Space, Its Narrative Implications, and the Self in Victorian Literature
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When I set out to conduct preliminary research for my honors project this summer, my objective was to examine the relationship between setting and identity in Victorian literature. Fittingly, then, I began by reading Raymond Williams’s seminal text The Country and the City, which offers a comprehensive exploration of place in English literature. After looking into a few more contextualizing works, I emerged armed with both a general background in my area of interest and an extensive list of nineteenth-century British literature that I aimed to read.

While the path that I took may, at first, seem as meandering as a stroll through the labyrinthine streets of Victorian London, I conducted essential research in a variety of genres and topics that ultimately proved to intertwine. During my eight week fellowship period, I read utopic fictions of a fallen, future London overtaken by nature (News from Nowhere, After London, Archimago); tales of subterranean civilizations (The Time Machine, The Coming Race); imperialist adventure stories set in distant countries (King Solomon’s Mines, short fiction by Dickens and Kipling); and reverse colonization narratives in which foreign “others” attempt to conquer London (The Beetle, The War of the Worlds, Dracula). In all, I read and took extensive notes on thirteen novels in addition to Victorian essays, articles, short stories, poetry, and a play; this literature I supplemented by reading critical analyses of the novels and stories, historical works on topics ranging from London’s underground geography to Victorian xenophobia, and theoretical explorations of the modern city’s changing nature.

These last sources sparked an interest in linking the Victorian fin de siècle (late nineteenth century), during which most of these novels were published, with the beginnings of modernism (early twentieth century). In nearly all of the novels I explored, I noted a palimpsestuous quality to the multi-layered natures of people and landscapes (both rural and urban). Just as a palimpsest is a document that has been written upon many times, with the original writing scratched out and replaced by new text, so are people and places in many of the texts I read made up of varied physical, cultural, and temporal layers. I read of human-animal hybrids, ancient beings who live for centuries, and seemingly civilized people with a savage streak. I read of spaces where civilizations exist both above and below the earth, houses that serve as foreign outposts within imperial London, and the city’s ancient, yet lingering, past. Finally, I noted a modernist impulse in the way that these fragmented, complex people and places allow past, present, and future to coexist.

This research stemmed thought-provoking and exploratory discussions during my weekly meetings with my advisor, Professor Briefel. I benefitted greatly from her knowledge of Victorian literature and culture and often left her office with both new thematic concepts to explore and several borrowed books to read. In addition to enabling such provocative conversations, this fellowship granted me the invaluable opportunity to devote my full attention to preparing to undertake my honors thesis. The lengthy annotated bibliography that I have produced will prove vital to my writing process. With this essential background in fin de siècle Victorian literature, history, and geography, I feel confident and excited to continue my journey through these fictional spaces as I work toward writing my honors project.

Faculty Mentor: Aviva Briefel
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