Urban Gothic Fictions of the Fin de Siècle

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I spent this summer studying Victorian urban gothic literature of the fin de siècle under the mentorship of Professor Aviva Briefel. While the initial bibliography for this project listed only twenty fictional and critical works, eight weeks of research led to a final annotated bibliography of over seventy sources. In preparation for an honors project on the urban gothic subgenre, I was able to explore a number of the most well-known works of the urban gothic (a subset of Victorian literature of horror dealing specifically with urban spaces) written between 1886 and 1911. My goal was to pinpoint the urban gothic’s particular relation to modernity—the specifically modern concerns at stake in its imaginative portrait of the city—and to narrow my focus, constructing a deeper set of parameters for my honors research in the coming school year.

I began by reading nine novels by Robert Louis Stevenson, Oscar Wilde, Richard Marsh, Bram Stoker, and George du Maurier, as well as several short stories by Vernon Lee. To supplement these readings, I familiarized myself with a large body of critical perspectives surrounding Victorian fiction’s reflection of contemporary views of science, sexuality, criminality and consumerism, views which often took the form of a pseudo-scientific anxiety about degeneration. Because this project deals almost exclusively with the urban spaces of London, my research also included a study of the socioeconomic nuances of London; I read contemporary accounts by Reverend John Garwood, Henry Mayhew, and Cesare Lombroso, along with a number of historical analyses. Along the way, I took written notes, periodically consolidating these notes into brief annotations.

Towards the end of this fellowship, I became interested, through my reading, in the tension between decadence, a self-indulgent prizing of beauty over utility, and mass culture, a socioeconomic ideology reflective of London’s swiftly growing commercial and consumer markets. I wanted to trace the gothic monster through the urban space, from his most unlikely incarnations (most notably as the dandy or the flâneur/ urban wanderer) to his most conspicuous (as un-dead, un-human or un-British, in the Victorian sense: vampire, mummy, shape-shifter, and racial other). Professor Briefel recommended a number of critical and theoretical perspectives on flâneurs, dandies, mass culture, and violence—a body of twentieth-century writings including Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, and Michel de Certeau, along with the work of contemporary theorist Mark Seltzer—which both balanced and revitalized my quest to link mass culture, genre, and aestheticism.

My weekly discussions with Professor Briefel were instrumental to the development of my own critical perspective. She provided invaluable insight and encouragement as I puzzled over these texts, and her own work (in preparation for a book on hands in Victorian literature, and for the two English courses on Victorian urban narratives and crime that she will teach next semester) often overlapped with and supplemented mine. As the summer draws to a close, I am left feeling tremendously well-prepared for the challenging year of thesis research and writing ahead of me. This summer has given me the opportunity not only to construct a deeper knowledge of the era and subgenre I have chosen to focus upon in my honors project, but also to develop an analysis that I know is unique and controversial, a thesis project that I can fearlessly put in conversation with Victorian texts and their critics.

Faculty Mentor: Aviva Briefel

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