising “a material for memory” (Marcia Pointon, quoted by Lutz 135). This was a resuscitation of medieval and pre-Reformation relic culture, in which body parts of saints were revered, prayed to and thought to provide an active conduit for speaking to the saint himself or herself, who might then speak to God on behalf of the one praying to the relic. Clearly, the Victorian expression of this notion was entirely secular, as it was the body parts of loved ones, not saints, that were preserved, and no miracles nor lines of communication were expected to be possible through the relic itself. Queen Victoria, mourning over the loss of Albert, commissioned the creation of at least eight pieces of hair jewelry from relics taken from Albert’s body (Lutz 132) and this act helped to solidify the popularity of this trend for Victorian society. A significant industry in manufacturing hair jewelry from hair taken from corpses developed by the middle of the century. This industry became moderately controversial as widespread and validated accusations exposed how the genuine corpse’s hair was frequently not actually used in the making of the memorial jewelry at all, and that the workers used their own hair or, in some cases, even animal hair instead. Eventually, scientific developments would override this folkloric tradition, as photography replaced these relics as souvenirs of the dead. Photography essentially served the same function as body jewelry, in that they both offered a physical, often painful reminder of the dead as,
in the words of Barthes, something “that-has-been” and can never be duplicated, replaced, or encountered again (Lutz 135).

Spirit photography provided another method of preserving the physical body of the loved one. Specifically, its popularity illustrates how folkloric thought simply adapted itself to developing technological advances and effectively absorbed them. It offered the possibility for a grieving person to be photographed under such conditions that a hazy, ghostlike image of the lost loved one would appear next to the sitter when the photograph was developed. In this way, the loved one could be remembered in a way that would never decompose. The range of spirit photography images depicts everything from painted resemblances of the dead loved one to swirling masses of ectoplasm that represented the dead person’s presence. Spirit photography was unusual in that it demonstrated how scientific advances were not always the anathema to believers in ghosts, as, here, an emerging technological development served to access alleged supernatural activity rather than clash with it. This kind of photography was done typically through double-exposure or other trickery unbeknownst the grieving person posing for it, and originated when American photographer William Mumler accidentally double-exposed a photograph in the 1860s and realized its market-potential within a culture obsessed with Spiritualism and seeking empirical assurance that an afterlife was possible. Likely, he and other spirit photographers exposed the grieving client’s photograph through a glass plate on which a “spirit” had been drawn, which in many cases had been hidden in front of his plate-holder, or simply double-printed the photograph, with the first print being that of the sitter and the second that of the “spirit”
Even when Mumler’s technique was publicly exposed, spirit photography remained popular, if increasingly peripheral, well into the twentieth century. It is true that the earlier folkloric practice of keeping corpse-part souvenirs was replaced by photography, but this is not a case of a scientific, technological development supplanting folkloric thought. Instead, technology was used to generate “evidence” of folkloric belief.

The idea of the ghost even found its way into the scientific discourse of the nineteenth century, in the form of poisonous miasma. One popular theory attempted to explain how cholera and typhus were able to rampage so quickly through crowded urban slums by locating the source of the contagion in deadly vapors that radiating from rotting human corpses, finding its way into wells and the air of the city, and spreading disease when victims either drink or breathe them in. The ghost imagery is clear; these miasmic ghosts carry identical identities to those in folklore, rising as cloudy vapors from decomposing human bodies and haunting the living. These ghosts infect the living with diseases that were likely to convert them into ghosts themselves. Dickens was troubled by this idea, and in “The Uncommercial Traveler” chapter “City of London Churches” (1860), describes his attendance at a church sermon (the name of which he remains willfully ignorant of, as is his intention) service in which his mind wanders in the direction of miasmic ghosts and the implications of taking their poisonous vapors into his own living body. The lengthy passage is worth quoting in full:

The opening of the service recalls my wandering thoughts. I then find, to my astonishment, that I have been, and still am, taking a strong kind of invisible snuff up my nose, into my eyes, and down my throat. I wink, sneeze, and cough. The
clerk sneezes; the clergyman winks; the unseen organist sneezes and coughs (and probably winks); all our little party wink, sneeze, and cough. The snuff seems to be made of the decay of matting, wood, cloth, stone, iron, earth, and something else. Is the something else, the decay of dead citizens in the vaults below? As sure as Death it is! Not only in the cold, damp February day, do we cough and sneeze dead citizens, all through the service, but dead citizens have got into the very bellow of the organ, and half choked the same. We stamp our feet to warm them, and dead citizens arise in heavy clouds. Dead citizens stick upon the walls, and lie pulverised on the sounding board over the clergyman’s head, and, when a gust of air comes, tumble down upon him. (Dickens, 1860, 56)

Everyone’s symptoms, winking, sneezing and coughing, remind the reader of some of the first signs of the onset of contagion. His disgust at the thought that he, and everyone present, is inhaling untold quantities of miasmatic human remains as the “something else” in the “snuff” in the air renders him too nauseous to keep his mind on the sermon being preached. He is in fact “as sure as Death it is!” that it is “human decay” that has infiltrated this atmosphere. Possibly, this concern worked its way into his fiction, as *Bleak House* offers several textual moments in which poisonous ghost miasma may be seen to reflect, or perhaps even influence, the environments in which it occurs. Most notably, the thick curtain of fog that suffocates London at the beginning of the novel is analogous to the stagnant sense of decay that permeates the interminable Jarndyce and Jarndyce case that obsesses the novel. This fog creates an atmosphere so smothering that Michael Steig describes it as “constipated,” as “a grossly blocked cloaca, in constant danger of violently bursting” (Steig 343). In this way, the overpoweringly thick “constipating” fog of *Bleak House* creates an environment that points toward one of the most prominent and horrible symptoms of cholera. Similarly, the foul, corrupted winds that constantly infest and define the crime-ridden slum buildings of “Tom All-Alone’s”
might carry the fetid rot of the miasmic corpse as well, as "[a]ir and water-borne miasmata take infection away from Tom All-Alone’s to the dwellings of the affluent and the great” (Henson 17), in the same way that cholera epidemics, for example, seemed by contemporary observers to originate in the slums before radiating outward into the more wealthy parts of the metropolis. (This motion paralleled the trajectory that many skeptical nineteenth-century thinkers thought was used to transmit ghost stories. These were suspected to originate in the storytelling homes of the uneducated poor and outward into respectable, wealthy societal circles, working their ways eventually even into literature itself.) Infectious miasma theory allows for an acceptable, scientifically-acknowledged reading of the ghost as a potential malevolent, reanimated human corpse. The ghost in both cases is the remnant from a human body, incorporeal and dangerous.

The “subject’s gaze

However, sometimes active attempts to generate messages from the human corpse were unnecessary, as the corpse could occasionally encase messages of its own within its corporeal body. In this way the corpse could be seen to have the ability to communicate that transcended death. M.R. James plays with the notion of the meaningful corpse at the climax of his short story “Number 13” (1904). Here, a series of unexplained disturbances have led the protagonist to believe that the mystery can be solved by tearing through a floor to access a sealed-up room; he does so and tells the reader that “[y]ou will naturally expect that skeleton [specifically that of the man who had vanished more than a century before] was discovered. That was not so” (James 176). Instead a vellum document was discovered, which, when translated, unraveled the story’s mystery. James knows that the
discovery of a human corpse frequently “answers” a ghost story’s central question and, in providing for the readers a document instead, implies that the two are, for all intents and purposes, interchangeable. Both the skeleton/corpse and the document can be “read” in order to understand what needs to be understood.

However, the unquiet corpse did not have to be reanimated in order to participate in the world of the living. And in fact, it was not even the entirety of the human corpse that was necessary for meaning to be generated, as certain human body parts were thought to be more useful as storytellers than others. The eye in particular might have had uses, as one particular folkloric belief about the corpse’s gaze remained as a viable concern even until the end of the century. Specifically, this theory, largely discarded in the Victorian era but still interestingly extant, claimed that the human retinas recorded an image of the last image their owner saw before he or she died. In a cultural moment in which the notion of the dead body as a literal mirror returned to the forefront, it was thought that this last image the person witnessed could actually be discerned by others if the dead person’s retinas were photographed. (It is significant that, similar to the case of spirit photography, the emerging technology of photography was considered to be the means of validating this old folk belief; technology rarely worked to support “superstition” in this way.) The murdered human body, in other words, might be a documentarian of its own death and proponents of this theory, which garnered more support in America, reported findings that suggested the potential worth of this idea. In an era in which the practice of photography was becoming increasingly popular and utilized in official capacities, it is perhaps not surprising that this notion of capturing a
moment and essentially making it eternal was extended from the mechanical camera to the organic eye, the organ on which the camera’s design was based.\textsuperscript{68} What is more surprising is that such a folkloric remnant would survive well into the scientifically-minded nineteenth century, and that it would find itself recommended in the midst of one of the most scrutinized police investigations of the century.

Specifically, during the early stages of the investigation of the murders that would become attributed to the Whitechapel killer known as Jack the Ripper, and during the inquests surrounding the death of victim “Dark” Annie Chapman in September of 1888, a columnist in the \textit{Star} newspaper suggested to investigators that photographing the dead woman’s retinas might reveal an image of the last thing she saw before she died, which would of course be the form of her killer.\textsuperscript{69} However, divisional police surgeon Dr. George Bagster Phillips categorically rejected the pursuit of this option, claiming in his deposition, without elaborating as to the motivations behind his decision, that “I gave the opinion that the operation would be useless, especially in this case” (Sudgen 138). So it was the less credulous voice that prevailed here and this test was never undertaken. None of the media coverage in 1888 and 1889 that exhaustively and graphically discussed the next three murders attributed to the Ripper, and a smattering of other killings thought at the time to be his responsibility, ever suggested that this technique be deployed again.

\textbf{“At the End of the Passage”}

This theory did not pass away from the culture without leaving a literary impression, though, as it is within the more credulous world of literature that this concept is explored and even validated, if murkily, in Rudyard Kipling’s short story “At the End
of the Passage” (published originally in America in 1890, then in England in 1891).

Here, the concept of reading “things in a dead man’s eye” (Kipling 344) in order to see in it the last image the dying man witnessed is explored, though with undercurrents of skepticism and without actually describing to the reader what is seen. A group of Englishmen stationed in a blazingly hot desert, apparently in a region that England has colonized or is attempting to colonize, confront the death of one of their number, Hummil, who had been acting very strangely immediately before his demise. After seeing nothing in the dead man’s eyes when the men look at them directly, Doctor Spurstow decides to consult a few photographs taken of Hummil’s eyes in order to see if the image of the last thing the dead man saw could be seen there. He leaves the sight of the reader to do this, interestingly, and is heard in a bathroom, smashing the camera. He returns, exclaiming “[i]t was impossible, of course. You needn’t look [. . .] I’ve torn up the films. There was nothing there. It was impossible” (Kipling 344). None of his reactions make sense if truly there was nothing to be seen, and his colleague Lowdnes, perceiving the nervous terror in which Spurstow attempts to light a pipe, counters that his friend’s verdict “is a damned lie” (Kipling 344). 701 So the reader is left to assume that the technique, though “impossible,” did in some way work, although we are not allowed to witness what the doctor saw in the photographs that so horrified him. In the end, neither in the case of an actual murder investigation, nor in literary discourse is this matter fully explored. Kipling’s piece places upon the reader the same sense of
frustration that Victorian skeptics of the supernatural felt: the empirical evidence that was so desperately needed to confirm the existence of supernatural activity is not available to us. At the end of the passage, in other words, of this story there is nothing to confirm our belief or satiate our suspicion.

Conclusion

Whether it was a readable corpse or manufactured image of the corpse, the physical remains of the human body offered profound insight into the concerns of nineteenth-century culture in regard to the shifting nature of how death was to be understood. The ghost, in all of its nineteenth-century manifestations, became another method by which the human corpse was used as a vehicle to express concerns and anxieties specifically endemic to the culture. Old folk beliefs continued pervasively to haunt and shape these “new ghosts,” though, grounding new understandings of the supernatural within ancient traditions which truly seemed to be “unexplodable” to those at the top of the self-defined social hierarchy who professed a need to dispose of them.

However, the human corpse was not the only corpse that troubled this era. Specifically, the physical remains of other organisms, some of these long-vanished from the earth, provided another point of tension worthy of investigation, whether in the form of actual unearthed fossils, assemblages of those fossils, or imagined reconstructions of the creatures that once infused those fossils with life.

Fossil discoveries triggered a wave of theories about natural selection, evolution, and, importantly, humankind’s place in the world as a part of a vast, constantly-developing process instead of the God-ordained destination of the development of all life.
on the planet. In a way these creatures, whose distant and implausible existence could only be reconstructed from fragments were ghosts in their own right. They were long-extinct ghosts, evident only in the form of bones so old they had literally turned to stone, but the implications that they stirred in the minds of those within nineteenth-century British culture made them just as frightening as any specter resuscitated from the musty depths of Gothic horror. If the ghost is truly an agent designed to turn our gaze to the past, then the fossil-ghosts being unearthed in the nineteenth-century and specifically within the Victorian era, turning attention to humanity’s deep-distant past, were capable of leading thinkers into some very dark passageways indeed.
CHAPTER FOUR: THE GHOST MONKEY IN VICTORIAN ENGLAND

Much has been written about Victorian duplicity, the cultural tendency toward simultaneously occupying seemingly opposing positions. At a series of crossroads, nineteenth-century British society seemed to exhibit a pronounced lack of desire to commit wholeheartedly to any one path. One of these divisions may be explored as it involves the separation between the public Victorian, as a morally-upstanding denizen of the modern world, and the private Victorian, frequently thought to be a morally-debased, lust-driven creature. (Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde illustrate this dichotomy can coexist, though uneasily, within the same individual.) Another cleavage may be found between the male and female expectations and experiences within the culture, or even the stark division that allowed luxury and poverty essentially to coexist in London and across the Empire. No matter what criteria are deployed, the Victorians displayed a profound cultural sense of split-identity. Awareness of this tension does not merely result from the critical hindsight of more than a century, but was in fact quite clear to those who lived within it. For example, before ascending to the position of Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli famously claimed, in his 1845 political novel *Sybil, or, The Two Nations*, that in England there were simultaneously

[t]wo nations, between whom there is no intercourse and no sympathy, who are as ignorant of each other’s habits, as if they were dwellers in different zones or inhabitants of different planets; who are formed by a different breeding, are fed by
a different food, are ordered by different manners, and are not governed by the same laws. (Disraeli 149)

While he was referring here to a gulf that defined very different existences, even within London, for the rich and the poor (these categories are important enough to be printed in all-capitalized letters in the conversation cited above), it is possible to apply this statement to a wider context. Specifically compelling for the purpose of this project, these “two nations” within one boundary speaks to the emerging divide that was taking shape in the nineteenth century that exaggerated the gulf between the public and private human being to an alarming degree.

Nineteenth-century cultural expression increasingly found value in envisioning a dramatic dichotomy that placed civilized human behavior on one side, informed by the highest principles of the society, and devolutionary savagery on the other, motivated by antediluvian animal impulses. The development of paleontology fueled the deployment of this dichotomy. Emerging interpretations of fossil discoveries made early in the nineteenth century were essentially inaugurated by Georges Cuvier’s 1808 description of the prehistoric mosasaur, based on his studies into a few fossilized teeth, and popularized in England by William Buckland’s 1824 description of a fossil jawbone which he believed once belonged to a large reptilian carnivore he named Megalosaurus. (Dorset Fossil collector Mary Anning contributed a series of important fossils which proved crucial to early paleontologists, among them the first studied remains of an ichthyosaurus, which she discovered at Lyme Regis in 1811. As a woman of the laboring classes, she was an outsider to academic discourse, did not publish her findings, and was not
generally credited at all by the scientists to whom she supplied fossils. Posthumously, resect was given to her contributions, though. After her death in 1847, a memorial window erected in her parish church, St. Michaels, credited her “usefulness in furthering the science of geology.” Furthermore, in an *All the Year Round* article Dickens wrote to describe a personal visit to her memorial, he notes that geology “was not a *science* when she began to discover, and so [she] helped to make it one” (Dickens, 1865, 63). Cuvier believed that catastrophism explained the remains of animals which were no longer present; massive geologic or weather-related cataclysmic events, such as huge floods, likely orchestrated by God, created unimaginable upheavals that instantaneously and fundamentally changed the composition of all life on earth. Buckland borrowed from this notion and spearheaded a philosophy toward explaining fossils that aligned their presence directly within the Christian narrative; namely, he felt that they represented the remains of the animals destroyed by the biblical Deluge. Conservative paleontologist Richard Owen, who would invent the initially-unpopular word “dinosaur” in 1841, championed a belief that God’s plan controlled the development of all organic life and that this unseen but omnipresent plan allowed for the development of all life on earth. Competing views quickly emerged, though. In 1830, geologist Charles Lyell articulated the theory of uniformitarianism in *Principles of Geology*, which offered a compelling argument in favor of the notion that the natural forces currently in action on earth had always been in action. Slow, gradual changes became seen as the vehicles through which long-term changes were made in species’ development. As a result much of British culture was receptive to the ideas of Charles Darwin, who argued in *Origin of the Species* (1859) that
environmental pressures could slowly shape the distribution of minor mutations and thereby adapt the populations [of all living things] to their conditions of life” (Asma 168). This was followed by Descent of Man (1870), which positioned humankind along with all other animal and plant life, within the natural system of evolution and therefore as a product of natural selection. Humankind was no longer the stable apex of the Christian God’s creation, then, but only another living species, heavily shaped by its genetic responses to natural pressures. As such, the human being could be envisioned as a thing of “two nations,” simultaneously a refined, civilized Victorian citizen and a result of millions of years of savage, prehistoric natural processes.

Mister Hyde is perhaps the best literary example of the presence of these “two nations” within the body of one man, but Victorian literature (especially later in the century at the fin de siècle) is awash with the anxieties concerning the revelations coming forth in regard to the connections that humankind had with an ancient world imagined to be horrific and brutal. Many of these anxieties were embodied in how writers envisioned the ancient human or entirely prehistoric body. Empirically, these bodies were long-dead corpses, fossils so old that their bones had turned to stone, but the very fact that they had once existed, in a “deep past” that had not previously been conceived, proved to complicate the longstanding notion of human superiority on earth. No literal concerns existed about a direct collision between the ancient world and the modern (except within the genre of early science fiction). However, the ghostly presence of the former seeped into literary culture of the latter, leaving fossil impressions, so to speak, of specific tensions and revealing a burgeoning awareness of what had been long ago, and what it
meant in regard to the society that the Victorians constructed around themselves. The human corpse in this case that becomes the vehicle for these anxieties is that of the imagined ancient human ancestor. This figure is similar in many ways to the semicorporeal ghosts discussed in the previous chapter, and its frequent occurrence in nineteenth-century literary and ephemeral culture makes it worth examining.

**Megalosaurus in Bleak House: The prehistoric ghost in the modern city**

The antediluvian and modern worlds collide dramatically in the opening moments of Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1852-3), when the narrator notes there is “[a]s much mud in the streets, as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth, and it would not be wonderful to meet a Megalosaurus, forty feet long or so, waddling like an elephantine lizard up Holborn-hill” (Dickens, 1852, 3). Again, one is reminded of the contemporary theories which defined the infectious nature of corpse-infused urban miasma which troubled Dickens. It is with this in mind that the notion of noxious vapors conjuring a dinosaur as a “ghost” from the deep past is not outlandish. This image does help early in the novel to situate *Bleak House*’s London as a murky, primeval environment, haunted by long-lost ghosts. Gothic scholar Alexandra Warwick notes how literary depictions of London, especially toward the end of the century, described a frightening prediluvian-type landscape, as writers “dominantly figured [the city] as labyrinth, jungle, swamp and ruin” (Warwick 34). Indeed, the notion of London as a disturbing place in which evolutionary progress appears to move backwards had been discussed in other contemporary sources. Henry Mayhew’s massive social tract *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-2), for example, mentions while describing how the
wretched lives of young coster-girls involve no impulse other than pursuing food for sustenance that “[t]he rudest form of life, physiologists tells us, is simply a locomotive stomach. Verily, it would appear as if our social state had a tendency to make the highest animal sink into the lowest” (Mayhew 44). The human regresses to the animal as London offers ideal conditions to encourage a reversal of the evolutionary process, or what this dissertation will call “devolution.” Perhaps the tendency to envision London in this way allowed people to localize their concerns about the implications that fossil discoveries and paleontological thinking were introducing to the culture; visions of a primeval London “brought home” the notion that humanity may have played a previously unimagined role in the deep past. Perhaps, also, the streets of London became for many Victorians a new Gothic space; Martin Tropp suggests that in the nineteenth century “specters and ghosts” were no longer confined to faraway medieval castles as they were in the Gothic tradition of the eighteenth century, but were now inhabiting the labyrinthine neighborhoods of the Metropolis (Tropp 81). I would add to Tropp’s theory that these urbanized “specters and ghosts” reached back much further than the Gothic, all the way to the deep past of the prehistoric world.

For Dickens to construct a vision of a deep-past London, his choice to select a giant prehistoric animal, a fairly new entity within British culture slowly becoming identified as a dinosaur, as perhaps a symbolic representation of the interminable Jarndyce and Jarndyce lawsuit (itself a gigantic, outdated behemoth) is understandably apt.72 Neither the Megalosaurus nor the ancient lawsuit belong in the otherwise realistic storyworld Dickens presents; one is a biological impossibility and the other is a legal
impossibility. Moreover, this opening imagery hints that the novel may be read as a late-
Gothic work, in which the dead, now through wills and legal procedures, control the
living (Tropp 72). Accordingly, a dinosaur becomes an instructive reminder of how these
long-dead animals were a powerful force in the nineteenth-century culture’s anxiety
about the shifting, decentralized placement of humanity in a rapidly-changing notion of
the universe itself. The longstanding Christian narrative, which set forth a clear origin
story for life on earth and placed humanity at the pinnacle of God’s creation, was difficult
to reconcile against the evidence that the fossil record was bringing to light. With no
Biblical references to situate them, fossilized remains complicated the Christian narrative.
So in many ways, the dinosaur, or here the Megalosaurus, could become humanity’s
deepest ghost, a symbol of a world that Victorian culture was only beginning to learn
actually existed, and one, disturbingly, in which humankind, or a shadowy, long-extinct
proto-humankind, may have played a significant part.

However, Dickens is deliberate in choosing this specific dinosaur as the one to
represent the prehistoric world, of the myriad prehistoric monsters that were rapidly
entering the culture and could have been inserted into this textual moment. He points
toward an instance in which at least one Megalosaurus, as reconstructed by Victorian
scientists and artists, did indeed actually appear in 1854 in modern-day London: within
the Crystal Palace in Sydenham, erected in the south London area of Sydenham on the
site of the Great Exhibition of 1851. In fact, in calling the Megalosaurus an “elephantine
lizard,” Dickens connects with the impulses that motivated the Crystal Palace
Megalosaurus reconstruction. This is an attempt to understand the prehistoric animal by
comparing it with the morphologies of familiar, extant animals. Designed by proto-paleontologist Richard Owen and sculpted in “life size” concrete by artist Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins, these dinosaur models became extremely popular. They were set in constructed environments meant to imitate what was believed to be the sweltering, swampy landscape in which they once lived. These settings were deliberately Edenic. The imagined habitats invoked the need to place these prehistoric monsters within the parameters of a traditional Christian narrative, in much the same way that Dickens’ speaker notes that the mud from which the Megalosaurus comes may rise “as if the waters had but newly retired from the face of the earth.” Researcher Nancy Rose Marshall explores how these dinosaur models and their contextual presentation both combated and confirmed Victorian concerns about the prehistoric world:

[i]n the face of unsettling implications presented by the prehistoric past, the spatial model of the park thematized an investment in the idea of a divinely ordained model of progress culminating in the Victorian period. Yet despite the multiple controls created by the designers to guide the minds and bodies of spectators, the park also worked against its own ideological narratives, evoking fear and doubt. (Marshall, Nancy 287)

In other words, in spite of the fact that the dinosaurs were for the most part placed on the edge of reconstructed marine environments, thus hinting at their putative doomed role in the Christian Deluge narrative (Marshall, Nancy 295), observers simply were not able to detach themselves from the implication that such gigantic, ferocious-looking animals necessarily compromised the belief that humanity was the “pinnacle” of organic creation on earth.
It would be a mistake to assume that Victorian culture universally believed that these reconstructed prehistoric monsters necessarily represented the precise, “real” reflections of a long-gone empirical reality (whatever that may be). Contemporary source material reveals that many Victorian writers realized that the representations of these monsters of the deep past were in fact products of the imaginations, albeit well-informed imaginations, of their reconstructors. *The Morning Post*’s 1894 review of Rev. Henry H. Hutchinson’s book *Creatures of Other Days* remarks of the copious artwork representing these prehistoric creatures that:

> [t]hese artists, it is true, have had to trust considerably to their imagination in depicting the outward appearances of creatures that have in many cases only left behind them very incomplete specimens of their internal structure, and it would therefore be a mistake to place too much faith in their drawings, which, it should be said, however, fairly illustrate [sic] the most reliable theories that have been formed. (“Creatures of Other Days” para. 1)

The Victorians, despite the reputation they suffer among twenty-first century critics, were not convinced that they were always in possession of objective truth.73

Importantly, too, Dickens was not alone in imagining what the Megalosaurus would look like if it were to appear in modern-day London. Accompanying the description of the Great Exhibition’s Megalosaurus at Sydenham in Edward MacDermott’s *Routledge’s Guide* is this alarming scenario: “[w]hat a terrible scene it would have made to have witnessed on the sedgy banks of some old Thames...the megalosaurus hobbling down to the margin of these muddy streams...to see creatures come out of the water and grapple ‘til the dark waters were reddened with their blood” (MacDermott 195). The Megalosaurus was a symbol of the bloodthirsty antediluvian
past, a past in which nature “red in tooth and claw” was always engaged in hyper-violent, savage struggles to overcome and kill one another. An anonymous writer to the *Morning Chronicle*, whose letter on the Sydenham Palace monsters was published on 5 April, 1854, commented that the Megalosaurus’s vicious-looking dentition looked like “a double row of sharp and jagged-edged scimitars placed close together, guarding the entrance to his voracious maw, and ready to crush, to cut, and to tear any creature which might come within range of this truly ‘infernal machine’” (from O’Connor 498). This Megalosaurus is rendered as a virtual hell-mouth.

**The deep past emerges**

But is a hell-mouth without anyone to punish a hell-mouth at all? Humanity needed to be written into this prehistoric narrative of resuscitated ghosts from the deep past, and quickly. An early anonymous observer of the Sydenham dinosaur models, writing for the *Westminster Review* in 1854, was overwhelmed by their prehistoric magnitude and felt that “[s]urrounded by prodigious natural phenomena, and terrific living forms, a cold fear falls upon us, and we cry for a ‘man’” (Marshall, Nancy 296). Actual human fossils had yet to have been found in direct conjunction with the animals that would become known as dinosaurs, but ancient human artifacts had been found in association with the remains of long-extinct giant mammals, suggesting coexistence. Even when such occurrences did arise, as in Paviland Land in South Wales in 1823, in which ancient human fossils were found alongside the remains of mammoths and other extinct animals, conservative writers continued to resist the claim that humanity had coexisted with these apparently spectacular but vanished creatures. Oxford Professor of
Geology and devout Christian William Buckland equivocated wildly to invalidate this strong evidence of the coexistence of the human and the prehistoric animal; he claimed that these cave discoveries appeared “to have been disturbed by ancient diggings, and its antediluvian remains thereby to have been fixed with recent bones and shells” (Buckland, from MacGowan 60). George Cuvier felt that the fossils of humans had never been found, and those which had been claimed to be so had been misidentified, though he would later abandon this claim. This relinquishment of the idea that prehistoric humans were impossible eventually signaled the dawning of a new cultural norm. And importantly for nineteenth-century culture, this placed the human in an imagined territory in which it increasingly could not separate itself from the prehistoric monster.

Close examinations of the fossil record, via the emerging science of geology, revealed that humanity did not share the ancient world with the Megalosaurus, which died out much earlier. However, it did establish the fact that humanity very likely coexisted with many other, equally gigantic and bizarre extinct animals. Perhaps the fact that the debut of the Sydenham dinosaur models in January 1854 was celebrated by a group of luminaries sitting around a table set up inside the model of the Iguanodon offers a symbolic placement of the human in the prehistoric world. These men are literally inside the dinosaur’s body, as though they had been eaten by it (despite the fact that the Iguanodon was known, even at this early point, to have been a herbivore), and they themselves participate in this symbolic act of consumption by eating the food placed before them. This incident speaks to larger concerns, and is serving as a filter to illustrate the coping mechanisms engineered by Victorian culture as a means to reconfigure a sense
of evolutionary superiority in the face of an intimidating-looking deep past. Here, we see that the antediluvian monster and the Victorian gentleman who exhumes and reconstructs that monster are inextricably joined in this ritual, sharing a meal, as it were. In other words, within the body of the prehistoric ghost made flesh, in concrete, human culture may peacefully interact with the terrifying past it has imagined the ancient world to have been. It is only when nineteenth-century culture is able to reconstruct the past, in a shape suitable for it to use, in this case as a table, that this past can be tamed. Alternately, one might submit to the fantasy that the scientists and luminaries had been eaten by the dinosaur, as after all they are sitting in its gullet. This reading invites the observer to envision the men as the ghosts of men who had died through being eaten by a prehistoric monster, which was thought to be the fate of many of our prediluvian ancestors, who were still believed by many to have coexisted with dinosaurs in a world of vicious, unceasing, and bloodthirsty combat.75

Figure 5: Naturalists Dining inside the Model of a Dinosaur, Crystal Palace, Sydenham, New Year's Eve, 1853. From the Illustrated London News. In Getty Images (n.l., n.p., n.d.; web).
And perhaps this notion of the prehistoric human having a place in the terrifying antediluvian world that the Victorians imagined was useful in a subtly nationalistic sense as well. *The York Herald*, for example, published a transcript of Benjamin Waterhouse Hawkins’ “Second Lecture, in York, on Extinct Animals” (1856) shortly after the Great Exhibition and the subsequent unveiling of the Sydenham dinosaur models he had engineered. Here we find the speaker brandishing the fossilized jaw of a “tiger or lion” found in Yorkshire. Comparing it with the jaw of a modern-day lion, he notes that “the latter sinks into insignificance by comparison” and, furthermore, he asks his listeners to imagine “[h]ow much more formidable, therefore, were the animals which had inhabited Yorkshire than any of the feline tribe with which they were acquainted at the present day” (“Second Lecture, in York, on Extinct Animals” para. 2). In other words, the ancient humans who may have inhabited the Yorkshire area would have had to do battle with a much more intimidating and powerful foe than do modern humans sharing their geographic regions with the smaller, extant lion species. Since humans still exist in Britain, it would stand to reason in the minds of many Victorian thinkers that natural selection had favored humanity in this particular battle; the same could not be said of the inhabitants of lands which still contained lions, by this line of reasoning. (Among the many errors inherent in this reasoning is the fact that it assumes the Victorian-imagined reality of a prehistoric world in which all organisms were constantly fighting to the death. This type of an environment has been invalidated by twenty-first century paleontologists as unconducive to what is now understood about animal behavior and consequently is an unsustainable model. Also, as the British Empire was claiming ground in Africa, the
well-known habitat of modern lions, there was perhaps a nationalistic and racist value in the fallacy of asserting the superiority, at least when comparatively measured against likely lion opponents, of ancient Britons compared to modern Africans. The thinking along these lines would be that those who lived on the land mass that became Britain were steeled by doing battle with far more dangerous predators than did those who lived on the continent that would become Africa.

In many ways, the prehistoric imaginary space was itself becoming something of a ghost world, a constant and frequently disturbing presence in nineteenth-century society. Long before Darwin’s publications in the middle of the century, the discovery of fossil materials had stimulated contemplative discussions of prehistory. In her early, little-considered essay “On Ghosts” (1824), Mary Shelley laments the loss of the prehistoric world that none of her colleagues, or even all but her most distant ancestors, have ever actually known.

What a different earth do we inhabit than from that on which our forefathers dwelt! The antediluvian world, strode over by mammoths, preyed upon by the megatherion, and peopled by the offspring of the sons of God, is a better type of the earth of Homer, Herodotus, and Plato, than the hedged-in cornfields and measured hills of the present day. (Shelley, “On Ghosts,” 334)

She places a classical world version of humanity in the prehistoric world, and she is also accurate in her placement of humanity not alongside the dinosaur, but rather amid the megafauna that early humans did coexist with, according to the indications of the fossil record to which she had access. More important is the juxtaposition of the prehistoric monster with the classical figure, the world that is not “hedged in” and which belongs alike to the megatherion and Homer. The notion that this conglomerated prehistoric
world can be thought of as being comprised as the title indicates of “ghosts” which serve to remind us of long-vanished, yet imaginatively superior times.

**Victorian fear of monkeys**

The imagined bodies of dinosaurs and other extinct animals were not the only ghostly evolutionary ancestors capable of arousing fear and anxiety in nineteenth-century British culture. As the theories of evolution percolated across Victorian culture around the time of and even well prior to the publication of Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* (1870), the notion of humanity’s apparent ancestral connection to and divergence from apes and monkeys inspired a visible series of literary and popular culture responses. *The Descent of Man*, while not the first contribution to this development, did provide a popular, specific framework from which the discussion of the primate’s relationship to humanity began to be directly articulated. While important, the release of Darwin’s book did not open a floodgate of revolutionary material, as many of the ideas it contained were already in cultural circulation. In fact, Darwin’s earlier *Origin of the Species* (1859), for example, had popularized the notion that natural selection rewarded the most adaptable organisms (a concept which *Descent of Man* would apply to the process of humanity’s slow development from apes), and this idea was quickly co-opted by social scientists such as Herbert Spencer, who coined the term “the survival of the fittest” in 1864 to apply Darwin’s theory to social concerns. (Social Darwinism, in other words, was not Darwin’s idea.) Darwin himself was surprised that the release of *Descent of Man* did not stir more angry responses than it did. Largely, the public embraced it and Darwin’s fellow scientists found it reasonably congruent with existing ideas in the discourse,
though some found themselves at odds with his deployment of theology (Irvine 240-1). Predictably, satirical publications such as *Punch* gleefully adopted comical imagery of apelike humans and humanlike apes as tools of satire. The blossoming discussion of the relationship between the human and the ape even provided at least one occasion for a critic to use it against Darwin himself; an anonymous Welshman, in a furious personal letter to Darwin, accused him of being like “an old Ape with a hairy face and a thick skull” (Irvine 240). Thomas Huxley, in “The Origin of Species” (1860), collected in *Darwiniana* (1896), notes that this kind of attack was not new to Darwin’s critics. He criticizes how “old ladies of both sexes consider [Darwin’s 1859 book *Origin of Species*] a decidedly dangerous book, and even savants, who have no better mud to throw, quote antiquated writers to show that its author is no better than an ape himself” (Huxley, 1896, 22-3). The ape-as-human, especially after 1870, could be used for many purposes.

**Evolving image of the ancestor**

Boria Sax has researched the visual depictions of apes and monkeys throughout the nineteenth century, finding that prior to the widespread exposure of theories of evolution (located around the 1870 publication of *Descent of Man* but definitely evident earlier) simians were represented in volumes about natural history as benign and humanlike. The spirit that motivates these early depictions is one of amusement, and the similarities to human morphology are conveyed as charming. However, emerging scientific discourse that brought the ape into closer ancestral proximity to the human rendered them suddenly more threatening, and these cartoonish, comical images vanished in favor of much more dangerous, outright monstrous forms (Sax 48-50).
Most dramatic might be the frontispiece from Philip Henry Gosse’s 1876 edition of *The Romance of Natural History*. This image depicts a scene in which a pair of stereotypically-rendered African inhabitants is being attacked by a terrifying gorilla with a demonic human like face and a mouthful of sharp fangs; the monster leaps from a tree branch and threatens one of the men with raptor-like claw-feet (Gosse frontispiece). The humans cower in melodramatic terror and are clearly no match for this horrific assailant. Gosse describes the gorilla later in the body of the text with a voice that is clearly unnerved by its simultaneous monstrosity and human-resemblance. The gorilla is “a gigantic kind of man-like ape” that “makes the nearest approach of any brute-animal to the human form; it is fully equal to man in stature, but immensely more broad and muscular; while its strength is colossal” (Gosse 256; 257-8). It is also “described as always manifesting an enraged enmity toward man” (Goss 258). It is like a human in stature, but in behavior it is a monster that violently hates its alleged evolutionarily superior relative, the human. Gosse muses that “[t]here must be something so wild and unearthly in the appearance of one of these apes, so demon-like in hideousness, in the solemn recesses of the dark primeval forest” (Gosse 258) that he considered including accounts of the gorilla in his chapter that concerned “The Terrible.” That the eyes are those of a “demon” and that the habitat is “primeval” hint toward how the Victorians merged the supernatural into their cultural expressions about in ways these new scientific theories painted the notion of “primeval man.” Our distant evolutionary ancestors become better understood by Victorian culture when it borrows from ancient folklore in order to distance them from “us” as demonic. (In this way, oddly, the primeval man as
prehistoric “demon” was believed to have walked the ancient earth in much the same way as did the devil, which interacted with the physical world as a literal presence, according to the kind of archaic “superstitious” thinking which many in the Victorian academy attempted to push away.) And that this monstrous image of a gorilla attack was the opening one in the book indicates its importance to the culture for which it was written. Victorians were increasingly concerned with the implications of their evolutionary relationship with apes, and perhaps rendering them horrifically monstrous helped to create at least a safer visual distance from which to consider them. The fact that the gorilla is clearly going to defeat its human opponents also perhaps hints that the human (or at least the discernibly “Other” human) is not actually at the top of the Victorian Chain of Being, the apex of all creation, after all, but rather is so degraded that it can be bested in combat by its putative evolutionary ancestor. Alternately, this process of monster-making may have enhanced the sense of horror even further, implicating (as did much of the literature in the nineteenth century) the monsters that lay dormant, or not, within the civilized veneer of the Victorian human.
However, one of the most fascinating literary reflections of this tension in regard to the burgeoning of evolutionary theory shows itself in the presence of the incorporeal enemy: the malignant ghostly monkey. Like the spirit of a long-dead ancestor, these entities manifest themselves across the literary and popular culture landscape of the Victorians, as a disturbing, if not outright terrifying, reminder of what humanity was believed to have been. Extinct animals were becoming visible through the exhumation and interpretation of the fossil record throughout the nineteenth century, but in spite of the discovery of jawbones and other humanlike fragments, in the popular mind there was
a notable absence of detailed evidence supporting the existence of the apelike ancestors of humankind. The monkey in the fossil record was therefore also something of a ghost, and perhaps its seeming absence helped to exacerbate Victorian anxiety.

The connection between the ape and the human provided the foundations for what always seemed to be a tenuous discussion, but the discovery in 1856 of fossilized teeth set into a humanlike jawbone provided an empirically verifiable focus for this conversation. These remains were determined to belong to an ape-ancestor of the human, classified as *Dryopithecus*, which lived in Europe during the Miocene Epoch, between 23 and 5 million years ago (Fleagle 382). In this same year, the excavation of well-preserved Neanderthal fossils in caves in Feldhofer, Germany offered further evidence of the ancient presence of creatures which were clearly “primitive pre-modern humans” (Pettitt and White 31). In his 1859 work *Origin of the Species*, Charles Darwin illustrates the precarious classification of humankind amid the extant and extinct apes, by claiming that “[n]o doubt man, in comparison with most of his [primate] allies, has undergone as extraordinary amount of modification, chiefly in consequence of the great development of his brain and his erect position; nevertheless, we should bear in mind that he ‘is but one of several Exceptional forms of Primates’” (Darwin 162). Humankind, in other words, is a “Primate,” but an “Exceptional” one which has distinguished itself in the evolutionary sense through the enhancement of features not evident in any other living ape: namely, brain size and bipedalism. No matter how “Exceptional” the “Primate,” it is still a “Primate.” This language, which posits humanity as primate without conceding that it is anything more than “exceptional” within this group, hints at what Thomas Kuhn,
in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, calls the true threat that Darwin’s ideas imposed upon conventional science and culture at the time. The notion of evolution had in fact been active currency in scientific discourse in the decades before Darwin published his contributions, so it was, according to Kuhn, not so much that idea that created a disturbance as the fear that evolution was not directed by “a goal-oriented process” (Kuhn 171) that placed humankind at its glorious telos.

Scientist Stephen Jay Gould reads this tendency, which flourished in the Victorian era but remains active in our culture today, as a “desperate desire to make humans special and superior among the animals of the earth” (Boyle 138). Conventional thinking insisted that the “idea” of man was present from the dawn of creation, acting as a goal in the mind of God through which all evolutionary developments were oriented toward producing. Natural selection, however, “operating in the given environment and with the actual organisms presently at hand, was responsible for the gradual but steady emergence of more elaborate, more articulated, and vastly more specialized organisms” (Kuhn 122). It was nothing more than competition, seemingly unassisted by a divine intention, which produced the modern form of humanity, and not design. This may have been the most frightening notion Darwin introduced to the discourse of his culture. Victorian scientist Thomas Huxley, whose defense of evolution earned him the nickname “Darwin’s Bulldog” despite his disagreement with several of Darwin’s theories, confronts this idea in *Man’s Place in Nature* (1863), which placed human beings within the structure of evolution and argued that it was not exceptional, or really in any way different, from any other species subject to this natural process. Human dignity, offered Huxley, was not an
innate sign of humanity’s superiority over all other creatures on earth but was rather an
awareness that was earned, or not, by each individual (Lyons 134). Huxley sets out his
claim by asking “[i]s it... true, that the Poet, or the Philosopher, or the Artist...is degraded
from his high estate by the undoubted historical probability, not to say certainty, that he is
the direct descendant of some naked and bestial savage...Is mother-love vile because a
hen shows it, or fidelity base because dogs possess it?” (Huxley, in Lyons 134). Can
the accomplishments of Victorian culture, standing on the shoulders of the giants of its
ancestors’ great classical works, be stained, Huxley asks rhetorically, simply because of
the unsavory evolutionary heritage of its contributors? Of course not, because by
extension the presence of “mother-love” in a hen and “fidelity” in a dog do not
fundamentally devalue these very “human” qualities.

Ultimately, to understand “how closely man agrees in constitution with the higher
mammals” is to embrace “an agreement which must depend on [recognizing] our close
similarity in minute structure and chemical composition” (Darwin, 1870, 156). A brief
passage in the conclusion of Darwin’s *The Descent of Man* seems to highlight the
difficulties inherent in attempting to sever the human being too thoroughly from its deep
past. It must, he admits, be acknowledged that

man, with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased,
with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living
creatures, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and
construction of the solar system - with all these exalted powers - Man still bears in
his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin. (Darwin, 1870, 643)

Human exceptionalism is delineated here (and is emphasized by shifting “man” from a
common noun at the beginning to the passage into a proper noun at the end) but is
qualified in the final clause of the statement by a reminder of the “stamp” of its roots. In a way, the “lowly origins” of humanity haunt this passage like a ghost, providing the last impression from a passage that otherwise elevates the human being above its fellow organisms.

And this troublesome connection between the human and the ape, which problematized Victorian science’s efforts to maintain modern humanity’s placement at the top of an evolutionary hierarchy, could not entirely be couched in theoretical analyses or discussions of fragmentary evidence describing a distant prehistoric world. Specifically, the discovery by European cultures of the African gorilla brought into circulation the awareness of a primate that seemed very humanlike. A goal-oriented structure of natural selection would not allow for the coexistence of an inferior form alongside its superior, yet the gorilla’s presence as just such an apparent creature could not be denied. Paul du Chaillu’s 1856 expeditions into Gabon allowed him to collect a number of gorilla specimens, largely skeletons and skins, which by 1861 had been distributed to many London-area museums.

Mister Hyde

However, other disturbingly humanlike apes had been visible in English culture long before debates about natural selection and human evolution drifted into the cultural forefront. Mister Hyde emerges as perhaps the most clearly-delineated evolutionary throwback. After his first encounter with Hyde, Richard Enfield notes that “[t]here is something wrong with his appearance, something displeasing, something downright detestable” and that “he gives a strong feeling of deformity, although [he] couldn’t
specify the point” (Stevenson 41). This unclear “deformity” strikes the lawyer Gabriel John Utterson with “disgust, loathing and fear” which he understands results from his awareness that “the man seems hardly human! Something troglodytic” about Hyde’s appearance haunts, and thus inaugurates the notion in the text of Hyde as morphologically sub-human (Stevenson 51). Hyde’s behavior is especially simian, as well; his fatal attack on Sir Danvers Carew is performed “with ape-like fury [as Hyde] was trampling his victim under his foot and hailing down a storm of blows” upon him” (Stevenson 63). Jekyll’s butler Mr. Poole locates his aversion to Hyde within a framework that calls attention to bones and, by extension perhaps, fossils. “[T]here was something queer about that gentleman – something that gave a man a turn – I don’t know rightly how to say it, sir, beyond this: that you felt it in your marrow kind of cold and thin” (Stevenson 95); thus, he could feel within his bones that something was “queer” about Hyde, in the same way that the discovery of fossilized bones was revealing that there was equally something “queer” about Victorian claims that humankind shared no evolutionary territory with monkeys. Poole solidifies the connection of Hyde to an ape by likening him to a “masked thing like an ape” (Stevenson 95). Dr. Hastie Lanyan describes an encounter with Hyde that powerfully highlights his apelike appearance. “I could hear his teeth grate with the convulsive action of his jaws; and his face was so ghastly to see that I grew alarmed both for his life and his reason” (Stevenson 110); the emphasis on the prominent teeth and strong jaw of the ape are congruent with Victorian representations of the simian.
Even Jekyll’s written “confession” describes Hyde as “the evil side of my nature […] which was less robust and less developed than the good” (Stevenson 121); Hyde is “less developed” in the same way that the monkey, and the deep-past fossilized monkey, is the less developed” version of the human. Jekyll condemns Hyde’s “apelike tricks,” which included “scrawling in my own hand blasphemies in the pages of my books, burning the letters and destroying the portrait of my father” (Stevenson 135). Here, the ape-like nature of Hyde causes him to attack the artifacts of literacy and heritage; defacing books and letters seems in accordance with the actions of a spiteful creature which knows that literacy is a clear talent that separates the human from the ape. (Though Hyde is capable of writing, at least, his rage toward Jekyll’s books and letters reveals it to be an ability he does not respect.) Similarly, destroying Jekyll’s father’s portrait may be seen as an act of ancestor-replacement; it is a reminder to Jekyll that he is descended not from humanity but rather from apelike creatures like Hyde. Finally, Jekyll hopes that his written confession will be preserved against “the action of [Hyde’s] apelike spite” (Stevenson 136). The apelike Hyde exists as a threat, from the primitive evolutionary past, so dangerous that it might erase the very record of humanity itself.

Constructions of such problematically humanlike creatures were not relegated to fiction, either. An 1881 article in the *York Herald* titled “A Monkey Burglar: Singular Capture at Warrington” playfully described the culprit in anthropomorphic terms as “an unusual character” who “could give no account of himself” and so was taken into custody, as if he were a human being, where he “made himself comfortable” at the bridewell (“Monkey Burglar” para. 1). But monkeys were aligned with humans in the
nineteenth-century imagination much earlier in the century, even preceding the presence of the Darwinian debates. A carnival in Prittlewell in 1826, for example, featured a plethora of monkeys and apes, all of which were presented in a manner that hinted at their physical resemblance to the human form and their capacity to adopt humanlike behavior. Here,

\[\text{the marmoset dances Cheshire rounds; the ‘pigmey’ walks upright and drinks wine; the manteger drinks with his lips ‘like a Man’; the creature looking like a wild man politely removes his hat to the crowd. In each case the manners taught imitate European forms of culture or politeness and amusingly transgress, as well as reaffirm, the boundaries between high and low, human and animal, domestic and savage, polite and vulgar. (Stallybrass and White 41)}\]

Human interference, through the supply of training and props, was sometimes not even necessary to create the suggestion of the humanlike ape, as many apes and monkeys seemed alarmingly humanlike entirely on their own. For example, Regent’s Park Zoo displayed a chimpanzee named Tommy in 1835 which seemed able to learn at the pace of a human child, and an orangutan in 1837, about which Queen Victoria claimed “[h]e is frightful and painfully and disagreeably human” (Malchow 121). Significantly, the human resemblance was not only “frightful” and “disagreeable” to the Queen, but “painful.” And this “pain” in regard to the presence in Victorian culture of the humanlike ape was not only psychological, stimulated by the suggestion of similarity, but may actually have been physical too, brought about by the ape itself. 

*The Illustrated Police News*, in its 24 August, 1872 edition, details an attack committed by an escaped pet monkey, described as “artful,” upon a woman who lived nearby. The illustration that accompanies this account is labeled “An Artful Monkey, My
Next Door Neighbour,” which implies a relationship of approximate equality between the complainant (or at least the artist) and the simian attacker (as well as perhaps hinting that the human and the monkey were being considered at this point evolutionary “neighbors” of humanity), while the text of the article refers to the monkey as the property of its owner, and property that has even won prizes, in fact. The illustration itself depicts a large, ferocious baboon-like ape atop a fence and reaching down, grabbing at the petticoats of a fallen and terrified-looking woman. There is nothing overtly sexual described about this attack, either in the text or the illustration (unless one wishes to read the tip of the monkey’s tail as a semi-erect penis). This would be an important detail, as many scientists believed that monkeys and apes were inclined toward sexually assaulting human women, or at least those women who belonged to “Other” cultures. Johann Friedrich Blumenthal, in comments published by the Anthropological Society in 1865, interpreted from his reading of travel narratives into exotic locations that “lascivious male apes attack women [who] perish miserably in the brutal embraces of their ravishers” (from Ritvo 92). Paul du Chaillu reported a story told to him by members of the Mbondemo tribe describing the abduction and rape of a woman by a gorilla which was believed to have been “inhabited by a spirit” (Reel 60). The fact that a monkey, possessed by a ghost or otherwise, could feel attraction toward a human (however implausible this claim has turned out to be) would seem to imply a close relationship between humankind and monkeykind. But even without a clear indication of the sexual impulse of this particularly “artful” monkey, the Illustrated Police News’s tendency to report on alarming frequent and brutal domestic crimes, frequently involving physical
attacks by men against women, either by spouses or neighbors, implies in a somewhat ugly manner that a monkey that assaults a woman is behaving within the expected, though disturbing, parameters for human male behavior. (Perhaps a parallel narrative is suggested here, too, that violence committed against women was the result of contra-human behavior, and that it fell rather within the territory of the savage, antediluvian version of the human.) This case may be offered as proof that monkeys did not need to have supernatural affiliations in order to terrorize nineteenth-century British society.

At least one literary example exists to indicate that the idea of “monkey attacks” in London was not considered categorically impossible. Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “Lot #249” (1892) features a vengeful reanimated Egyptian mummy that is initially misidentified by eyewitnesses as “an escaped ape” (Doyle 135). When the mummy attacks the protagonist, he describes it as “bounding like a tiger at his heels, with blazing eyes and one stringy arm out-thrown” (Doyle 133). While these features are not exclusively ape-like, the speed at which it moves seems congruent with that of a monkey and the fact that it stretches out a “stringy arm” to grab him indicates the sort of manual attack that might be suspected of primates, the only animals other than man which use their upper extremities to engage their enemies.

The ghost monkey did not have to be either directly corporeal and “true” (as in the Illustrated Police News story) or wholly fictive and supernatural (as is Doyle’s story). Even quasi-supernatural Victorian-era entities would occasionally take on the morphological characteristics of the ghost monkey, whether or not this attribute was in
any way relevant to their initial representations in British culture. As evolutionary thinking collapsed long-maintained conceptual boundaries that separated the human from the animal, creating an ever-fluid liminal space in which identity began to lose its integrity, more creatures in the Victorian era were found to occupy the hazily-delineated borderlands than previous eras had allowed for. It is just these liminal, partially-supernatural entities, as fellow dwellers in “no-man’s land,” that deserve attention now. The possibly-human, possibly-supernatural creature flourished in Victorian culture, achieving an especially high level of cultural visibility within the pages of *Punch* magazine.

The ape-like face of “the Nemesis of Neglect,” from the 1878 *Punch* cartoon analyzed in the previous chapter, offers at least the hint of a ghost monkey figure in association with the Whitechapel murderer in 1888. However, the quasi-supernatural creature most likely to occupy the role of the ghost monkey is Spring-Heeled Jack. This mysterious assailant took many forms in its various appearances across the landscape of nineteenth century England, appearing first in 1803 around Hammersmith as a headless bear, then as a white-sheeted ghost, among other manifestations, developing an ability to leap great distances during a spate of attacks in 1824. However, he is most recognizable from a pair of separate attacks on young London women Jane Alsop and Lucy Scales in 1838 and an equally bizarre assault on soldiers on patrol at Aldershot in 1877. Witnesses described him as a tall, devilish man with glowing eyes and metallic claws, wearing a shiny helmet and a skintight silver oilskin suit prominently featuring a red, fiery lantern on the breast, and a long black cape. He became known for behaving in much the way
one might suspect of a malignant monkey, operating nocturnally while leaping great
distances and attacking unsuspecting people, mostly young women, scratching them with
his talons and breathing fire into their faces, then leaping away over walls and buildings,
leaving his victims absolutely terrified. (Only the fire-breathing is not a behavior that a
nineteenth-century person would associate with a money or ape. This attribute is more
closely aligned with older folkloric sources which treated accounts of encounters with
devils and demons.) He was of course never apprehended, though at least the 1838
attacks are frequently thought to have been the work of the bizarre eccentric Marquis of
Waterford.\textsuperscript{83}

However, as Spring-Heeled Jack matriculated through British culture and its
press, his shape shifted to accommodate more comedic usages. One deployment of a
Spring-Heeled Jack figure in particular concerns us here. Responding to the unusual
attack at Aldershot, in which Spring-Heeled Jack approached a soldier, slapped him
several times, then vanished into the night after possible being shot multiple times, the
comic paper \textit{Funny Folks}, in its 26 October 1878 issue, depicts Jack as an ape-like
vampiric creature in the illustrated comic “‘Spring-Heeled Jack’: Re-Appearance of the
Idiot at Aldershot.” The disproportionately large head, huge eye-sockets, and spindly
limbs are all very monkey-like, and the bat-like wings in addition to the moon smiling
upon the figure as it flies over the cityscape, pull it into the realm of the supernatural, if
not as a vampire then at least as a ghost-like entity. This visual representation, while
overtly comical, was not necessarily disconnected from the eyewitness accounts of the
incident. The soldiers who experienced the monkey-like attacks and monkey-like evasive
speed of Spring-Heeled Jack at Aldershot also, when being interviewed, described him not as a man but as a “ghost” (Bell 154).

Figure 7: “Spring-Heeled Jack: Re-Appearance of the Idiot at Aldershot.” (in Funny Folks, 26 Oct., 1878; 342; web: New Readerships).

The increasingly hazy lines that separated the human body from the monkey body in the Victorian imagination were multidirectional, as literature offered several ape-like human characters in this era beyond the recognizable figures of Hyde’s and Frankenstein’s monster. Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White* (1859), for example, renders the character of Marian Halcombe in a very simian fashion through the eyes of the narrator Walter Hartright, even though her behavior throughout the novel is never recognizably ape-like. Hartright is confounded by how simultaneously appealing and repulsive she strikes him to be, as “[t]he instant my eyes rested on her, I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude” but he quickly
ascerns that “[t]he lady was ugly!” because her “complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on the upper lip was a moustache. She had a large, firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down her forehead” (Collins 29). The swarthiness, the moustache-hairline, and especially the firm jaw and piercing eyes, accompanied by the thick hair and low forehead, were all definitive markers of the ape. Hartright is made uncomfortable by this seeming hybrid, who combines the ape with the human in the same way she combines she feminine with the masculine. He is perplexed by how she is simultaneously attractively feminine and repellently masculine to him, and he describes “a sensation oddly akin to the helpless discomfort familiar to us all in sleep, when we recognise yet cannot reconcile the anomalies and contradictions of a dream” (Collins 29). Thus, the speaker feels himself in a dream-state, unable to comprehend how his oppositional feelings toward Marian might be rationalized. Marian here becomes in some ways like the Kristevian Abject, in that she attracts and repels at the same time, and this troublesome ambivalence creates a sense of disorienting unease in those such as the confused Walter Hartright, who gaze upon her. Perhaps this feeling is similar to that which confronts the Victorian thinker who contemplates the disturbing similarities between the human and the ape, especially in light of the implications that emerging ideas of evolution carried with them.

**Orientalism and Julia Pastrana**

Marian provides a good literary glimpse into how human beings who seemed to resemble apes, especially if those human beings did not discernibly belong within the
parameters of English culture, achieved a strong spectacle-value in nineteenth-century British culture. The discussion of the ape-like human was constructed by acts of “Othering” which were motivated by concerns regarding the nature of the broadening British Empire. The technique, in which the ape-like human was read as a way to comprehend the distant past of the human species, was typically deployed in regard to the racial “Other,” which included essentially any person who was not physically similar to western Europeans, and especially anyone who lived within an area that Britain included within the boundaries of its Empire. The process of “Othering” involved the creation of a constructed image of a person or group of people that emphasized how different that group was when compared to “civilized” people. (It should be noted that the “Other” was an invention of the Self and so, in a way, it was also the image that confronted the “Self” when it looked in the mirror.)

This process, called by Edward Said “Orientalism,” constructs a fabricated image of the “Orient” through defining its inhabitants as ugly, savage, backward, bizarre and essentially sub-human. (The “Orient” itself was an imagined space; it was essentially a conceptual receptacle for all difference, lumping together everything that was unfamiliar or perceived as threatening to the British Empire or Western cultures in general.) Importantly, these definitions were entirely constructed without consulting anyone who belonged to the groups that were being defined and were entirely generated by contrasting the imaginary “Other” with the culture of the Empire, or the “Self.” In other words, the “Other” was necessarily excluded from any role in the construction of the definitions and parameters of what it meant to be “Other.”

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This kind of racism was strategic, in that rendering a group of human beings “Other” could justify any intrusive acts of Empire, as a way to help advance an underdeveloped people. Said notes, though, that “Orientalism” was not deployed as a means to justify colonial enterprise, but was rather used in advance to validate the need to colonialize (Said 39). One of the ways in which the “Oriental” “Other” might be constructed involved a consultation of scientific discourse, and specifically that which was forming around the notions of evolution and natural selection. If humanity had truly evolved from the ape, then the non-European subject in the British Empire could easily be perceived as a member of a “primitive culture” and thus be defined morphologically as ape-like. In this way, “Othered” cultures could be read as humanity’s ghosts from the deep past, offering a glimpse of what the human species looked and acted like at an earlier stage of its development. Of course, this was untrue, as members of “Other” cultures were in no way any different as a species from anyone else on earth. Alfred Russel Wallace championed this opinion that consulting existing cultures could not necessarily provide an instructive window toward understanding the genesis of the human species.

Perhaps the most visible of these “Othered” individuals in the nineteenth century was Julia Pastrana (1834 [?]-1860), an indigenous woman living in Mexico who suffered from a condition which caused her to grow long thick black hair over her face and most of her body. She was displayed as evidence of a hybrid form, linking the human to the ape, and even labeled briefly as a “Bear Woman”; Alexander Mott, M.D., believed her to be the result of breeding between a human being and an orangutan (Bondeson, 1997,
219), though how this could have been possible when she was discovered in Mexico is not elaborated upon. When she died as a result of childbirth complications in 1860, she and her stillborn daughter were mummified by professors at Moscow University and displayed in a glass case (until she was finally removed and buried in Mexico in February 2013). The denial of the proper burial afforded to her places her within the parameters of the unquiet human corpse; she continued to generate meaning and controversy long after her life was over and her body placed on permanent display. In life and death, she was invariably described in such a way as to posit her as a living “missing link,” which had yet to have been satisfactorily discovered in her lifetime, between the human and the ape.

A newspaper description of her, as observed from life, reads as follows:

[t]he eyes of this lusus natura [sic] beam with intelligence, while its jaws, jagged fangs and ears and terrifically hideous ... Nearly its whole frame is coated with long glossy hair. Its voice is harmonious, for this semi-human being is perfectly docile, and speaks the Spanish language. (Bondeson, 1997, 219)

Importantly, the reader of account is frequently reminded that, in spite of Pastrana’s language use, docility, harmonious voice and intelligent-seeming eyes, she is inescapably an “it,” as the description keeps in clear view her “semi-human” morphology, including her “hideous” “jagged fangs” and the coat of “long glossy hair” that aligns her more closely with the identity of the animal or at least a discernibly pre-modern human. Even Charles Darwin seemed to make use of her potential as a living “missing link.” In volume two of The Variation of Animals and Plants under Domestication (1868) he makes this perceived connection clear:

Julia Pastrana, a Spanish dancer, was a remarkably fine woman, but she had a thick masculine beard and a hairy forehead; she was photographed, and her
stuffed skin was exhibited as a show; but what concerns us is, that she had in both the upper and lower jaw an irregular double set of teeth, one row being placed within the other, of which [a cast was taken]. From the redundancy of the teeth her mouth projected, and her face had a gorilla-like appearance. (Darwin, 1868, 394)

It should be noted that Darwin was writing of the posthumous Pastrana, and so was using this taxidermized human corpse as evidence to support his theories of evolution and natural selection. Darwin’s opportunistic reading of Pastrana, which allowed for the belief in the presence of a living connection between the human and ape through her physical body, represented a movement toward locating a missing link. Literary voices, unlike Darwin, increasingly looked away from empirical evidence such as Julia Pastrana’s unfortunately displayed corpse and toward the supernatural as a viable realm from which to create such a link.

Morlocks

Indeed, the supernatural monkey could be found in nineteenth century literature, largely apart from Imperialist “Orientalist” thinking. Instead, they are usually depicted as ghostly, dangerous relics of a deep past. Unusually, though, ghost monkeys have not been explored by literary criticism as reflections of the anxieties of their cultures of origin, especially in regard to burgeoning theories about human evolution. Perhaps the most productive way to begin to explore the expression of such fears through the textual deployment of this unique figure would be found within H.G. Wells’ *The Time Machine* (1895), specifically in regard to the devolved, cannibalistic, subterranean Morlocks the protagonist encounters when he travels to the year 802,701 A.D. These creatures are described in terms that overlap, specifically, the “whiteness” and the peripherality of the ghost with the apelike appearance and behavior of the monkey. The Time Traveler’s initial description of the Morlocks comes from a brief glance of a “white animal” (Wells 30). David J Lake’s “The White Sphinx and the Whitened Lemur: Images of Death in *The Time Machine*” makes clear that the color white could be read as a symbol of death and ghostliness. The Time Traveler solidifies his perception of this juxtaposition of characteristics later, through another encounter in which “I thought I could see ghosts,” as he catches fleeting glimpses of “white figures” and “a solitary, white, apelike figure” (Wells 40); “[t]hey must have been ghosts” (Wells 41), he rationalizes to himself, half-seriously.

As the Morlocks come into more clear focus as the novel progresses, more ghostlike and apelike tendencies become apparent. For example, their habitat places
them in similar territory as do the bodies of those who become ghosts. Also, they are a subterranean race, so their bodies essentially live underground, as do the bodies of the dead from which ghosts are generated. The Morlocks’ corpse-like nature is enhanced by the Time Traveler’s attempts to understand his revulsion to them. Of the Morlocks, “I felt a peculiar shrinking from those pallid bodies. They were just the half-bleached colour of the worms and things one sees preserved in spirit in a zoological museum. And they were filthy cold to the touch” (Wells 46). Pallid, worm-colored and cold: these are the qualities of the corpse. But these monsters are simultaneously very simian as well. For example, the Morlocks’ uncannily dexterous ability to climb deep wells upward and downward to and from these underground homes reminds the Time Traveler of the tendencies of a “Lemur” (Wells 43) and even “so like a human spider!” (Wells 42). These descriptions are essentially synonymous, as a long-limbed, slow-moving lemur may effectively be described, especially from the point of view of an observer unfamiliar with the primates of Madagascar, as a “human spider.”

If the Morlocks may be accepted as a race of ghost monkeys, then their presence offers much to the conversation that Victorian literature had concerning its burgeoning awareness of theories about evolution and natural selection. The Time Traveler theorizes that, in this distant future, the species of humanity has fractured into two very distinct halves due to the strong separation of labor roles by class, coupled with evident, impressive technological advances. As a result, humanity has evolved into the tiny, pale Eloi, happy, ignorant surface dwellers so unaccustomed to manual work that their hands appear boneless, and the Morlocks, remnants perhaps of the working class, troglodytic,
savage cannibals. In other words, humanity splinters, with one faction moving “forward” and growing dull and weak because technology and scientific advances have made life too easy for them; “[s]trength is the outcome of need; security sets a premium on feebleness” (Wells 28) and with nothing to fear, the Eloi had “decayed to a mere beautiful futility” (Wells 52). The other faction “regresses” into shapes that evoke Victorian notions of the prehistoric human or proto-human, “bleached, obscene, nocturnal” things that disgust him, and that may or may not even be bipedal (Wells 42). To the Time Traveler, the world is one in which “humanity [is] on the wane” (Wells 28) and “the two species that had resulted from the evolution of man were sliding backwards, or had already arrived, at a new relationship” (Wells 52), in which the regressed form clearly dominated the more advanced form. Neither evolutionary destination in this storyworld, not the weak simpleton nor the monstrous cannibal, is a favorable one. That both species are ultimately doomed is given more evidence when the Time Traveler travels further into the future to witness the end of the earth, where he encounters neither Eloi nor Morlock. Less directly, one may interpret the Time Traveler’s observations on passing through the ruins of London’s Natural History Museum, in which he encounters the decomposing displayed remains of Megalotherium and Brontosaurus fossils (Wells 58). “This too shall pass away,” seems the thought instigated by the juxtaposition of the present, represented by the Time Traveler who looks upon the fossils of the deep past while visiting the future. In other words, just as these prehistoric creatures became extinct, so too will the equally unadaptable denizens of the earth, circa 802,701.
If the time machine does indeed catapult the Time Traveler into the very distant future of earth, and if that future provides evidence that Morlocks will adapt from the human species, then to some degree the Time Traveler, and all human beings in the nineteenth century from which it appears he has originated, contain a Morlock, or the evolutionary potential of the Morlock, within them. A majority of monster theory criticism begins from the premise that the literary monster is essentially a mirror, typically a dark reflection of the protagonist and often increasingly similar to the protagonist behaviorally and physically. In this way, Grendel reflects Beowulf and, more temporally proximal to this project, Frankenstein’s monster reflects Victor Frankenstein and Hyde reflects Jekyll. The Victorian himself and herself, too, contain traces of deep-past human ancestors, or the “ghost monkey within.”

Seen in this way, one would certainly expect the Time Traveler, himself a Morlock ancestor, to exhibit the monstrous tendencies he describes in his descendants. He describes himself, for example, excited at the potential for doing violence, reacting with disappointment when he discovers he will not, after all his preparation to do so, have to assault the White Sphinx monument in order to retrieve the Time Machine; he casts his iron bar away, “almost sorry not to use it” (Wells 72). This desire to do violence, to behave in a manner expected of the Morlock, is even more strongly described through the sense of violent abjection the Time Traveler develops toward the Morlocks; “I longed very much to kill a Morlock or so. Very inhuman, you may think, to want to go killing one’s descendants! But it was impossible, somehow, to feel any humanity in the things” and it is only the consideration of the impracticality of this act that “slaked my thirst for
“murder” and “restrained me from going straight down the gallery [into the Morlocks’ lair] and killing the brutes I heard” (Wells 61). Importantly, the Time Traveler acknowledges the deep genetic connection between himself and these devolved monsters, but does not linger on the possibility that mass Morlock murder would be an act of at least partial extermination of his own species.

But ghost monkeys do not only loom in literature in the imagined human future as a frightening evolutionary destination for humanity. They may also be found in the not too terribly deep past. Specifically, at least one nineteenth-century ghost story locates a clan of ghost monkeys lodged within the indistinct period of Britain’s prehistory. Grant Allen’s “Pallinghurst Barrow” (1892) describes a ghostly assault upon a trespasser into the “Old Long Barrow” at Pallinghurst Common, in Hampshire. The protagonist Rudolph becomes immersed in a ghostly re-enactment of an ancient pagan ritual, and the primitive ghost-Britons who perform it are not only atavistic in behavior but are described as clearly apelike. Rudolph confronts “a ghostly throng of naked and hideous savages. They were spirits, yet savages” (Allen 163) and therefore simultaneously ghosts and human ancestors. He notes that they were

grinning and hateful barbarian shadows, neither black nor white, but tawny-skinned and low-browed; their tangled hair falling unkempt in matted locks about their receding foreheads; their jaws large and fierce; their eyebrows shaggy and protruding like a gorilla’s; their loins just girt with a few scraps of torn skin; their whole mein inexpressibly repulsive and bloodthirsty. (Allen 163)

He concludes his description with the repeated claim that “[t]hey were savages, yet they were ghosts” (Allen 163). Their morphology is plainly that of the ape. “Grinning” is an attribute aligned with apes; “tawny” skin is congruent with the coloration of many apes;
“low brows,” “receding foreheads” and “shaggy eyebrows” all describe the prognathic profile of the ape’s skull especially when compared to the fainter expression of these features on the human skull; “large and fierce jaws” certainly evoke images of the gorilla’s powerful mandible; the near-nudity is not necessarily apelike but does help to distance these creatures from their fully-clothed Victorian observer; and the overall “repulsive” and “bloodthirsty” appearance powerfully serves to dehumanize these entities and highlight their monstrous “Otherness.”

The terrifying object of these apelike ghosts’ worship is an animated human skeleton, its teeth befouled with layers of dried blood left there from countless previous victims. Rudolph is aware that he is about to become consumed in similar fashion. The human corpse, in this frightening form, becomes the most dangerous adversary in this storyworld. This cannibalistic skeleton is a living fossil and more importantly a deep-past ancestor capable of killing and devouring its descendants. Even worse, the protagonist watches as the skeleton “seemed to disappear, or rather fade into some insubstantial form, with was nevertheless more human, more corporeal, more horrible than the dry bones it had come from” (Allen 165). Significantly, this apelike ghost could essentially un-fossilize itself and could re-corporealize its body, fueled by human blood, meaning that the Victorian human body was here in danger of being literally replaced by its resuscitated ancestor. That the Victorian human is rendered as food to set this process in motion provides a reminder that humanity, in its modern shape, could not claim to occupy the reigning position on the “food chain” anymore. Yet, the fact that the skeleton stares at Rudolph with “hungry eyes of hideous cannibal longing” (Allen 167) indicates
that this monster is close enough to being human that if it were to eat him the act would be cannibalistic. In this context, the ghost monkey is for many reasons anything but harmless, and is much closer to Britain’s history and the Victorian’s identity than were the distant human-like fossils being discovered around the world at this time.

The “Scrap-Book”

But ghost monkeys can be much closer to Victorian culture too, appearing as haunting entities recorded within relatively recent English history. Specifically, this type of creature pulls itself from an ancient document into the world of the living in the pages of M.R. James’ “Canon Alberic’s Scrap-Book” (originally published in 1894 in London’s National Review). Here, an Englishman visiting the “decayed town” of St. Bertrand de Comminges in the Pyrenees purchases from the local cathedral a scrap-book, a patchwork collection of ancient manuscript fragments assembled into a single disjointed volume, largely because one particular piece obsesses him. It depicts a scene, which the narrative’s speaker dates to the late seventeenth century, in which five horrified-looking soldiers, one of whom is apparently dead from a horribly broken neck, surround a demonic monster, whose features, though indistinct, appear to activate the specific trope of the ghost monkey.

At first you saw only a mass of coarse, matted black hair; presently it was seen that this covered a body of fearful thinness, almost a skeleton, but with the muscles standing out like wires. The hands were of a dusky pallor, covered, like the body, with long, coarse hairs, and hideously taloned. The eyes, touched in with a burning yellow, had intensely black pupils, and were fixed upon the throned King [who centers the illustration] with a look of beast-like hate. Imagine one of the awful bird-catching spiders of South America translated into human form, and endowed with an intelligence just less than human, and you will have some faint conception of the terror inspired by this appalling effigy. One remark
is universally made by those to whom I have shown the picture: ‘It was drawn from the life.’ (James 9)88

Perhaps this is another instance of the Victorian tendency to bring ancient folkloric beliefs into literary considerations of scientific discourse, uniting the figures of the primate and the demon. It is not difficult to see this demonic monster as monkey-like. The “coarse, matted hair,” wiry muscle structure, taloned “hands” and yellow eyes are all, even if exaggerated as they are coagulated into a horrific composite, recognizable features of primate morphology. Even the spidery lankiness of the hairy limbs, as well as the association with South America (a continent in which Victorian culture was aware that monkeys were indigenous) would seem to indicate a simian appearance.89 Similarly, the sense the monster radiates of sub-human intelligence (though how this could have been coherently conveyed in the manuscript is unclear) seems to offer a reminder of monkeys and apes, the creatures in the animal kingdom which had been determined by Victorian science to possess an intelligence just beneath that of the human.

Beyond this frightening morphology, and the obvious implication that this creature is so dangerous as to have snapped the neck of one of the soldiers, is the skeletal appearance of at least parts of the creature’s body. This desiccated morphology may be read as a reference to the fossilized monkeys that were being discovered in fragmentary skeletal form throughout the nineteenth century, and which were increasingly being identified as humanity’s ancestors from the deep past. The image of a skeleton covered with hair and muscle can be read as a long-dead thing returning to a life-like state, a living corpse, or for the purpose of this examination, a ghost monkey. And further
emphasizing the ghost-like nature of the creature is the speaker’s observation that the manuscript containing it has, from the point of view from which the story has been written, vanished, and is only preserved in the form of a photograph which had been taken of it. Even the manuscript is now a ghost. (Perhaps it can even be said that it survives only, outside of the short story of course, as a “spirit photograph” of sorts, but one produced without technological manipulation.)

“Green Tea”

The next most prominent and clearly-defined ghost monkey, in terms of canonical literature, is found within Sheridan LeFanu’s 1872 short story “Green Tea.” This short story features an incorporeal antagonist in the shape of a small demonic ghost monkey. Most critical treatment of this story, of which there has not been much, focuses on its similarities to other stories by LeFanu, or its commentary on addiction and the power of hallucination. None of the critics who have written about “Green Tea” entertain the very viable possibility, as presented in the storyworld, that the ghost monkey may be anything more than a series of increasingly menacing green tea-induced hallucinations.

The plot follows protagonist and story-recorder Dr. Hesselius, who does not deny the label of “conjurer,” as he becomes acquainted with a troubled but otherwise shy and unassuming intellectual, Mr. Jennings. Jennings claims to be haunted by a supernatural entity that is driving him mad, enlists Hesselius’ help in order to overcome it, but is eventually found dead, with his throat slashed; it is assumed that the madness, or “blue devils,” that had haunted his mind had at last completely overtaken his sanity and that he had committed suicide as a result. A close reading of the text complicates this
interpretation, though. Early in the narrative, as Hesselius waits in Jennings’ library for his host to make an appearance, the former peruses the notes taken by the latter from a Latin edition of a Swedenborg text. Among these he finds this passage, which seemingly foreshadows the looming presence of a malignant supernatural entity; “[i]f evil spirits could perceive that they were associated with man, and yet that they were spirits separate from him, and if they could flow in into the things of his body, they would attempt by a thousand means to destroy him, for they hate man with a deadly hatred” (LeFanu 9). This is an ideal description of how the ghost of a human ancestor from the deep past, simultaneously “associated” by evolution but “separated” by extinction, might feel about its descendant. That the boundaries of the human could be so fluid as to allow for a supernatural creature to “flow” into its body and occupy it is also a disturbing notion especially for a Victorian, for whom any incursion into his carefully-cultivated civilized demeanor threatened his status at the top of the social hierarchy. Such an entity would be truly horrifying for the Victorian, particularly if it turned out to be more of an internal than external enemy.

And Jennings has indeed encountered such an entity. He describes how his burgeoning addiction to green tea, a beverage capable of keeping him energized and focused as he maintains a lifestyle of intense nocturnal writing, causes him to fall into a morbid state and begin seeing a demonic monkey. It slowly manifests itself in front of him as he sits alone in a darkened carriage as a pair of glowing red eyes. These eyes indicate their mirror condition by following his own, and they eventually coagulate into “the outline of a small black monkey, pushing its face in mimicry to meet mine” (LeFanu 92).
So from its initial manifestation, the ghost monkey is read as a mirror image of Jennings. To “ape” is of course to mimic, and the mimicking nature of this ghost monkey immediately establishes it as an apelike mirror image of the man who observes it. If we read this scene as that of a man confronting his evolutionary ancestor, the ghost of who his species used to be, then this textual moment describes a man facing the ghost of his own ancient relative. It is a mirror that shows the human his own image from the deep past. And this manifestation is considered by Jennings to be something capable of *devolving*. Regarding “spectral illusions,” Jennings claims that “I have read of cases in which the appearance, at first harmless, had, step by step, degenerated into something direful and insupportable, and ended by wearing its victim out” (LeFanu 18). In other words, the “affection” he thinks he sees may deteriorate into something that is actually dangerous, similar to how the ghost monkey is itself already a “deteriorated” form of the modern human being, and one that apparently becomes increasingly more lethal as the narrative progresses.

This monkey appears to be supernatural from the outset. Jennings tests its corporeality by poking it with his umbrella, only to find that the umbrella passes without resistance right through its body (LeFanu 17). This action may be read beyond the literal in a multitude of ways. On the surface, it tells the reader that the monkey is not a corporeal object, and that as a result it is either a hallucination generated by the mind of its observer, or that it is truly a ghost. It might offer a critique of the evolutionist’s claim that humanity and apes are related, in that, when the man attempts to make contact with the monkey, his efforts yield no tangible or solid results. It may also indicate a
frustration with the incomplete nature of the fossil record at this time; a handful of fossil apes, such as the seemingly humanlike *Dryopithecus*, had been excavated and cataloged, but for the most part discernibly transitional forms that could solidify in a literal sense the connection were absent, or at least had yet to be interpreted.

The ghost monkey becomes increasingly more frightening and threatening every time it manifests itself, and Hesselius notes that his acquaintance is beginning to take on the appearance of a corpse, “looking like death” (LeFanu 18). If the ghost is, as Victorian and previous cultures have defined it, a spectral version of a deceased human being, then the deterioration of Jennings into a deathlike corpse-state is significant. As a corpse, he is the raw material from which a ghost or, here a ghost monkey, might be expected to spring. Moreover, the ghost monkey begins to take on conventionally demonic qualities, such as a “glow of red embers” (LeFanu 19) and produces in Jennings a feeling that its presence was “drawing me more interiorly into hell” (LeFanu 21). It even confounds his attempt to connect through prayer to Christianity, as “whenever I meditated praying; It was always before me, and nearer and nearer” (LeFanu 22). The ghost monkey impedes Jennings’ religious thoughts. The demonic overtones reach a point where he confesses to Hesselius that “[y]ou had no idea, sir, that living man could be made so abject a slave of Satan” (LeFanu 24). The ghost monkey may indeed be a powerfully specific threat to Christian thought in the nineteenth century, as its presence in fossil form complicates Christian creation narrative not only by indicating a deeper history of humanlike creatures than had been accounted for, but also by implying that evolution and natural selection had produced the form of the modern human, rather than
the hand of a creative Christian God. Here, the fossil of the proto-human monkey presents a frozen moment in stone that, unlike a ghost, does not fade away after it has delivered its message from the past to the present. The antithesis of the ghost, the fossil is forever available to the empirical, scientific eye of the nineteenth century. It is infinitely more difficult for a skeptic to “debunk” than an old ghost story told by an uneducated, anonymous rustic.

Further, the ghost monkey eventually begins, in a way that is not explained in detail, to compel Jennings toward increasingly dire acts of criminality. The ghost monkey “is always urging me to crimes, to injure others, or myself” (LeFanu 24). He does not seem to succumb to these demonic encouragements, as he does not confess to any criminal activities. So he initially proves himself able to resist the ghost monkey, but only for a while. And when Jennings does kill himself, slashing his throat in the middle of the night with a straight-razor (LeFanu 27), no-one is present who may either confirm or deny the presence of a supernatural antagonist encouraging him to do so. There is no empirical evidence, even in the subtlest form, that this act is anything other than a conventional suicide, as straight-razor throat slashing was not an uncommon method of Victorian self-destruction. Not a trace of evidence exists at the scene, not even a single telltale series of bloody monkey footprints walking across the hardwood floor. Jennings’ servant Jones, who reports on the activities of Jennings’ last night alive, notes that his master asks him whether he can see anything unusual at one point and, at another, whether he has heard cursing emanating from the room in which Jennings has
sequestered himself. In neither case, significantly, does Jones mark anything out of the ordinary.

Whether or not this ghost monkey actually “exists” within the parameters of the storyworld does not matter for the purposes of this analysis, though it would certainly be read differently depending on its identity as a monster or as an illusion. In Jungian terms, the ghost monkey must either correspond with “spiritist theory,” and thus be a “self-existing” entity entirely external to its observer, or it must fall in line with “animist theory,” and therefore be a hallucinatory projection radiating from the psyche of its observer (Jaffe 77). The narrative is constructed in a way that supports the “animist” reading that the ghost monkey may be entirely hallucinatory; no character other than Jennings sees it and the general critical consensus is that the ghost monkey is entirely product of the green-tea-tinted imagination of the man who observes it. A postscript, in epistolary form, offers an explanation for the apparent hallucination. Nerve fluid that travels through the brain may have its equilibrium damaged, as a result of the intervention of substances such as green tea taken in excess, and “[t]his fluid being that which we have in common with spirits, a congestion found upon the masses of brain or nerve, connected with the interior sense, forms a surface duly exposed, on which disembodied spirits may operate; communication is thus more or less effectively established” (LeFanu 29). In other words, the unbalanced brain may become a conduit for discourse with the spirit world. This explanation does not satisfy literary or cultural critics, though. Thomas Boyle, for example, defines the alleged appearance of the ghost monkey as a direct manifestation of Jennings’ id, a displacement of his suppressed id.
passionate impulses (Boyle 176). This reading is in tune with the notion that the ghost monkey did “urge” Jennings to “commit crimes,” as did Mister Hyde to Jekyll, and Hyde is occasionally (though I would argue, erroneously) read as an id-manifestation of Jekyll. It may be questioned whether, as an id-centered hallucination, the ghost monkey is intended to be read through “animist” filters as an inextricable part of Jennings’ interiority, and one which takes the shape of a proto-human, or as an illusion, making it a denial of the validity of evolutionary connections between the man and the monkey because of its illusionary nature. Interestingly, Noel Carroll ultimately finds the illusionary notion of the ghost monkey to be entirely unsatisfactory (Carroll 148) but does not push an interpretation so far as to drive it into “spiritist” territory, as the text’s storyworld posits through Hesselius its origin to Jennings’ overindulgence in green tea, which according to the aforementioned explanation infects the nerve fluid that controls the human brain and consequently perverts the perception of the eye inside the brain.

LeFanu’s fiction, here and elsewhere, does not resolve the question of supernaturality for his readers (though the majority of critics who treat the story proceed from the unexamined assumption that the ghost monkey is entirely and necessarily the product of Jennings’ mind). His work frequently features the climactic, mysterious suicide of a central character, whose self-destruction is the result of an apparently supernatural agency which represents the guilt the character has attempted to avoid. These supernatural influences were known in the nineteenth century as “blue devils” and were defined as representations of “despondency and hypochondriac melancholy” (Gates 18). The protagonist in LeFanu’s “The Watcher” (1847), for example, who we later find
is haunted by the memory of neglecting a young girl so severely it drives her to suicide, is relentlessly pursued by a shadowy apparition he believes to be demonic. At the end of the story, he does battle with the demon, in a furious struggle outside the sight of the narrative, and is subsequently found dead. Similarly, “Mr. Justice Harbottle” (1872) involves a judge haunted in his dreams by the spectres of those he has hanged, as well as a gigantic, monstrous doppelganger version of himself. This double eventually sentences him to death, and he is discovered at the close of the story, hanging from a banister in his home. In both of these cases, Barbara Gates points out in “Blue Devils and Green Tea: Sheridan Le Fanu’s Haunted Suicides,” the motivations behind the “blue devils” are clear: those spurred to suicide are victimized by their own inescapable feelings of guilt. There is no such guilt to be found, by way of explanation in regard to the death of the seemingly unblemished Jennings in “Green Tea” (Gates 20). The only sense of guilt that the ghost monkey in “Green Tea” may be pointing toward, according to a Victorian mindset, is the possible “guilt” of the “original sin” of being born as a human, and thus inextricably tainted by the evolutionary connection to the monkey.

This notion is worth pursuing. The act of suicide, illegal in England until 1823, marginalizes the Victorian human body too, as it involves a person transforming himself or herself into a corpse. Such acts usurp the role of the Christian God as the only entity allowed to destroy the gift of life it bestows. Perhaps the presence of the ghost monkey, as a spectrally reanimated human ancestor, served to define a similar threat as did suicide. The ghost monkey is a ghost from a past so deep that human beings still resembled monkeys, it offered itself as an emblem of the possibility that God was not the creator of
all life, and that millions of years of natural selection and selective adaptation were more 
responsible for the human shape than any divine creative hand. Clearly, the ghost 
monkey seen in this light was tremendously dangerous, lurking as it did amid a culture 
with a longstanding if turbulent Christian tradition.

**Man-Monkey Attack**

And LeFanu’s green tea demon was not the only definitive ghost monkey that can 
be found in the nineteenth century. Considerably less well-known, but significant insofar 
as the ghost monkey is concerned, is a fairly obscure account from 1879, recorded by 
Charlotte Sophia Burne’s 1883 *Stropshire Folklore*, in which a laboring man, as he 
returns on horseback late at night from an errand and crossing a road that straddled the 
canals of Liverpool and Birmingham, encounters something equally terrifying and 
inexplicable.

Just before he reached the canal bridge, a strange black creature with great white 
eyes sprang out of the plantation by the roadside and alighted on his horse’s back. He tried to push it off with his whip, but to his horror the whip went straight 
through the thing, and he dropped it on the ground in fright. The poor tired horse 
broke into a canter and rushed onwards at full speed with the ghost still clinging 
to its back. How the creature at length vanished the man hardly knew. (Burne, in 
Redfern 151)

After emerging from a terrified stupor days later, he was able to report this attack to his 
“master,” who relayed it to the investigating authorities and was told, enigmatically, that 
“[t]hat was the Man-Monkey, sir, as does come again at that bridge ever since the man 
was drowned in the Cut!” (Burne, in Redfern 151, italics Burne’s). With this
unelaborated remark, the account ends, and the author moves on to a completely different narrative.

This story did not seem to circulate widely across English culture, and will not be argued here as an influential narrative as if it had. But what is important about this unusual story is how the Man-Monkey may be read within its culture’s understanding of humanity’s ancient relationship with primates, as was being set forth by evolutionary theorists and those who wrote about it. The similarities between this Man-Monkey and LeFanu’s ghost monkey are difficult to ignore. Both manifest themselves suddenly and attack a nighttime traveler, for example. Also, both seem to possess an unusual combination of corporeality and incorporeality. This is again not atypical within revenant tradition, and is seen here with the Man-Monkey’s simultaneous ability launch a physical attack on the man by jumping onto him and clinging to his back, while demonstrating immunity to physical attacks against it when the man’s whip passes cleanly through its body, and eventually vanishing altogether. Neither the Man-Monkey nor LeFanu’s ghost monkey, importantly, are witnessed by anyone other than the individual who has been attacked, which leads to the “animist” implications that both percipients may have imagined, or even deliberately fabricated, the encounters entirely.

But the Man-Monkey narrative offers a bit more insight into its possible nature as a manifestation of a response to current Victorian thoughts about the antiquity of the human species. Specifically, the fact that the Man-Monkey appeared after a man drowned in the area is significant. A death by drowning echoes the fate of all the victims of the Deluge, so the “survival” of an apelike human creature, even in ghost-form, may
offer evidence that subverts the Biblical claim that all prediluvian life on earth was exterminated following this event. Furthermore, the connection of the Man-Monkey to the identity of a drowned man is important, in that a ghost takes on the semblance of the shape it wore when it was alive, almost without exception. In this case, however, the apparent ghost of a man has devolved as it moves from the natural to the supernatural realm, taking on the appearance of a monkey. But this evolutionarily-backsliding monkey is truly dangerous, and not just because it mounts a corporeal attack on the man who encounters it. Rather, its menace emerges from its apparent attempt to “take the reins” from a human being. In leaping onto the back of the horse, displacing and subsequently unhorsing the rider, the ghost monkey essentially takes the place of the man. This ghostly Man-Monkey, no longer in the shape of the human it might have been expected to be but now in the form of the supernatural remnant of a human ancestor, wants to reclaim its place at the head, or reins, of nature, the status that evolutionary development caused it to lose, to cede to modern humanity. The battle becomes an allegorical one, not as much between man and ghost monkey as between the species of man and that of its deep-past ancestor, back from the dead and attempting to assert its superiority over the human. One cannot help but recall the Time Traveler of Wells here, in his violent struggles with the Morlocks. In both cases, the ancestor returns from the deep past to attack the species it will eventually engender, and which will inherit the earth.

Also, rather than discarding the authorities’ flip-sounding comment about how the ghost monkey had manifested itself after the drowning of a man as a simple cause-and-
effect explanation for the presence of a ghost, in which a disaster claims the life of a physical body which returns to the place of its demise as a spiritual body, we may wish to look a bit more closely at the story it tells. Foremost, the notion that a *man* dies and returns in ghost form, as a *monkey*, is interesting. Typically, as has been discussed above, a ghost takes some semblance of the shape of the living entity it used to be, but here, unusually, we have a regression, or a devolution. Even more compelling is the notion that the man suffered the fate of all antediluvian creatures, drowning. The idea that a monkey, essentially a ghost of humankind’s evolutionary past, might return from its antediluvian position, in which its extinction had essentially been ordained by the Christian God, to inhabit the “post-diluvian” future of humankind is especially terrifying to a Victorian culture. This presence is deeply troublesome to a society clinging to the fading belief that it, both as a species and a culture, was the glorious culmination, the destination of the Christian God’s creation plan. How can the human species evolve if it is threatened by the presence of the very obsolete species it has allegedly replaced?

While none of these out-of-place simian figures can be argued to proceed directly from anxieties pertaining to human evolution and our distant connections with monkeys and apes, this chapter attempts to outline how such concerns maintained the presence of fears about evolution and natural selection as they unfurled throughout the nineteenth century. The ghost was an impression left by the ancestor, so by extension the ghost monkey was the impression of the ancestors from the deep past. This prehistoric world was typically envisioned by the Victorians as a violent, frightening place. It was imagined as being constantly mired in life-and-death combat, which perhaps served to
emphasize how impressive the human victory was, as it transcended from this terrifying place, adapting and eventually surviving into and shaping the modern world. The fossil record did not necessarily insert humanity into this narrative, even as an unformed, proto-human protagonist-to-be, but the Victorians consistently wrote themselves into this landscape as important characters anyway. However, when we consult the literary record and ephemeral materials that recorded the popular culture of the nineteenth century, we begin to see cracks in the armor with the figure of the ghost monkey, as an entity always lurking as a reminder of the deep past from which humanity has managed to pull itself.
CONCLUSION

Nineteenth-century British culture was alive with the undead. This era is essentially book-ended by Mary’s Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897), but plenty of undead activity may be found between the publications of these seminal novels. Human corpses in this century were considerably more dynamic in literature and ephemera than they had been previously, defying the culture’s belief that death was the inexorable conclusion of life’s activity. They were supposed to act as avatars for the finality of death, and so to be immobile, empty bodies expected to do nothing more than decompose and disappear, out of sight of the living. Thomas Hood’s “Sonnet: - Death” (1823) poetically sets forth the traditional notion that, in death, “this warm conscious flesh shall perish quite, / [a]nd all life’s ruddy springs forget to flow” (Wolfson and Manning 16: lines 5-6). Instead, human corpses frequently and alarmingly transgressed this role, refusing to be extinguished and returning to interact, either directly or indirectly, with those in the world of the living. In other words, many human corpses failed to behave as they were expected to behave and therefore marked themselves as undead. Whether the undead human corpse was disturbingly visible in an overcrowded cemetery, spontaneously combusting for unknown reasons, stolen from its grave to serve the needs of human dissection, splayed out on the dissector’s table, returned from death to communicate with or to seek vengeance upon the living, or adopting the haunting
shape of an imagined deep-past human ancestor, the corpse in the nineteenth century consistently refused to rest in peace.

This dissertation has discussed how myriad cultural factors fed the anxieties of writers in the nineteenth century, from overuse of limited burial spaces, scientific curiosity that could only be satisfied by disassembling the human body, the rise and critique of Spiritualism, and a blossoming knowledge of the possible depths of human evolution and its ancestral relationships. All of these factors, while not new to the nineteenth century, nonetheless found prominent placements in the cultural discourse, and many writers expressed their burgeoning anxieties about these concerns by constructing the vehicle of the restless corpses as a means to do so. The human corpse was useful here, as it was easily accessible as an undeniable reminder of death with a long tradition of artistic and literary expression to this end. Rendering the human corpse as an active entity, and thus bringing the dead back to life or even back into the gaze of the living, allowed nineteenth-century writers to call into question the very notion of uncrossable boundaries.

The individual literary and ephemeral encounters with the restless, undead corpse which have been explored here tend to be fragmentary. Rarely does the animated human corpse dominate a novel, or even a short story; more often, while the human corpse is central to the trajectory of the narrative, it appears only briefly or impartially. Much like a “real” encounter with the supernatural, the glimpse of the undead tends to be fragmentary. As a result, this dissertation has been dedicated to the close readings of these specific textual moments, rather than more expansive readings of the entire texts in
which these figures manifest themselves. In other words, a close reading of Krook’s spontaneous combustion, examining the textual moment in which apparent supernatural intervention produces an unconventional human corpse, proves to be more productive for this dissertation than a detailed examination of the entire text of *Bleak House*. Such an approach also requires the consultation of multiple texts, as a dependence on any one narrative runs the risk of creating the scaffolding for an assumption that defines a particular occurrence, unique to the text of its origin, as an accurate rendition of broader cultural manifestations.

What these investigations have revealed is that nineteenth-century culture cannot be read as a single-stream of progress away from the embarrassing darkness of old folkloric “superstitions” and toward the light of developing scientific discourse. Rather, what emerges is a culture that refuses to commit itself either to science or superstition, and the frequent literary and ephemeral occurrences of the undead human corpse helps to make this tension visible. It is folklore to which many writers in the nineteenth century looked as a means to conceptualize and understand the new, troublesome implications raised in nineteenth-century culture. The folklore of the undead became a means by which threatening new ideas might be grounded against a familiar backdrop of time-worn narratives and themes.

Superstitious folklore was like the undead in that it was treated by many writers as a peripheral element; it belonged away from London, the heart of new thinking, and was thought to be confined to rural and Irish-influenced spaces, and was believed to be particularly the province of women and servants. But it was realized that “’tis only fair to
imagine that, at one period of the world, the grave was not ‘the home from which no traveler returns,’ but that the spirits of the dead have frequently been permitted to revisit the scene of their earthly pilgrimage” (W.R. 58). However, an article in the *The Lady’s Monthly Museum, “On the Appearance of Ghosts, Spectres, &c.”* (1805) encapsulates well the belief that folkloric beliefs, specifically in regard to ghostly apparitions, had been effectively “exploded” by the dawning of the nineteenth century and were now to be found only in far-off parts of the country where old-fashioned ignorance willfully prevailed:

After the false notion of the appearance of Ghosts, &c., was completely established, it became the too common practice of the people in general, more particularly in the provincial parts of England, by way of entertaining each other on a long winter’s evening, to relate the prodigious sights that had appeared to them, in their disordered imaginations, on important occasions, and in particular situations. (“On the Appearance of Ghosts, Spectres, &c.” 323)

Important, too, is the idea that these stories, circulated now only in the ancient oral fashion in locales far from the discourse of London and its scientific luminaries, are told in defiance of their “completely established” falsehood and are the products of the tellers’ “disordered imaginations.”

However, folkloric beliefs did not actually vaporize into the rustic horizon of Britain and the “disordered imaginations” of its storytellers as such writers claimed. Rather, these older beliefs were used as tools through which to approach the very anxieties that new thinking was disseminating. Human dissection, for example, could be confronted by those who were victimized by it (the poor, almost exclusively) less by being made to understand the scientific merit in dissecting the corpses of their loved ones
than by creating the ghost of a woman whose body had been “snatched,” as is described in Thomas Hood’s “Mary’s Ghost” (1826), and giving her powerful lamentations a voice. Similarly, later in the century the Victorian anxiety connected with emerging ideas about humanity’s role in evolution and natural selection could be managed, perhaps, by taking the path of Sheridan LeFanu’s “Green Tea” (1872) and embodying it within the avatar of a malignant ghost monkey, as a deep-past ancestor whose very presence could drive its descendent to extinction through suicidal madness. The entire Spiritualism movement may be read as a multidirectional gesture toward reconciling “superstition” with science, as the new techniques for communicating with the dead allowed for the inclusion of scientific, or pseudo-scientific, discourse into a previously folkloric realm. Many of Spiritualism’s detractors decried that it was incapable of verification through repeatable empirical inquiry while, at the same time, many of its proponents championed how scientific discourse, procedures and technology could actually be used to validate its legitimacy. Science and folklore, the new thinking and the old, are completely entangled in the space of nineteenth-century Spiritualism.

Ultimately, this impulse to borrow from the longstanding folkloric traditions of the undead resembles Victor Frankenstein’s efforts to bring the dead back to life. Frankenstein uses his knowledge of current scientific understanding, replacing the “sad trash” of the folklorically-driven medieval scientists he had studied when he was younger, to accomplish a very “superstitious” feat: bringing dead human corpse-parts back to life. The superstition is validated by science here because science makes the accomplishment of the superstition possible, so to speak. He performs this fusion of
science and superstition in what he describes as his “workshop of filthy creation” (Shelley, 1818, 82; Shelley, 1831, 56). This image may be expanded to include the larger scope of nineteenth-century endeavors which aimed to deploy superstitious, or folkloric, iterations of the undead human corpse as a means to confront scientific and other types of new thinking. The “workshop of filthy creation” of the many nineteenth-century literary and ephemeral works that offered the undead human corpse as an interpretive means of defense against the ingress of frightening new ideas was, truly, made “filthy” through its inclusion of old folklore.
This term was originally coined by Stoker.

This book was either authored by Thomas Southwood Smith or William Mackenzie.

An *apotropaic* is any ritual or symbol which is used to ward off or minimize evil, usually supernatural, influences. For example, the process of burying the body of a suicide at a crossroads, so that if the corpse reanimates it cannot find its way back to its home, is an apotropaic ritual act.

A perusal through the archives of sensational publications that spanned the 1860s to the 1880s, such as the *Illustrated Police News*, for example, would seem to paint a picture of London, and England in general, as a terrifying chaotic cacophony of bloody, rampant murder.

“Resurrection men” supported themselves by supplying the flourishing anatomy schools of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries with human cadavers to dissect. Various methods were used by resurrection men to supply this lucrative market, from stealing allegedly unclaimed bodies from poorhouses to committing outright murder, but the most popular technique involved the illegal nocturnal exhumation of freshly buried corpses from local cemeteries, or “grave-robbing.” The activities of these men will be discussed in further detail below.

This criticism came to a head in 1895 with the sensational press coverage of the murder of Bridget Cleary in the tiny rural Irish town of Ballyvadlea. Clearly was burned to death by her husband and a group of nine other relatives and neighbors, including her own father, all of whom were convinced that she had been stolen by fairies and replaced by a changeling. The brutal murder was intended to inaugurate a ritual that would allow for her return from the fairies. This case served as fodder to those in England who believed the Irish were too primitive and superstitious to be permitted to govern themselves.

The immense popularity of zombies, in cinema and graphic novels, provides the most striking evidence of the continuing power of the image of the corpse in contemporary culture.

This piece is perhaps is a contemporary fake, but, regardless the specific attribution of its authorship, is traceable to the late nineteenth century and is therefore still useful here.

The exception here is American author Edgar Allan Poe, whose work was familiar to English reading audiences, who frequently worked with the theme of people being buried alive, either accidentally or deliberately. “The Premature Burial” (1844) is perhaps the most prominent of these stories. Its plot, in brief, concerns a protagonist who is terrified of being buried alive because he suffers from catalepsy, which induces deathlike stupors; when he awakens from one of these trances in a dark, confined space, he fears he has been mistaken as dead and has been buried alive. His ensuing panic, which is based on a misunderstanding, is so powerful that it cures him of his irrational fear of becoming the victim of a live burial.

Twentieth-century folkloric researcher Paul Barber argues that the idea of the vampire emerged in seventeenth-century Europe largely as a result of misinterpretations made of corpses either accidentally or deliberately exhumed; when these were found not to have been decomposing as would be expected, or were engorged with blood, for example, their conditions were believed to mark them as cataleptic vampires.

In Sheridan LeFanu’s long-forgotten novel *The Haunted Baronet* (1861) the elderly women on corpse-watching duty spend the long hours together by telling stories of “people who grew long in their coffins, of other who had been buried alive, and of others who walked after death” (LeFanu 106). Significantly, at
least in this case, the corpse-watching ritual provides an invitation toward other folkloric expressions that concern themselves with the reanimated human corpse.

Vollum’s interest in premature burials stemmed, apparently, from his childhood in America; he had been declared dead by drowning but “awoke,” surrounded by actual corpses, lying on a board in a mortuary chamber (Bondeson 188).

Interestingly, this belief intersects with medieval folkloric narrative about revenants, animated corpses of those who have died “bad deaths.” Sometimes the revenant was possessed by an evil remnant of its pre-death personality, and sometimes it was devilish intervention which allowed for this reanimation. These malignant creatures were only dangerous as long as flesh remained on their bones, somehow containing their evil energy; if a corpse was burned to ashes, either before or after reanimation, it would kill the revenant permanently. It is, perhaps, significant that, in a much less supernatural way, burning the Victorian corpse would also prevent it from being abused postmortem.

It should be noted, though, that these issues were not necessarily contiguous, and that the cultural fears of resurrection men and human dissection had largely faded away before cremation became popular.

It should be noted that cremation was not an entirely alien notion for British culture, especially when considered through the lens of antiquity, as strong evidence exists to indicate its practice on the island prior to the introduction of Christianity (McMillin 20).

In spite, again, of the evidence that crime rates had not measurably increased in the nineteenth century from where they had been during the Regency. This would be difficult to see, though, under the cultural influence of the violent sensationalism of the Victorian press, which provided such a thick curtain of exaggerated, bloated and in some cases entirely invented crime narratives. (One thinks here of the “garrotting epidemic” painted by the press in the 1850s, which, quite simply, did not exist.)

Whether this was the result of losing control of the vessel in a storm-tossed sea or the outcome of a failed at-sea robbery attempt will likely never be known for certain.

Acts resembling cremation may also be found, perhaps, in Bertha Mason in Jane Eyre, who tries to burn Rochester to death in his bed (Bronte 140), then later sets all of Thornfield on fire and almost allows herself to be live-cremated, but instead leaps to her death as the flames surround her (Bronte 400).

This important scene represented identically in both the 1818 and 1831 versions of the novel.


H.K. Browne’s illustration accompanying this chapter, in the 1853 novel version, is labeled “The Appointed Time,” but depicts the scene in which Krook’s body is discovered ablaze, and not the conspiratorial meeting between characters that the chapter title literally points toward. The implication in this, perhaps, is that the chapter is more concerned about “the appointed time” for Krook to die in this unusual and disturbing manner.
The eighteenth-century cases to which he refers here, as well as a series of eighteenth-century cases he cites in a letter to Lewes, were not clever inventions, though many of them read as though they were Dickensian constructions, and can actually be consulted (though in language perhaps more straightforward and not as colorful as that to which Dickens lends them) in the records to which he ascribes them.

The panic that has no basis in actual events, and is more of a media invention, is a common feature in nineteenth-century British culture. For example, the “garroting panic” that shook London in 1862 provides a good example of how a single incident, in this case of Member of Parliament Hugh Pilkington, who was garroted on the street by a pair of robbers, can lead to an explosion of accounts of copycat incidents, none of which likely happened, in the press (Gray 111-4).

These “patent coffins” were structurally different from the previously discussed “safety coffins,” which had been designed as a safeguard against premature burial rather than as protection against grave robbery. Amusingly, an 1818 broadsheet song entitled “The Patent Coffin” sings its product’s praises so powerfully that it activates the old fears of being buried alive, and assures its potential purchaser that there would be no escape from the Patent Coffin, if one were to awaken, prematurely interred, inside of one. “Yet,” warns the broadsheet author, “to take heed you must not fail, / [l]est to the grave they hurry you, / [i]f you’re not dead / [b]efore you let them bury you, / Tho’ from a trance when in / [o]ften cry and rave and shout again, / [c]aught fairly in our patent gin, / [t]he world can’t let you out again” (Richardson 80, lines 21-8). Falling into a cataleptic state, in other words, could have dire consequences.

The male pronoun can be safely used here, as no evidence has come down to us indicating the presence of female anatomists. (Not even in literature do we encounter these.) In fact, the mere presence of women, as observers, at dissections was considered by many conservative thinkers to be a very disturbing cultural development.

Many literary and cultural critics, such as Ruth Richardson and Tim Marshall, dedicate their treatments of Frankenstein to its inescapable connection with the cultural responses the burgeoning field of anatomy studies, and its ever-increasing need for human corpses for surgeons and students to dissect. The first edition of the novel was published in 1818, at which time anatomists, legally restricted to using only however many human corpses could be supplied from the gallows, were driven to rob fresh graves for supplies of recently-deceased human material.

The notion that Frankenstein uses specific body parts that are traceable to specific criminals, or even that he visits the gallows to collect bodies, is not part of any of Shelley’s editions, and these details emerged only in later theatrical and cinematic adaptations of the novel.

This unusual English surname might have been deployed by Hogarth to contribute by association to the reader’s negative inclinations toward this antagonist; in aligning him by name with a well-known ancient Roman Emperor renowned for cruelties, including overseeing the execution of his own mother, and suffering the ignominious end of being the first Emperor to commit suicide, Hogarth ensures that we feel no sympathy for him at this stage in his postmortem development.

“Amativeness” describes a propensity toward lust.

Phrenology is now recognized as pseudo-science. Phrenology, developed by German scientist Franz Joseph Gall at the end of the eighteenth century, entailed the means by which the contours, bumps and angles of the human skull, each corresponding to a specific brain function, could be distinctly “read” from an individual and used to interpret or confirm that person’s dominant characteristics, personality traits and even, most disturbingly, his or her tendencies toward criminality. While initially very popular, by the
1840s, enough doubt had surfaced in regard to this practice that it was no longer given credence by the conventional scientific community, and its use was essentially consigned to the more peripheral space of Spiritualism.

31 This name arose because of the resurrection man’s tendency to stuff the corpse into a sack in order to carry it through populated areas without arousing suspicion. The tell-tale sack, with a decomposing body crammed into it and lugged through the dark streets at night by shadowy characters was a symbol deployed frequently in literature and the popular press of the grave robber.

32 The hospital was already a frightening place in the minds of the poor; it was avoided whenever possible, as it was considered culturally to be a place in which to die instead of a place in which one might be cured. Those who entered, in short, were not expected to leave. It was suspected that experiments were performed on the poor within its walls, so that the wealthy may benefit from the knowledge attained, and that, overall, the hospital was nothing more than a site for the “live butchery” of the impoverished (Richardson 44).

33 This harshness did not reflect a universal consensus among England’s wealthy, though, as a competing, more Victorian understanding of the nature of and obligations toward the poor emerged as the century progressed. This new view was one which saw the world as a place in which the ever-present poor, while perhaps deserving of their condition, should at least be shown mercy and charity when it was possible to do so, informed by a larger intention of alleviating human suffering (Smith 113). The development of more consistent hospital care for the poor, the expansion of voting rights, social and legislative concern for the welfare of urban industrial workers, and the gradual phasing out of the oppressive Poor Laws brought this viewpoint into sharper focus as the Victorian era moved toward the fin de siècle. (Some form of this legislation would remain “on the books,” though it was frequently ignored by the judicial system, until 1929.) Dickens again comments on this emerging Victorian attitude, and how it might channel its energy to the needy at the edges of the English Empire while ignoring those closest to home, through the character of the altruistic Mrs. Jellyby in Bleak House (1852-3). This woman’s enthusiastic obsession with supporting missionary efforts in Africa comes at the expense of her own children, who, neglected by their mother, either scamper about and injure themselves in dirty hordes around the house, like Peepy, or are enlisted as virtual slave-laborers to write letters for their mother’s missionary efforts, like Miss Jellyby. The expanding Empire allows, at least in this novel, an opportunity for England’s own poor to be ignored by those who would otherwise be charitable, as they cast their generous eyes further, toward the edges of the Empire. In this way charitable work ignores the present body of the impoverished person in and around London, while fixating its attention on the absent, or at least imagined, impoverished body of the person who lived in faraway places so foreign and bizarre that even their names sounded odd on English tongues.

34 Decades later the popularity of burial, or “friendly,” societies would reanimate the issue that the poor people’s only value was that of their corpses. As discussed in the introduction, these societies allowed individuals, most of them poor, to pay into a pool that would then be used to generate funds to cover the costs of a funeral for any member of the individual’s family who died; on several occasions, unscrupulous participants would murder family members in order to claim the money that was supposed to help bury them.

35 It is important that we consider this text without confusing it with the very popular musical theater iteration of the story, or the films which have been made based on that musical. Twentieth and twenty-first century popular culture may blind us here, because, if we fail to trace this storyworld to its earliest extant root, as, especially in the matters that concern us here, these later iterations share very little material with the original serialized novel.
Crossroad burials carry a long folkloric connection with the supernatural in English culture. Allegedly, a corpse was buried at a crossroads if the community to which it belonged thought it had the potential to reanimate as an undead entity. Suicide, and those thought to become vampires, were frequently considered dangerous enough to be buried in this way. In theory, the crossroads location was chosen because the corpse, when it invariably reanimated, would be too confused and disoriented by the multiple paths available to it, and be forever unable to return to the place in which it used to live. It was specifically in Romania that this technique, the burial of a body which was suspected to be a viable candidate for vampirism, was practiced (Murgoci 13), and the idea, if not the actual practice, was certainly familiar throughout European folklore.

Thomas Hardy’s short story “Grave by the Handpost” (1897) works through this apotropaic ritual and demonstrates that meddling with the parameters of this superstition-infused ritual may create disastrous, if not supernatural, consequences. Here, a soldier’s father’s heart is broken by a letter from his son, so he kills himself and is buried at the crossroads. The residents of the neighboring village find this ritual “barbarous” and so sing a Christmas carol over his grave to bolster his soul. The suicide’s son returns, is heartbroken by what his words have wrought, and arranges to have his father’s body dug up and given a decent burial in the cemetery of a less superstitious village. This is not done, however, and the son commits suicide at the crossroads, desiring to be buried there next to his father in a note that remains unread and unheeded by those who find his body and inter it instead in a cemetery. Though it is a “barbarous” custom, the rules which govern it cannot, it seems, be defied without incurring dire consequences.

This occurs in much the same manner as does “The Appointed Time” chapter in Dickens’s *Bleak House*, discussed in the previous chapter.

Scholarly debate exists as to whether this story of Sterne’s “resurrection” is apocryphal or not, but no evidence can be found to refute it.

Mary’s ghost names several actual anatomists in her accusations, as she inventories the parts of her body, where they have been taken, and what, in the name of science and medicine, has been done with them.

The “garroting panic” that seized Victorian culture in the middle of the nineteenth century is an example of this. In this case, reports of an epidemic of nocturnal attacks on wealthy men in the streets, who would be throttled until they gave up their valuables, created a serious panic. It was not until the middle of the next century that these reports would be exposed as largely fictitious, and, if anything, variants that built themselves from the foundation of a single garroting-robbery attack that was reported to the police.

Apparantly the body-snatchers had abandoned the corpse on the road when it fell partially out of their cart but was still attached, whereupon its feet somehow hit the ground and bounced in such a way that they thought it had returned to life and was walking after them.

The similarity to the name Burns to Burke seems to be a coincidence, as the characters share little common ground. Burke was not a medical student, was not responsible for the deaths of any of his own direct relatives (though at least one of his wife’s relatives became a victim), and was not a man who displayed any clear remorse in regard to those he sent to the anatomist.

It should be noted that this tendency to illustrate the “subject” prior to dissection was not an uncommon practice in the early nineteenth century. William Clift, for example, sketched such subjects as London Burker John Bishop and the female Burker Elizabeth Ross; unlike other artists engaged in these sorts of activities, he illustrated his subjects as realistically as possible, avoiding popular tendencies to try to
construct within the portraits physical hints in the criminals’ features to connect them to the crimes they committed (MacDonald 21). Clift was not, however, opposed to illustrating monstrous creatures, as at least one of his surviving sketches is that of a “mermaid,” a constructed baboon-fish creature presented to him for analysis, and which he quickly announced as a fraud (Ritvo 178-9).

44 Extant sources from the time do not, however, explain the ultimate whereabouts of her corpse after this process of preservation.

45 The description of this shop, cluttered with masses of decomposing and arcane items, recalls Krook’s rag-and-bone shop from Bleak House.

46 It should be noted that this technique of communicating with the dead was not new, and was in fact the method employed by the ghost known as “Scratching Fanny,” who allegedly manifested in London, at Cock Lane almost one hundred years earlier. (Even when revealed to be fraudulent, this case remained extremely popular.) The notion of the “knocking ghost” was so familiar to English culture, even long before the Cock Lane flap, that at least one play, “The Drummer; Or, the Haunted House: A Comedy” (1716, no author attributed in surviving editions), was able to lampoon the trope by presenting characters who took advantage of ghostly folklore and fabricated ghostly knockings, voices and drummings in order to create a cover for their criminal activity. The criminals’ hope was that the credulous would be too terrified to investigate an environment which seemed to be haunted.

47 Later in his life, Mesmer became concerned that his principles of magnetism were being over-applied to all supernatural philosophies that had sprung up around Europe, and felt that animal magnetism was being shoehorned into spaces in which it did not belong, and was being used to validate theories that otherwise had no merit (Darnton 71).

48 Florence Marryat would disagree with the use of the word “supernatural” as a descriptor for Spiritualism, as “nothing that exists is above nature, but only a continuation of it” (Marryat 166).

49 This book’s title reflects well its theme, and it should be pointed out that one method by which the Victorians attempted to understand the shifting boundary that separated life from death was to embrace Spiritualism to such an extent as to eliminate the notion of death altogether as a concept.

50 This resistance would relax toward the end of the century, as attempts to place the metaphysical within scientific discourse became commonplace, but conventional scientific hostility toward Spiritualism dominated in the mid-nineteenth century.

51 This phenomenon is known to those who study folklore as the “friend-of-a-friend” syndrome, of FOAF. It describes the almost universal tendency of an urban or rural legend, of which the ghost story may be classified, to be told in a third-hand manner, distanced at least by two degrees from the actual percipient of the narrative.

52 Sheridan LeFanu’s “Squire Toby’s Will” (1868) refers to “the old folk rule of the ghost who can’t speak until it is spoken to” (LeFanu 6), referencing an old folk tradition that defines how the living ultimately had control over the shapes of the conversations they had with the dead.

54 Johnson’s attraction to this story was stirred by his interest in the sort of reliable, verifiable ghost accounts which could serve “to separate the lurid stories of chain-rattling phantoms, which would do the rounds in London’s taverns and newspapers, from those apparitions he felt might be genuine” (Chamber 137). After the death of his wife he even prayed “O Lord! [ . . . ] if thou hast ordained the souls of the dead
to minister to the Living, and appointed my departed wife to have care of me, grant that I may enjoy the good effects of her attention and ministration, whether exercised by appearance, impulses, dreams or in any other manner agreeable to thy Government. Amen” (Chambers 137). Unfortunately for Johnson, he received neither a response nor a visitation from his departed wife.

55 This notion of a parade of supernatural human corpses wandering the graveyard en masse reminds one of the similar profusion of cemetery-dwelling corpse-monsters encountered at the climax of “Dracula’s Guest,” written more than a century and a half later.

56 To invalidate an idea by “exploding” it appears in *Frankenstein*, too, as Professor Waldman admonishes Victor Frankenstein for his previous intense studies of classical and medieval science; Victor has, in the mind of his educator, devoted himself to useless, arcane and “exploded” material.

57 The deployment of this ghost is indicative of how Dickens made use of the supernatural while, at the same time, he grew more disenchanted with Spiritualism and the idea of ghosts in general. Spiritualist complained that “Dickens’s books exploited the spiritual machinery which, outside of his fiction, he actively disdained” (Miller 326).

58 “Non-skepticism” should be defined here. This position is a direct reaction to skepticism, rather than the retention of previously-held supernatural or superstitious beliefs in the wake of a cultural milieu that specifically devalues them.

59 It should be noted that many of the early scientists whose work Frankenstein initially consults, including Cornelius Agrippa, Paracelsus and Albertus Magnus, practiced a form of science that was, even in Shelley’s time, considered closer to magic and alchemy than it was science. Frankenstein’s father labels Agrippa’s work as “sad trash” (Shelley, 1818, 68; Shelley, 1831, 44) and his physiognomically-disagreeable professor Krempe is astonished to find Victor is still reading Paracelsus and Magnus, works “as musty as they are ancient” (Shelley, 1818, 75; Shelley, 1831, 49).

60 One wonders how the tendency to consume human flesh might be readable through the consultation of this problematic empirical evidence.

61 The strong Irish belief in the supernatural as late as the turn of the twentieth century, especially in rural areas, was well-known in Britain, at least partially because of the criminal case involving the murder of Bridget Cleary. In 1895 Cleary was murdered, and her body burned and hidden, likely by her husband and a cadre of friends and relatives, because she was thought to have been a “changeling,” a supernatural creature that faeries used to replace the humans they stole away. Her sickly behavior and assertive personality were considered to mark her as a changeling, and in spite of suspicious skepticism at the trial her murderers’ alleged belief in faerie-lore resulted in reduced sentences ultimately being handed down to them (Bourke).

62 There is no last name, or first name, depending on interpretation, provided for the author of this piece.

63 Skeptics, both now and in the Victorian era, felt that these controlled arrangements were established in order that the séance conductors may better perform and disguise their roles in creating the hoaxed “supernatural” phenomena they pretended to be channeling.

64 It is this very controlled environment that séance skeptics would take issue with, as it maintained conditions in which conventionally scientific testing of the phenomena was fundamentally impossible.
The idea that specific parts of the human corpse retained power, and that the entire body was not needed in order to generate meaning, could even be seen within nineteenth-century ghost stories, most notably Sheridan LeFanu’s “Ghost Stories of the Tiled House” (1861), which has also been published tellingly under the title “Narrative of the Ghost of a Hand.” This piece features a ghost that appears as a malevolent, chubby, aristocratic hand.

One of the most well-known of Mumler’s spirit photographs by commissioned by Mary Todd Lincoln, who prized the image of herself, dressed in mourning, sitting in a chair, while the translucent figure of her dead husband seemed to be placing a comforting hand on her shoulder.

The idea that the presence of a ghost, or ghostly entity, acts to distract a Christian from his or her prayers or attention to devotional rituals, thus pulling the Christian away from what he or she ought to be contemplating, is to be revisited in fiction through LeFanu’s “Green Tea” (which will be discussed in the following chapter).

Some of the most enduring and disturbing imagery that remains from the Jack the Ripper investigations involves the postmortem photographs of the faces and bodies of the killer’s grotesquely mutilated victims, in fact. None of the victims was ever photographed in life, and so the only visual evidence of their existence, so to speak, is found in these photographs of their corpses. (The graphic illustrations of the victims found within articles of the Illustrated Police News, among others, do not seem overly concerned with accurate visual representations of the victims, and appear stylized and intended more for visceral, not representational, effects. Sometimes images are directly recycled, stirring to life the implication that prostitutes, and in particular dead prostitutes, were essentially so similar as to be interchangeable.)

At least one doctor at her inquest, Wayne E. Baxter, attributed her death to an attacker who sought to harvest some of her organs in order to sell them (Jakubowski and Braund, eds., 27). Though this theory was never investigated further, it does plant the compelling suggestion that Chapman’s death may have been connected, in some way at least, to the practice of human dissection and body snatching.

The implication of the story seems to be that the howling loneliness of the desert drove Hummil to suicide, and that such a factor threatened all the characters to some degree. One wonders how such a factor would have read as visible in the photographed eyes of their dead friend, but, again, the text does not supply us this information, and in fact destroys it before we have a chance to look upon it at all.

Sir Richard Owen coined this term in 1842 to designate this “distinct tribe” of creatures, but it took several decades to become recognized by English culture and achieve its current dominant status as the universally-accepted name for these extinct animals. In spite of its use in academic publications it was not until the 1880s that the term supplanted the previous designation of these creatures as nothing more than “extinct reptiles” (O’Connor 494-5).

It is of only peripheral importance to note that the reconstruction of the Megalosaurus has since been discovered by current paleontological understanding to be obsolete. The creature was imagined by the Victorians as a massive quadruped, greatly resembling a huge carnivorous iguana, as this form seemed to make sense with the reptilian features of the fossils and the extant iguana as a recognizable and seemingly comparable model. The far reaches of the British Empire made the idea of a giant lizard acceptable, as such species were being “discovered” and documented throughout the century. Twenty-first century reconstructions have shifted the shape of the Megalosaurus to that of a biped, or therapod, morphologically similar to an early version of a Tyrannosaurus rex.
The Victorians were perhaps connected with the notion of a world in which dramatic struggle was commonplace. In terms of the “dog-eat-dog” nature of Victorian society, David L. Hull notes that “[a]ll you have to do is read Dickens to get a feel for exactly how brutal the early years of capitalism were in England” (Hull 142). In this environment of conspicuous wealth living alongside abject poverty, in which, for example, 85% of children committed to workhouses died before becoming eligible to leave, the British government responded to these horrific conditions by establishing the extremely restrictive Poor Laws, which made any form of charity for the impoverished which was unconnected with back-breaking labor virtually impossible to secure (Hull 142).

Though outside the parameters of this project, Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Lost World* (1912) provides a valuable glimpse into a fictive world in which human beings are imagined to be no match for the prehistoric monsters which endeavor to devour them.

One wonders if this term is perhaps meant to be connected with the Enclosure Acts, in which Parliament moved to “hedge in” much of the English countryside, cutting off access to territory that local people had enjoyed for centuries. One of these acts, an expansive consolidation of previous acts, was passed during Shelley’s lifetime and two decades before she published this essay in 1801. Perhaps Shelley imagined the loss something ancient in these enclosures, which essentially scarred a landscape that had not appreciably changed since antediluvian times, and which had certainly never before been subjected to such artificial maneuvers of “hedging in.” Neither Homer nor a megatherion would have comprehended the Enclosure Acts, in other words.

As might be expected from artwork representing the British Empire’s interpretation of African and other colonized people, these two men are themselves somewhat simian-like in appearance. The gorilla, then, appears almost to be attacking his own kinsman which, to read through the clear racist implications of such visual commentary, exacerbates the notion that the gorilla is closely related to the human.

Perhaps tellingly, this illustration was not featured in the book’s first edition in 1861. Concerns about evolution and natural selection, at that time, had yet to hit the fever pitch that they would later in the century.

One thinks here of the dog-man in *The Island of Doctor Moreau* whose loyalty to the protagonist is unbreakable to the extent that he is ultimately killed in defense of his “owner.”

Interestingly this expedition was undertaken the same year that the *Dryopithecus* was discovered, which might be seen as an indication of the multiple angles through which old notions of Victorian science were being assaulted at this time. Both and living and fossilized evidence was suddenly present.

The monkey’s species is difficult to identity from the illustration, which emphasizes its savagery so much that in truth it resembles more a werewolf than a primate. If pressed for an identification based solely on this stylized illustration, though, a primatologist would probably label it a baboon.

The gorilla in this account may certainly be read as a “ghost-ape” (a figure which will be discussed in detail below), as it is an actual gorilla possessed by a supernatural spirit. It is in this way similar to many nineteenth-century ghosts, as it is corporeal body “inhabited” by an incorporeal entity.

Current researchers no longer consider the Marquis of Waterford as a viable candidate for Spring Heeled Jack, though his name has long been invoked as an intriguing culprit.
Fragmentary jawbones comprised a great proportion of the earliest hominid, or human-like ape, fossils found in the nineteenth century, so the notion of using a pronounced jawbone to suggest “ape-ness” was by the time Collins wrote the novel a familiar idea.

A misspelling of *lusus naturae*, which roughly translates to “freak of nature.”

To call the Morlocks cannibals might entrap us within a technical inaccuracy, as multiple times in the novel the Time Traveler describes the Morlocks and Eloi as comprising “two species.” If they had truly separated morphologically to this extent then they would not be able to interbreed, and thus the tendency of the Morlock to feed on the Eloi is not cannibalism as much as it is simple predation.

Though it is purely speculative, it is interesting to imagine these bloody thoughts also as those of the earliest Victorian scientists who confronted the skeletalized fossil fragments of long-extinct monkey-like creatures which seemed to have a direct but distant connection to humanity.

The notion of the revelation that an illustration of a horrible monster has been rendered not from the depths of the human imagination but “from life” will be echoed almost to the letter in the final passage from H.P. Lovecraft’s well-known short story “Pickman’s Model” (1927).

The spider is perhaps an odd, but not unique, transitional form through which to reconcile the similarities that seemed to exist between the human and the monkey and emphasize the horror that such similarities triggered, as we recall that Wells’ Time Traveler also described one of the first Morlocks he sees as resembling “a human spider” (Wells 42). Some Victorian horror fiction authors aligned the image of the spider with that of “primitive man”; this tendency is perhaps most prominently illustrated in Bertram Mitford’s *The Sign of the Spider* (1896), which introduces an African tribe, the People of the Spider, who have built their belief systems around a gigantic arachnid to whom they feed human sacrifices.

Emanuel Swedenborg was a Swedish eighteenth century Christian mystic and scientist whose work discussed the possibility of communication with supernatural and demonic beings.

Interestingly, this procedure also seems to describe the process of “demonic obsession.” “Demonic possession,” by contrast, involves the process whereby an evil supernatural entity enters a human body and torments it from within, whereby by contrast “obsession” involves an evil superhuman entity’s attempts, by latching onto an individual, to destroy him or her by acting upon the victim from outside his or her body, as LeFanu’s ghost monkey seems to do.

Early in *The Time Machine*, a Morlock appears to the Time Traveler in a similar fashion; “A pair of eyes, luminous by reflection against the daylight without, was watching me out of the darkness” (Wells 41). The ghost monkey, perhaps, has a tendency to manifest as an unseen watcher, or as a gaze, before it shows the rest of its physical body to the human it watches.

One perhaps thinks, here, of a literary image which significantly pre-dates the presence of Darwinian thought in nineteenth-century culture. Specifically, Samuel Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancyent Marinere” (1800), and the textual moment at which the mariner, cursed as a result of murdering the albatross, finds himself thickly in the presence of the supernatural (most clearly manifested through the presence of “a million, million slimy things” and the accusing stares from dead but not decomposing eyes of his crew) and unable to pray. The ghostly eyes, as a symbol of the curse he is under, blocks access to the possibility of Christian assistance, just as the ghostly gaze of Jennings’ ghost monkey seems to do; “I looked to Heaven, and try’d to pray; [b]ut or ever a prayer had gusht, [a] wicked whisper came and made / [m]ly heart as dry as dust” (Wordsworth and Coleridge, 20, lines 236-9).
Throat-cutting was such a common form of suicide, especially among the lower classes in nineteenth-century England that the wounds on the first victim of the killer who would become known as Jack the Ripper, Polly (or Mary Ann) Nichols were initially thought to be self-inflicted.

This theory shares much ground with many Spiritualist explanations offered for the working of animal magnetism, and specifically how the process of mesmerism could be used to create a state of receptivity for impulses that would normally be inaccessible to the human mind.

The notion of the monster as id is also championed by many critics addressing the case of Mister Hyde, who is claimed to be a manifestation of his creator’s id.

This story was later rewritten as “The Familiar” and published in 1872.

Interestingly, the author later details the account of a man plagued by ghostly visions who embraces not modern, but rather archaic, science to cure himself of these alleged delusions, specifically through “the application of leeches to the anus.” (“On the Appearance of Ghosts, Spectres, &c.” 330).


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