Sexuality in Gothic Literature and the Victorian Age

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The Gothic tradition of literature is encompassed in a large part in late-Victorian literature as a whole. Victorian influence on the Gothic is blatant, particularly in the works of Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker. Victorian culture is often described by historians as repressive in terms of discussing sexuality, and this widely accepted belief is perpetuated through nineteenth century Victorian Gothic literature. Despite this supposedly defining characteristic, however, the Victorian age encompassed a range of dialogues surrounding morality and sexuality.

The generalization of Victorian society continues to be a depiction of a culture afraid of sex and its potential repercussions. Throughout all of the condemnation of sex, particularly female sexuality, that occurs in Victorian literature however, the importance of the fact that sex is being discussed at all is often overlooked. Rather than being a taboo subject, sex was a popular topic, with opinions on the matter ranging from encouraging to repressive. Victorian and Gothic authors embraced the subject matter in their writings.

Dracula and other Victorian Gothic literature portray marriage as having the function of taming the impulses of men, while women are meant to have little, if any, sexual desire. It was a popular belief during the nineteenth century that women had no sex drive whatsoever. Dr. William Acton’s Functions and Disorders of the Reproductive Organs was widely published in England and the United States during the middle of the nineteenth century, and was one of the most widely quoted sexual-advice books in the world. His summation of women’s sexuality was essentially that “the majority of women (happily for them) are not very much troubled with sexual feelings of any kind. What
men are habitually, women are only exceptionally” (Degler, 1467). Female sexuality was written off as nonexistent by many pseudo-doctors with a pen and an audience who were consequently widely read and discussed.

In “Victorian Sexuality: Old Texts and New Insights” Peter Gay mentions the attitude that many had in the Victorian era surrounding sex and women. He says hyperbolically, “Respectable husbands used their wives to make children and prostitutes to have pleasure.” He continues, “Married women of the better sort were free from the importunities of sexual appetite, and that is why men—incoyrigible beasts, all of them, except for inhibited secular saints, who were, if anything, even more peculiar and less likeable—got their erotic enjoyment anywhere but at home” (Gay 372). It was a prevalent idea that women’s sexuality was solely for procreation, not enjoyment.

In “The Spermatic Economy: A Nineteenth Century View of Sexuality,” Ben Barker Benfield argues that male doctors were so convinced that women had no sexual interest that when it manifested itself, drastic measures were taken to subdue it, including the excision of the sexual organs. He says, “Defining the absence of sexual desire in women as normal, doctors came to see its presence as disease” (Degler 1468). The rhetoric many of these authors use to describe female sexuality makes it seem as though its nonexistence is the position that the majority held in the nineteenth century, but this is not the case.

Dr. Ely Van de Warker contradicted the belief of nonessential female sexuality in “Impotency in Women” in 1878. He embraced female sexuality as normal. He separated sex consequentially for men and women, but deplored the fact that some women had no sexual feeling, a state which he called female impotency. Strikingly conflicting with Dr.
Acton, he considers a lack of sexual feeling in women abnormal and worthy of medical attention, just as the same symptoms in men would be cause for medical concern.

Dr. Acton’s second edition of his book often reveals his desire to create a new, better standard of sexual attitude and behavior. When read closely, it becomes clear that such a standard does not already exist, despite the fact that he is writing like it does. He says, “The audience should be informed that, in the present state of society, the sexual appetites must not be fostered; and experience teaches those who have had the largest means of information of the matter, that self-control must be exercised” (Degler 1477). Because he is saying that he is trying to teach self-control, he is essentially admitting that self-control has not been attained by the majority. It becomes noticeable that he is not describing a common attitude, but advertising for a modification to the general practice of society. Gay says of Dr. Acton, “For all his popularity among writers who found his style ingratiating and his opinions congenial, neither Acton’s observation on female sexuality nor his moral preferences went unchallenged, nor were they even characteristic of his time” (373).

While it is undeniable that the Victorian era cultivated the idea of women’s place in the home, this became misinterpreted and extended into an anti-sexual attitude by historians. The medical authors at the time were often biased in their sourcing and quotations, and therefore their literature was, according to Degler, “taken to be descriptive of the sexual ideology of the time when in fact they were part of an effort by some other medical writers to establish an ideology, not to delineate an already accepted one” (1477). A small amount of people were attempting to create an attitude about sex,
and their strategy was to act as though the attitude they desired was actually the accepted social norm.

Although these authors wrote as though their opinion was fact, the literature of the time was not necessarily indicative of actual sexual behavior in the Victorian era. There was often a disconnection between those qualified to write medicinally and those attempting to embrace Christian values through written lectures. The mixture of religion and medicine created confusion as to what was fact and what was projection, both in the nineteenth century to those who were reading these so-called “doctors,” and later to historians who were attempting to analyze the attitude of the Victorian culture towards sex. According to Gay, “physicians unhesitatingly invoked Christian credentials and adopted a tone more suitable (we would now think) to the pulpit than to the medical school auditorium. Conversely, preachers of all descriptions would adopt an avuncular bedside manner to which their academic degrees in theology scarcely entitled them” (375). Because the actual status of authors was unclear, there was a degree of skepticism surrounding the literature of the time. Readers were often inclined to overlook this skepticism, though, simply because they wanted to be preached at and to be informed without regard for whether the authority they were reading was a professional sermonizer or a professional physician.

Dr. John Kellogg authored *Plain Facts for Old and Young*, selling over 300,000 copies by 1910. He followed the lead of Dr. Acton in expressing his opinion that sex was far too dominant in the thoughts of Victorian society. In making such a claim, however, he contradicts the idea of a sexually inhibited society that he attempts to both portray and prove. Kellogg says, “it would appear that the opportunity for sensual gratification has
come to be, in the world at large, the chief attraction between the sexes” (Kellogg 178). Such statements would seem to disprove his insistence that sexuality is not an indulgence for many, but many members of the Victorian era were duped nonetheless. Despite the fact that his book is entitled “Plain Facts,” throughout his writings he acknowledges that what he claims are facts are actually hopes and ideals. He writes, “There will be many, the vast majority, perhaps, who will not bring their minds to accept the truth which nature seems to teach, which would confine sexual acts to reproduction wholly” (Degler 1479).

The common belief of many about Victorian society’s attitude towards sex is that it was entirely repressive and prohibited from being discussed. This is clearly untrue, as the fact that sex was widely conversed about even in condemnation is contradictory to the idea of prohibition. Gay says that “while the discussion on nineteenth-century sexuality has been carried on in these absolute terms—repression versus freedom—it seems far closer to the truth of the time to see writers, and their readers, ranged along a wide spectrum of opinion” (376). The large amount of books surrounding the topic written in the Victorian era demonstrate that the supposedly unmentionable subject was more prevalent than assumed.

In “Victorian Counterculture,” Morse Peckham makes the assertion that indiscretion surrounding a sexual act was more of a crime than the act itself. The crime lies in being discovered. Such a statement aligns itself with the idea that sexuality was rampant despite attempts to suppress it. Peckham says, “Writers from one end of Europe to the other, writers and publicists of every kind, emphasized the supreme value of sexual virtue.” He questions, “Was this because such virtue was so rare?” (Peckham 258). He believes that there were two sexual cultures in the nineteenth century, a public one of
constriction and a private culture of liberty. He asserts that contrary to popular belief, the actual counterculture of Victorian society was the effort by a small group of middle-class evangelicals to stamp out the remissive culture of sexual liberty.

Sigmund Freud’s nineteenth century advancements in psychology focus on the discussion of sexuality. Peckham believes that Freud was treating a small amount of the members of the counterculture of sexual repression, and as a result extended his research to the entire population. It is undeniable that many of Freud’s patients were sexually repressed, but the repression was not necessarily implemented by Victorian society. In a cause and effect situation, the sexual repression of his patients may have been a result of their neurotic inflections, rather than the contrary. His focus on sexual repression, however, lends itself to the argument that sexuality was a prevalent subject in the nineteenth century. He placed a large amount of emphasis on the importance of sexuality to one’s health, bringing the conversation to a prominent placement.

Michel Foucault studied the eighteenth and nineteenth century’s attitude towards sex in his book *The History of Sexuality*. He believes that during this time, a person’s identity became increasingly tied to his or her sexuality. He asserts that the idea that western civilization suppressed sexuality during the Victorian era is a false hypothesis and that discourse on sexuality actually proliferated the time period. Part One of his first volume is entitled “We ‘Other Victorians,’” and discusses reasoning behind why the repressive hypothesis is believed to be true. His “repressive hypothesis” says that since the rise of the bourgeoisie, any expenditure of energy on purely pleasurable activities was frowned upon. As a result, sex was treated as a private, practical affair that should only take place between a husband and a wife. Sex outside of said relationship was not simply
banned, but repressed. There was not only an effort to prevent extramarital sex, but also an effort to make it unspeakable and unthinkable. Discourse on sexuality was confined to marriage. Foucault says in *The History of Sexuality*,

More important was the multiplication of discourses concerning sex in the field of exercise of power itself: an institutional incitement to speak about it, and to do so more and more, a determination on the part of the agencies of power to hear it spoken about, and to cause it to speak through explicit articulation and endlessly accumulated. (18)

Foucault contradicts the repressive mindset that some members of Victorian society attempted to foster in this statement. He says that there were a multitude of discourses surrounding sex, particularly through scientific agencies. As a result, Foucault claims sex was a popular topic in Victorian culture.

From the early eighteenth century on, the literate public began to clamor for literature addressing sexuality until the end of the nineteenth century, when writings on sex and marriage swelled to a flood, containing contrarily words of wisdom and words of warning, moral concern and encouragement. The Victorian myth of repression is solely representative of a small group of nineteenth century evangelicals striving to create what they felt was a better, more moral attitude towards sex.

Victorian writers and Victorian society shared a common fear and a common goal. The common goal was the creation of a stable, ordered society, and the common fear was social anarchy and the subsequent rising of the urban industrial proletariat in a massive class revolution. Quieting of the discussion of sexuality would have helped to contribute to an ordered society, as it would have quelled animalistic comparisons and created mutuality. Subduing sexuality and subsequently suppressing seditionary situations supported the standards of the state and synthesized solidarity. Perpetuating the
myth of Victorian repression and minimizing any dialogue encompassing sex would have been in the best interest of those fearful of chaos and anarchy.

Late-Victorian Gothic literature often aligns itself with the prevalent Victorian idea of marriage as functioning solely to tame the uncontrollable instincts of men, while women are portrayed to ideally have no sexual desire, and as a result are essentially objectified. Kathleen L. Spencer’s article “Purity and Danger: Dracula, The Urban Gothic, and the Late Victorian Degeneracy Crisis” discusses Bram Stroker’s novel Dracula and its societal implications as a representation of a typical late-Victorian text.

Spencer describes Dracula as “not an isolated phenomenon, but part of a literary/cultural discourse comprised not only of other tales about vampires, but of other fantastic novels and stories that also focus on sexual dynamics, whether covertly or overtly. Whatever it is that Dracula is saying about sex, then, it is saying not in isolation but as part of a dialogue” (198). That discourse is referred to as the Victorian era, with Dracula being part of the sub-genre of Gothic literature. Because Dracula has a sexual theme, whatever the theme may imply, Dracula is part of the open Victorian discussion of sexuality.

Spencer discusses the victim characters in Dracula and their equation with the sexual values of the Victorian age. Lucy served the social function of the surrogate victim who is sacrificed to restore a lost order. Lucy is an example of overt, excessive sexuality, something that is condemned in Victorian society. She gloats about receiving three proposals in one day to Mina, and even says that she wishes she did not have to be confined through marriage to one man. She sleepwalks, something that was connected in literature to sexual promiscuity. Stoker connects sexuality to death when he has Lucy
sleepwalk to a graveyard. By sacrificing Lucy, the men purge their fear of the role of female sexuality.

The gender roles in Victorian society were rigid and distinct. The women’s realm of the home was deemed a refuge from the utilitarian business world. Women’s role was to save men from their own baser instincts, and to lead men to heaven. Spencer mentions the Victorian attitude towards homosexuality. It was seen as making sense that women desired to be more like men in their attraction to women, but Victorian society could not comprehend what they saw as men refusing to act like men in their desire of other men. Throughout this discussion, men are clearly held in higher esteem than women, a prevalent theme throughout Gothic literature.

Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* contradicts the Victorian attitude towards homosexuality in its support of relationships between men. Through said support, however, women are demeaned. The treatment of the women in Wilde’s novel implies that only men are fit and worthy companions for each other.

Lord Henry minimizes and scoffs at his aunt’s philanthropic efforts in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. He attends a dinner at his aunt’s home, attended by several members of London’s elite upper class. After a discussion in which Lord Henry makes ironic and intellectually condescending remarks to the men of the table, his aunt Lady Agatha says, “Dear me! How you men argue! I am sure I can never make out what you are talking about” (Wilde 40). Oscar Wilde shows Lady Agatha to be less intelligent in this instance than the surrounding male company, and makes her aware of the fact that she is lesser than the others in that manner.
Following the dinner at Lady Agatha’s residence, Oscar Wilde introduces a subsequent female character, Victoria, or Lady Henry. She encounters Dorian while he is waiting for Lord Henry, and is portrayed as shrill, vague, and untidy. Wilde describes her dismissively, emphasizing her fundamental unimportance. Following Victoria’s exit, Lord Henry details his views on women, saying:

I find that ultimately, there are only two kinds of women, the plain and the coloured. The plain women are very useful. If you want to gain a reputation for respectability, you have merely to take them down to supper. The other women are very charming. They commit one mistake, however. They paint in order to try and look young….As long as a woman can look ten years younger than her own daughter, she is perfectly satisfied. As for conversation, there are only five women in London work talking to, and two of those can’t be admitted into decent society.

Lord Henry’s flippancy towards Victoria can be clearly reflected in his ultimate dismissal of women as a whole. The introduction of the main female character, Sybil Vane, is from the perspective of Dorian, and as a result she is shown to be an extension of Dorian rather than her own individual character. She generally functions as an interest for him rather than as a dynamic personality. Sybil easily gives up her career and her talent in order to be with Dorian, and as a result she loses much of her substance. Dorian describes the thrill of being able to see others place value on Sybil Vane, while knowing that he lays claim over her. He says, “I want to place her on a pedestal of gold, and see the world worship the woman who is mine” (Wilde 75). Dorian portrays a view similar to that of Victorian society, in which women belong to men, and are subsequently subservient. This view extends itself to the position of women in marriage and sexuality.

Through its condemnation of women and acceptance of homosexuality, *The Picture of Dorian Gray* furthers the popular Victorian discussion of sexuality. Both Stoker and Wilde are in coalition with the varied sexual discourse that permeated the
nineteenth century. Despite the illusion that Victorian society was sexless and repressed, the sheer amount of literature that amassed on the subject during the nineteenth century proves its lack of reticence. Whether society members were in favor of rampant liberation or limitation to procreation, the Victorian age and Gothic literature were permeated with discourse on sexuality.
Works Cited


