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**A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF VICTORIAN HORROR NOVELS AND
SHORT STORIES**

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Abstract: This paper is an account of a study about the horror novels and stories that were written and published during the Victorian period. An attempt is made to trace the various ideas and passions in the Victorian novels and short stories and its association with the genre of horror. This will enrich our understanding about the major writers of this genre of the era and their reasons and thoughts. Works like Dracula, The Picture of Dorian Gray, and The Turn of the Screw, The Signal-Man and The Body Snatcher are popular in this genre and fascinate us with their interesting narration. Simultaneously, we will look into some important works of this genre of the preceding and succeeding era which are an interesting part of this account.

Keywords: Afterlife, Evil, Hallucinogenic, Mysterious, Paranormal, Sensuality, Spiritualists Supernatural

Introduction: Victorian Britain was a very religious nation. When we examine it in retrospection, we find that religious opinions of the people were associated with their several other beliefs and faiths. Polytheistic¹ beliefs were included too. Stories about fairies were not as significant and popular in comparison to those which talk about ghosts and supernatural. This age seemed to be influenced and haunted by supernatural stories. Religion itself preached to people that the pure souls were reposing in heaven and the corrupted souls were damned in hell. The Catholic religious teachings itself provided enough lessons about ghosts and their functions. It taught people that ghosts were tormented souls who were trapped in hell. They cannot rest and have pleasure because of their corrupt nature and the sins that they have committed.

Though the Victorian age witnessed new scientific perspectives generated by the thoughts and philosophies of Karl Marx and Charles Darwin. They challenged existing beliefs and dogmas, but beliefs of people cannot be changed suddenly. They have a significant

¹ Belief in worship of multiple deities

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influence on people and society. So people believed in the lessons and teachings of the church and supernatural stories continued to be popular. Victorians were quite obsessed with death. The Protestant sect differed from Catholics by claiming that pure souls went directly to heaven and evil ones went to hell.

The popularity of supernatural stories was related to economic changes of the period. Due to the industrial revolution, people migrated from rustic villages to cities and towns. They moved into houses that often had attendants and servants. These servants found themselves new in houses. Lighting was provided by gas lamps that could have been implicated in the rise of the horror story. Spiritualists believed that souls living in the afterlife were able to communicate with people living in this world. They organized meetings to communicate with souls of the afterlife. The ghost stories got ample background and support in this period to become popular. They have been a convenient way to depict unbelievable topics in the era.

Major Horror Novels of the Period: The horror tradition blossomed in the Victorian period. We have influential examples of it. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, *Woman in White* by Wilkie Collins and *The Turn of the Screw* by Henry James are important works of this genre and their characters and narrations fascinate us.

The Picture of Dorian Gray is a philosophical novel by Oscar Wilde and was published in 1890. It Henry Wotton paints the portrait of Dorian Gray. Throughout the plot, the devil is used as a symbol. Lord Henry is the symbol of evil. He corrupts the soul of Dorian through his hedonistic world view. Dorian loses his innocence and becomes a sinner. Under the influence of Lord Henry's hedonistic views, Dorian explores his sensuality. He approaches and courts his love interest, actress Sibyl Vane. Due to her poor performance, Dorian rejects her. Dorian observes that the portrait has changed. Now he looks at his portrait and that gives an impression of cruelty. Dorian decides to reconcile with Sibyl, but she commits suicide. Dorian locks his portrait. Now, he started experimenting with every vice influenced by the book that Lord Henry gave him. Due to his debauchery portrait has become so hideous. Basil urges Dorian to pray for salvation. Dorian blames Basil for his misery and stabs him. Sibyl's brother James Vane tries to kill Dorian, but Dorian escapes. Late at a shooting party, a hunter kills James. Dorian now wants to live righteously to get new experiences and restore beauty to the picture, but he can see only his uglier image. He decided to destroy his portrait. He stabs the picture. The servants find the disfigured dead body of Dorian. The portrait beside his dead body is beautiful again.

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Dracula by Bram Stoker² was published in 1897. It is an epistolary novel and is narrated through letters and diary entries. The author draws inspiration from Transylvanian folk stories and history. Harker visits Dracula to help him purchase a house near London. Harker wanders the castle and meets three female vampires. Dracula leaves the castle. Harker escapes with his life. Dracula takes a ship for England. On landing there, he stalks Lucy. Harker's fiancée, Mina Murray, goes to Budapest to nurse him. Lucy becomes sick. Professor Van Helsing examines her condition and diagnoses her. Lucy and her mother are frightened by a wolf. Her mother, Mrs. Westenra, dies of a heart attack, shortly thereafter, Lucy also dies. After her death, she becomes a vampire and stalks children. Seward, Helsing, Harker and Mina go to her tomb, and they observe that she is a vampire. They behead her and fill her mouth with garlic. Harker and his wife join the campaign against Dracula. Dracula learns of their plot against him. He uses Renfield to enter Seward's asylum. There he secretly attacks Mina. He drinks her blood and also forces Mina to drink his blood. So she is cursed to become a vampire after her death. She can be freed from the curse if Dracula is killed. The group finds the properties of Dracula, and they open the boxes leaving them useless to Dracula. They attempt to trap him, but he escapes. Since Mina and Dracula sucked each other's blood, they have become psychically connected. Professor Helsing tracks Dracula's movements through hypnosis. Mina guides them, and they pursue Dracula. Hunters follow Dracula's boat and after his box is loaded into it, they attack it. Harker slashes Dracula's neck and Quincey stabs in his heart. Dracula dies and frees Mina from the vampiric curse. Quincey dies due to the wounds on his body. When the Harkers have a son, they named him Quincey.

The novel, *Woman in White*, is written by Wilkie Collins³. It was published in 1859. It is an intricately plotted and great sensation novel. Walter Hartright is informed by policemen that the mysterious and distressed woman that he saw has escaped from an asylum. He has been hired as a drawing teacher to Limmeridge House in Cumberland. There he falls in love with Laura, despite her betrothal to Percival Glyde. Upon knowing this, Marian advises Walter to leave the house. Laura receives a letter warning her against marrying Glyde. Walter knows that Anne has placed that letter. Glyde placed Anne in the asylum. Despite all, Laura and Glyde marry. Glyde attempts to use Laura's money from the marriage settlement, which she refuses to do. Glyde faces the problem of Laura's refusal to give money. So Glyde and Fosco plan to use the similarity between Laura and Anne to exchange their two identities. They plan to put Laura in an asylum under the identity of Anne and bury Anne upon her death as Laura. Anne succumbs to her illness and is buried as Laura, while Laura is drugged and sent to asylum as

² Irish author and the author of Gothic horror tales

³ An English novelist and master of mystery story

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Anne. Marian visits the asylum, and she learns that it is not Anne but Laura who has been treated as erroneous Anne when she protests her true identity as Laura. Marian and Laura escape from the asylum. Walter returns from Honduras, and they plan to restore Laura's identity. Walter knows that Glyde is illegitimate. He is not entitled to inherit his property. Glyde, dies in a fire while attempting to destroy incriminating documents. From Anne Catherick's mother, Jane, Walter knows that Glyde's mother was married to an Irish man who left her. She was not free to remarry. Glyde needed a marriage certificate of his parents to borrow money. He went to church and added a fake marriage to the church register. Jane helped him to access the register and was rewarded with money.

After the death of Glyde, Walter, Marian and Laura are safe from persecution. Now they have to prove Laura's real identity. Walter suspects that Fosco knows about the dates of Anne's death and Laura's trip to London. Walter knows from a letter that he got from Jane's former employer that Anne was the illegitimate child of Laura's father, so she was Laura's half sister. On his visit to the opera he knows that Fosco has betrayed the Irish nationalist society. Before Fosco flees the country, Walter forces a written confession to restore Laura's real identity in exchange for safe passage. Laura's identity is restored and the inscription on the gravestone is replaced by Anne. Fosco escaped and was killed by an agent of society. On the death of Frederick Fairlie, Walter and Laura's son inherits the Limmeridge house.

Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* was published in 1898. Douglas is the narrator of the novel. He reads a letter written by the late governess of his sister. The letters tell the story of her hiring as a governess. A man who takes responsibility for his young niece and nephew hires her. The nephew, Miles, is attending a boarding school. His sister, Flora, lives in Bly and is cared by Mrs. Grose. Flora's uncle is not interested in raising children and gives full charge to the governess. The governess goes to Bly and starts her duties. Missa returns from school just after a letter confirming expulsion arrives. The governess fears that there is some horrible secret behind his expulsion. Soon after, the governess saw the figures of a man and a woman around the grounds of the estate. She cannot recognize those figures. The figures come and go on their own will. They were not seen by any other members of the household. The governess saw them as supernatural. She knows from Mrs. Grose that her predecessor, Miss Jessel, and an employee, Peter Quint had a close relationship. Before their deaths they spent their time with Flora and Miles. The governess becomes convinced that Miles and Flora are aware of the presence of ghosts in the estate. Flora left the house when Miles was playing music for the governess. The governess notices that Flora is not there. She goes with Mrs. Grose in search of her. They found her on the shore of a lake. The governess is convinced that Flora is talking

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with the spirit of Miss Jessel. The girl denies that she was talking with Miss Jessel and asks the governess to leave her. Mrs. Grose takes the girl to her uncle. The governess was with Miles. She saw the ghost of Quint at the window. The governess covers Miles who wants to see the spirit. The governess tells Miles he is not controlled by the ghost. She finds that the boy died in her arms.

Major Horror Short Stories of the Period: We have influential examples of the horror stories written during the period. The *Body Snatcher* by R.L. Stevenson, Charles Dickens' *The Signal-Man*, *The Old Nurse's Story* by Elizabeth Gaskell and M.R. James' *Lost Hearts* are important horror stories of this period. They are rich with interesting characters and narration.

The Body Snatcher is a short ghost story by R.L. Stevenson that revolves around two characters, Fettes and Macfarlane that attended medical college under anatomy professor Robert Knox. They both were assigned the duty of taking receipt of bodies for dissection. Fettes meets Macfarlane at an inn along with a person called Gray. Gray treats Macfarlane rudely. On that night, Macfarlane brings Gray's body as a dissection sample. Fettes is sure that his friend has committed murder. Macfarlane persuades him to be silent and says he does not have enough courage to perform deeds like that he has done. The two men comprehensively dissected and destroyed the forensic evidence. Due to the shortage of bodies, their mentor sent them to a churchyard to unearth a recently buried body of a woman. When they were driving with the body seated between them, they felt nervous and took a better look at the body. They are stunned to discover that the body between them is of Gray, which they thought that they had ruined.

Charles Dickens' *The Signal-Man* is a horror story and was published in 1866. The story begins with the narrator asking a signal man for permission to descend. The signalman feels that he had seen the narrator earlier, but the narrator assures that it is not possible. The signalman welcomes the narrator into his cabin and they two speak about the signalman's work. His work consists of a dull, monotonous routine. The narrator thinks that the signalman seems like a dutiful employee. It seems that something is bothering the signalman, but he does not speak of it. Before the narrator leaves, the signalman asks him not to meet the next day. The next day the signalman revealed his troubles. He is haunted by a spirit that appears several times. With each appearance a tragedy occurs. In the first instance, the signalman saw a figure with its left arm across its face, he tried to talk with the spirit, but it vanished. After that, there was a terrible train crash. In the second appearance, the figure was silent with an attitude of

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mourning. Then a young woman died in a train that was passing. The narrator thought that the signalman is suffering from hallucinations. During the conversation, the signalman sees a phantom and hears an eerie sound of a bell ring. The narrator hears and sees nothing. Signalman is sure that that the next tragedy is going to happen soon. He thought that the signalman was suffering from mental disease, and he suggests visiting a doctor. The next day the narrator visits the railway cutting again. He discovers that the signalman is dead having got struck by a train. The driver of the train explains that the signalman was looking intently at something and failed to get out of the way. The driver waved his arm in warning and covered his face to avoid seeing the train striking the unfortunate signalman. The narrator observes the similarity between the driver's narration and action and those of the phantom as described by the signalman earlier.

The Old Nurse's Story by Elizabeth Gaskell is a ghost story and was published in 1852. The story begins with the nurse Hester telling Rosamond that her mother was an orphan. She was her nurse-maid. Rosamond and Hester were sent to the former's maternal family home named Furnivall Manor House. Hester knows that only Rosamond's great-great-aunt, Miss Grace Furnivall occupies Furnivall Manor House. At Furnivall, they meet Miss Furnivall and her maid, Miss Stark. One day Hester and Rosamond were looking at all the portraits on the walls of the house. Hester observes that Grace was young and beautiful in the portrait, but her face was painted with a look of contempt. Dorothy, another maid, tells Hester that Maude, the older sister of Grace, was more beautiful than Grace. She shows the hidden portrait of Maude to Hester. Hester explains that late at night she hears music coming from the organ. Members of the house say "old lord" plays the music. She is scared when one evening she knows that the organ is actually broken, and so it should not work. One afternoon Hester goes to church. She leaves Rosamond at the manor house. When she returns, Rosamond is found nowhere. Everyone begins to look for her.

Hester looks at a set of footprints outside in the snow leading away from the home. She follows and runs into a man carrying the sleeping and frozen Rosamond. Rosamond is back at the house and warmed up. She tells Hester that she went looking for Dorothy but found a little girl who persuaded her to go outside. She followed her and found a woman crying. Nobody believes her. Miss Furnivall cautions Hester not to let Rosamond near the little girl. One night, Hester hears the organ playing and sees a little girl outside banging on the windows. Dorothy tells a story about Grace and Maude Furnivall. They both fell in love with a same guy. Maude secretly marries that person and had a child with him. Her father, Lord Furnivall discovered Maude and her child. He struck the little girl and evicted them. Shepherds found hysterical

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Maude caring for her dead child. Their father died within a year. One night, Miss Furnivall suddenly announces that she hears the voice of her father. Rosamond wakes up, saying that she hears the crying of the child. The ghost of old Lord approaches with Maude and a little girl behind him. Hester holds Rosamond. Lord Furnivall tries to strike the child. Miss Furnivall scolds the phantom to spare the little girl. Suddenly another figure of Miss Furnivall in her youth appears. The ghost wanders through the house with young Miss Furnivall following her father as he strikes the child. Shocked, old Miss Furnivall falls down and is bed ridden. She repeatedly utters “What is done in youth cannot be undone in age.”

M.R. James⁴’ *Lost Hearts* is a horror story and was published in 1895. It tells the story of Stephen Elliott. He is a young boy who is sent to stay with his cousin, Mr. Abney at a remote mansion called Aswarby Hall. This mansion is decorated with firs and oaks which are indicative of darkness and evil. His cousin is an alchemist and wants to make himself immortal. Mainly, there are two ghosts that make appearances in the story. Mr. Abney took their hearts when they were alive. He burnt their hearts to ashes and mixed them in red wine and drank it up. One can shrink in fear when one thinks of the unbearable pain these children had to face. Stephen is repeatedly bothered by apparitions of a young girl and an Italian boy whose hearts were taken when they were alive.

Some Important Works of the Preceding Era: During the 18th century we saw the gradual development of the genre of horror and Romanticism. It draws the inspiration from the written heritage of the late middle ages. We have *The Castle of Otranto*, by Horace Walpole, published in 1764. It was published disguised as an actual medieval romance and proved immediately popular. This novel inspired *Vathek* (1786) by William Beckford. We have many other influential examples of *A Sicilian Romance*, *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe. *The Monk* by Matthew Lewis was published in 1797.

Some Important Works of the Succeeding Era: Horror author H.P. Lovecraft’s novel *Cthulhu Mythos* popularized the genre of cosmic horror in the 20th- century era. His stories *The Outsider*, *Cool Air* and *The Vault* deal with the motif of the living dead. *Strange Conflict* by Dennis Wheatley⁵ is also inspired by that motif. M.R. James redefined the ghost story in this era. Robert Bloch wrote *Psycho* inspired by the theme of murders. Thomas Harris wrote *Red Dragon* and *The Silence of Lambs* in the 1980s. We have cinematic adaptations of horror literature. In the late 1960s, publications of *Rosemary’s Baby* by Ira Levin, W.P. Blatty’s *The*

⁴ An English author, scholar and provost of King’s College, Cambridge

⁵ An English author of thrillers and occult novels

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Exorcist and *The Other* by Thomas Tryon created a horror boom in the market. It paved the path for other numerous writers and encouraged the publications of other horror novels. Stephen King is the popular horror writer of the century. He is known for *The Shining*, *It*, *Misery* and *Carrie*. These are his masterpieces. He also published several other novels and short stories. *Ghost Story*, *Shadowland* and *Black House* by Peter Straub⁶ are the most hallucinogenic, scary and horrible thriller. Other popular authors of this period are James Herbert, Brian Lumley and Ramsey Campbell.

To sum up, we studied the features of various horror novels and short stories that were published during the period. We knew about the various ideas and beliefs that are depicted in the novels and stories of the Victorian period. We become familiar with various social, cultural and religious backgrounds that helped in the expansion of horror novels and stories in the period. This genre of fiction features discussions about religion, good, evil, and spirit. There is a struggle between humanity and unnatural forces of sin and evil. An oppressive, gloomy and inescapable landscape is set for the gothic horror novel. It is concerned with the exploration of extreme psychological states of human beings. We are attracted to this genre because of our fascination with fear, the supernatural and the paranormal. We learned about the complex narration of the horror fiction.

We knew about the major works of the genre of the preceding era that paved the path for expansion of horror fiction in mainstream Victorian fiction. The Victorian era produced influential, well-known examples of horror fiction. Their interesting characterization and narration fascinates us. The horror fiction of the succeeding era drew inspiration from the writings of this genre during the Victorian period.

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⁶ An American writer of horror and supernatural fictions

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