

# Supernatural Elements in Kipling's "The Mark on the Beast", Conan Doyle's "Lot No. 249", and Wells' "The Truth About Peycraft": The Gothic Short Story as Voicing and Exorcising Late Victorian Crisis

Marcella Romeo

University of Palermo, Palermo, Italy

The aim of this paper is the analysis of the supernatural elements in Kipling's "The Mark on The Beast" (1890), Conan Doyle's "Lot No. 249" (1892), and Wells' "The Truth about Peycraft" (1903) conceived of as the expression of the revitalisation of the Gothic imagery which, through the short story, serve to voice and exorcise late Victorian crisis, de-Constructing late Victorian identity. First, the complex nature of late Victorian Britain crisis will be deepened. Second, the short story will be focused on as an independent genre from the novel which mostly epitomized Fin de Siècle literary fantastic discourse. Finally, the short stories will be investigated as textual examples of what Brantlinger (1988) defined as Imperial Gothic, instrumental in voicing and exorcising the pressures of late Victorian crisis.

*Keywords:* supernatural elements, Gothic imagery, short story, late Victorian crisis

## Introduction

On the grounds of the critical studies carried out by Darwin, Said, Fanon, May, Deickman, Brantlinger, Killen, and Todorov, the aims of this paper are: first, to deepen the complex nature of late Victorian Britain crisis; second, to analyze the short story as an independent genre from the novel which mostly epitomized Fin de Siècle literary fantastic discourse, also revitalising the Gothic imagery; and finally, to investigate "The Mark on the Beast" (1890) by Kipling, "Lot No. 249" (1892) by Conan Doyle, and "The Truth about Peycraft" (1903) by G. H. Wells, among the most successful Modernist Gothic short stories, as textual examples of what Brantlinger, in his *Rule of Darkness: Imperialism and British Literature, 1830-1914* (1988), defined as Imperial Gothic, instrumental in voicing and exorcising the pressures of late Victorian crisis.

## The Late Victorian Crisis and the Discursive Nature of Imperial Gothic

"One epoch of history is unmistakably in its decline... View that have hitherto governed minds are dead or driven hence like disenthroned kings... meanwhile interregnum in all its terrors prevails" (Nordau, 1913, p. 5).

Nordau's words epitomized the late Victorian mental and emotional responsiveness to the economic, social, and cultural turmoil which overwhelmed fin de siècle Britain. They account for the blurring of all those deterministic boundaries which had governed and controlled British society all over the century. Precariousness, liminality, and uncertainty suffocate the ancient glories of the empire of enlightenment and progress, and even the middle-class White male English coloniser turns out to be submitted to chance and chaotic transgressions. As Darwin (1871) underlined:

That man descended from some lowly-organised form, will... be highly distasteful to many persons. But there can hardly be a doubt that we are descended from barbarians. ... man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin. (p. 378)

The pre-modifiers *distasteful* and *lowly* indicate the terms of the strong subjective and objective human response to the late 19th century traumatic changes the population had to manage and comprehend to assess and overcome derangement. Both the myth of progress and of race are negated by stating that if something evolve it can also regress and assuring that even the middle-class British White male, carrying with him a permanent, ignoble, and unknown self impossible to remove, could be overpowered by stochastic liminality. Abhumanness, unsuspected and unknown, was encoded in the human body and mind as one of our hereditary and evolutionary components which could contaminate or annihilate the civilized morals and behavior. Central to the anxiety about transgressing boundary order, as a form of projection of the self, was the Orient and the native considered as the nearest and most probable source of contamination: "With its exotic spatial configurations, its hopelessly strange languages, its seemingly perverse morality... [the Orient] threatened hygiene and domestic seemliness... In the Orient one suddenly confronted unimaginable antiquity" (Said, 1995, p. 166). The untamed reign of nature intrudes into the restrained reign of culture in the form of atavic past and, most importantly, the challenge is perceived as double: from external sources, the corrupted and corrupting other, and from the rational world itself, the morally pure center. Indeed, encountering the Orient means to face a far distant unknown past ready to alter traditional boundaries, to undermine conventional spatial and time coordinates. The native "is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element, disfiguring all that has to do with beauty or morality; he is the depository of maleficent powers", Fanon (1990, p. 31) argued, clarifying the approach the British coloniser had towards the colonised. The other has the ability to injure western bodies and minds making them assume different shapes, irrational behaviors and producing extraordinary and unfamiliar circumstances. Those who were in the past submitted and thought to be powerless have now the capacity to act effectively, to exercise control and authority over the controller. The unconditional power of British Civilization, the fixity of the rational White male English body, and the totalising framework of the bourgeois system are undermined. Discoursivities of anxiety of biological contamination, of invasion, both endogenous and exogenous, come to the foreground: "The imperialist fantasy of consumption is replaced by the nightmare of being consumed" (Stott, 2002, p. 154).

From this perspective, again Nordau's words help us to convey a graphic description of how late Victorian crisis was actually experienced and also the atmosphere which saturates the texts analyzed. "Over the earth the shadows creep with deepening gloom, wrapping all objects in a mysterious dimness, in which certainty is destroyed and any guess seems plausible. Forms lose outlines, and are dissolved in floating mist" (Nordau, 1913,

p. 6). Mysterious fears, transgression of boundaries, uncertainty and disorder make everything indistinct, obscure and faintly outlined. Striking realism and freshness of experience are conveyed, delineating the proper idea of the powerful Gothic impact economic and cultural discomfort had also on the emotions and senses<sup>1</sup>. A critical economic depression overwhelmed the period causing the working class insurgency; the imperial power was in decline, menaced by the rise of Germany and the United States of America; colonies' discontent, epitomized by the First War of Indian Independence (1857-1859), had engendered profound doubts about the superiority of race and risen the probability for the coloniser of being attacked by the colonised. The rise of the New Woman and homosexuality, challenging the traditional gender roles, was considered as the main indicator of cultural degeneration and corruption, a sharp attack on the stability of the family structure, a potential threaten to national health, and the maintenance of the purity of race. Socialism and trade unionism spread and the outbreak of the Boer War problematised the superiority of race and the morality of the imperial mission. Furthermore science, which over the century had attempted to furnish proper instruments to categorise what was considered criminal and abnormal, and restore the stability of norm, gave further support to the general feeling of decay and regression. The II law of thermodynamics emphasised the concept of entropy stressing how energy systems have a tendency to increase rather than decrease their entropy, intended as a measure of chaos it. The colonial center felt to be threatened by the periphery not only from a military point of view but also, and most pervasively, from an epistemological and ontological point of view.

### **The Gothic Short Story and the Fantastic**

Although the short story has been culturally marginalised over time in favor of the novel, it had a special significance for the 19th century writers and readers, being a textual area of great formal, thematic experimentation and identity *de*-construction<sup>2</sup>. "Supple, impressionistic and intense" (Showalter, 1995, p. 12), it was the narrative form through which modernism undermined Victorian realism and its focus on ordinary life. Suitable, on account of its "submerged meanings" (Gilbert & Gubar, 2000, p. 92), for articulating new themes such as the excursion into the unknown self, the male contested sexuality, and the fluidity of the barrier between real and unreal through the revitalization of the Gothic imagery, intended as an "oppositional force" (Garrett, 2003, p. 1), the short story served to dramatise and exorcise the fundamental tensions of late Victorian Britain, to objectify and simultaneously distance them. According to May (1994), the short story "breaks up the familiar life-world of the everyday, defamiliarises our assumption... more than the novel, presents the world as I-Thou rather than I-It" (p. 137). In the relationship I-It, the reader observes the world as the only one in which he/she may live; in the I-Thou relation, conversely, someone is conducted to other worlds suspended between seduction, the magical component, fear, and the unknown, allowing the reader to go beyond the boundary of certainty and problematising crucial questions. Capable of dehabituating the thinking process, the short story, rather than the novel, leads the reader to observe daily life with criticism and disrupt, opportunely, the prescriptive cultural and social order. "Deautomatization is here conceived as permitting the adult to attain a new, fresh perception of the

<sup>1</sup> Several other studies point to this conclusion. See Morton (1945), pp. 360-388; Hyam (1976), pp. 147-173; Wallerstein (1984), pp. 14-27, 287-360; Myers (1989), pp. 307-338; Boehmer (1995), pp. 12-59; McClintock (1995), pp. 21-74; Arata (1996), pp. 1-33, 107-150.

<sup>2</sup> This point is deepened in Marsh-Russell (2009), pp. 43-102, 120-133.

world... by allowing... access to fresh materials, to create with them in a new way" (Deikman, 1966, p. 217). Actualising "an experience directly and emotionally created and encountered" (May, 1994, p. 133), the short story encourages the reader to relate the events of the narration to his/her existential or social-cultural situation, at the same time, leading him/her to an emotional distance from characters. This distance can be experientially fruitful in establishing a transfer process with the reader giving birth to what Winnicott (1980) defined as "the space of cultural experience" (p. 147): a potential third space between the psychic-subjective and external-objective reality, the only one in which play, and consequently creativity rather than compliance, may exist and evolve allowing the self to abandon a dependence relationship and relating critically with the object. "Ideal for depicting clashes" (Stubbs, 1979, p. 105), the Gothic short story, through "ghostly disguises of blatantly counterfeit fictionality allows to confront the roots of our beings in sliding multiplicities and to define ourselves against these uncanny abjections, while also feeling attracted to them" (Hogle, 2006, p. 16). From this perspective, it serves to face late Victorian cultural disorders, to control alarming unknown forces, distressing changes, and to handle social anxiety. Through the element of the fantastic, in the sense identified by Todorov (1975): "Fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (p. 25), and marked by Zgorzelski (1979) as "the breaching of the internal laws which are initially assumed in the text to govern the fictional world" (p. 298), all destabilising factors may be supernaturalised and represented in dislocated forms, normalised and pathologised to be objectified and distanced at once. According to Brantlinger (1988), Imperial Gothic explicitly gives voice to anxieties about the probability with which civilization can devolve and thus about the decay of Britain's imperial hegemony: "The atavistic descents into the primitive experiences by fictional characters seem often to be allegories of the larger regressive movement of civilization, British progress transformed into British backsliding" (p. 229). The Gothic revival is apt to explore, articulate, and exorcise what would happen if the perspectives were altered and the colonial center were menaced by invasion. A "transhistorical" category (Hurley, 2006, p. 193) whose "cross generic dynamism has made it so transformable to suit to changing times" (Hogle & Smith, 2009, p. 1), it allows the reader to examine questions which would be difficult to approach in realistic literature, since through fantasy the desire which pervades and obsesses the forbidden can be plainly expressed, uncertainty and ideological ambiguity interrogated and depicted. A "kind of literary emergency" (Killen, 2009, p. 12), reactivated to support the readers to confront the shifting to modernity by externalising and negotiating anxieties, the Gothic "provided the narratives and the figures that enabled late Victorian middle class culture to successfully accommodate certain historical changes, notably modernising processes" (Daly, 1999, p. 24), and served to the British to project on to its evil supernatural and fantastic beings all that they did not want to recognise as inherent to the steady national self.

### **The Stories: Voicing and Exorcising the Crisis**

The 1880s and 1890s saw a surge of gothic fiction paranoically concerned with the disintegration of identity into bestiality, the loss of British identity through overpowering foreign influence, the vulnerability of the empire to monstrous and predatory sexualities, the death of humanity itself in the twilight of everything. (Jones, 2011, p. 66)

"The Mark on the Beast", "Lot No. 249", and "The Truth about Peycraft" actualise the revitalization of the

Gothic aimed at recognizing and distancing the late Victorian Britain crisis by "experiment[ing] with the emotional possibilities (for both characters and readers) of violating the laws of nature" (Spencer, 1992, p. 200). From a formal perspective, it is remarkable how the authors focused on the short story as a genre distinct from the novel, designed for the singleness of its effect, and the necessity to arouse and hold the attention of the reader (Haining, 1987, pp. ix-xiii; Luckhurst, 2005, pp. ix-xxxi). In the preface to his "Round the Red Lamp Being Facts and Fancies of Medical Life" (1894), Conan Doyle (1894) argued that: "A tale which may startle the reader out of his usual grooves of thought and shake him into seriousness, plays the part of the alternative and tonic in medicine, bitter to the taste but bracing in its results" (p. iv). Also for Kipling and Wells, short stories were a discursive experience totally different from novels in nature and scope. Wells underlined how, "a short story should go to its point as a man flies from a pursuing tiger. He pauses not for the daisies in his path, or to note the pretty moss on the tree he climbs for safety" (as cited in Hammond, 1992, p. 18). The stories, amusing and still terrifying, strictly focus on contemporary reality, highlighting that the world of the text and the world of the reader may overlap, blurring the border between fiction and reality. Central to them is what Hammond (1992) defined as a "disturbing quality" (p. 20), in so far as they raise doubts and, thus, possibilities of behavior or mental states which implicitly question accepted norms and beliefs, demonstrating how easily normal life can be altered by chance encounters and stochastic circumstances, and how the obscure zones of evil dwell immediately beneath the threshold of consciousness. They textualise what Brantlinger (1988) defined as Imperial Gothic, "individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventure and heroism in the modern world, the divided self" (p. 229). The stable, prescriptive, and comfortable universe in which all is known and assured by a rational approach is contaminated by a fluctuating, uncertain realm characterized by a gloomy order of being where nothing is fixed or definite. From this perspective, the stories are saturated with the notion of flux and explicitly propose an excursion into the unknown self, through the articulation of the fantastic. There are some dominating ideas they have in common: the blurring of the frontier between the real world and the world of fantasy, the Orient as the origin of corruption, the duality of man, the fluidity of life, and the precariousness of man due mostly to endogenous forces typically projected on to exogenous sources. In "The Mark on the Beast", the supernatural is attained in "the uttermost ends of the Empire" (Kipling, 1890, p. 84), colonial India, where men forgather accidentally and therefore seem to "have a right to be riotous" (Kipling, 1890, p. 84). A drunken and chauvinistic English coloniser, Fleete, desecrates a Hindu temple, "gravely grinding the ashes of his cigar-butt in to the forehead of the red, stone image of Hanuman... Shee that? Mark on the B-beasht! *I* made it" (Kipling, 1890, p. 85). In "Lot No. 249", the supernatural is actualised, instead, in a local setting, "in so famed a centre of learning and light as the University of Oxford" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 109), the core of White rationality, the propelling locus of cultural forces in which, however, "the path of nature has been overstepped" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 109). In Wells' "The Truth About Pycraft", the supernatural is realised again in a contemporary local setting, Bloomsbury, a residential district of north-central London famous, in the early 20th century, because associated with an influential avant-garde group of writers, artists, and intellectuals. The threat for rigid rationality and vigorous masculinity, thus, comes from within and by chance, by unknown and uncontrolled forces that destabilise the invulnerable center. These forces interrelate with the irrational Orient which powerfully intrudes the rational West in different forms. Fleete is supposed to be transformed into a beast by the offended Hanuman's priest:

[He] was on his hands and knees... The man's lower lip hung down. He made beast-noises... could not speak, he could only snarl, and his snarls were those of a wolf... We were dealing with a beast that once had been Fleete. (Kipling, 1890, p. 91)

Smith, a medical student at the University of Oxford, has to face a revived revengeful Egyptian mummy by which he is obsessed and haunted, "a horrid, black, withered thing" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 114) which is represented in all its ambiguity and duality, "The form was lifeless and inert, but it seemed to Smith ... that there still lingered a lurid spark of vitality, some faint sign of consciousness" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 128). The mummy, expression of the colonised destructive world and barbarism, is supposed to be revived by a "damnable... reptilian" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 111) student in archaeology, Bellingham, "a man with secret vices... [and] a demon" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 111) at Eastern studies and languages. Contrary to the mainstream late Victorian writers' construction and representation of Egyptian objects, the mummy, is not only "a commodity... a collectible object, a physical marker of imperial conquest" (Briefel, 2008, p. 264), rather a permanent artefact which threatens "the standardization and alleged impermanence of British commodities" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 265), something "created and with creative capacities" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 264). It invades the coloniser's spaces and, symbolically, his complete existence, so that what Smith thought was only "a dim suspicion, a vague, fantastic conjecture" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 130), suddenly takes form in the attempt to rationalise the occurrence: "Bellingham, in his Eastern studies, has got hold of some infernal secret by which a mummy can be temporarily brought to life" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 133). The demoniac Orient comes to the foreground through the figure of Bellingham; the maleficent secrets he has learnt from Eastern culture are capable of producing "a striking chain of events" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 134), says Peterson, who tries to convince Smith that the circumstance is only a product of his "fears and imagination" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 135). Smith, convinced of being followed by the mummy, actually by his inner and obscure self, "rushed madly and wildly through the night, he could hear a swift, dry patter behind him, and could see... that his horror was bounding like a tiger at his heels, with blazing eyes and one stringy arm out-thrown" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 133). The student is transfigured into a wild beast: his nerves were "all unstrung" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 135) and he recognizes that the encounter with the mummy made him overcome the boundary between human and abhuman, rational and irrational, "I am my own man again now... I was never so unmanned before" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 133). Peycraft's decaying portrait is introduced from the very beginning of the story, a "Great uneasy jelly of substance! The fattest clubman in London... abject... with his liquid appeal... he grunted and gormandized" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 447). The body is described as a hybrid semisolid substance, a shapeless, pulpy mass, and his figure is conveyed as an ignoble and degraded potentially subhuman creature. He is given a recipe by the narrator in order to lose his weight but instead of slimming down, he begins levitating. The problem has been caused, indirectly, by the narrator's great-grandmother, a Hindustani woman, whose demoniac recipes, the writing and spelling of which are "particularly atrocious" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 450), have revengeful powers being strictly interrelated with Eastern culture and languages.

The Orient is portrayed as the contaminating, malignant, and destructive component. Hanuman priest's supernatural and corrosive powers are depicted by Strickland who assists, astonished, to his friend's transformation into a savage beast that howls and devours raw and bloody meats.

In the moonlight we could see the leper coming round the corner of the house. He was perfectly naked... mewed and stopped to dance with his shadow... hideously and even through my riding-boots I could feel that his flesh was not the flesh of a clean man... we... told him to take away the evil spirit. (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 93)

The moonlight is a typical Gothic element through which the mysterious corrupting forces are introduced in the text, an element the short story has in common with the revivification of the mummy in "Lot No. 249": "The half moon lay in the west between two Gothic pinnacles, and threw upon the silvered street a dark tracery... There was a brisk breeze, and light, fleecy clouds drifted swiftly across the sky" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 133). Nakedness is conventionally a trope which embodies barbarian and uncivilized populations, to homologize natives to animals; as underlined by Fanon, Western Manichaeism typically dehumanizes the native turning him into an animal: "When the settler seeks to describe the native fully in exact terms he constantly refers to the bestiary" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 31). The leper, in fact, does not articulate words, emitting instead, the high-pitched, crying sound of a cat; his macabre and repulsive dance with his shadow suggests the horror of death and decay and his flesh is apparently contaminated, revoltingly ugly, offensive to moral sensibilities. However, he has both the power of corrupting a member of the empire and the authority to relieve him of evil forces. Also the demonised Bellingham "looks beastly... has a beastly temper" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 111); indeed, he embodies the duplicity of life since he is simultaneously considered as "a man of wide reading, with catholic tastes... His manner, too, was so pleasing and suave" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 119). But "clever as he undoubtedly was... the medical student seemed to detect a dash of insanity in the man" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 119). Smith recognizes the multiplicity and fluidity of human beings and seems to assume as an axiom that, "It's a wonderful thing... to feel that one can command powers of good and of evil-administering angel or a demon of vengeance" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 119). He does appreciate Bellingham's duality until the mummy is imparted new life and energy. Another example of floating, changeable creature suspended between life and death, the mummy has features that, "though horribly discoloured, were perfect... The blotched skin was drawn tightly from bone to bone... Two thin teeth, like those of a rat, overlay the shriveled lower lip... there was a suggestion of energy about the horrid thing" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 117). Monstrosity, repulsion, and oxymoronic relationships characterise the depiction of the mummy, whose textualisation emphasises one of the major themes central to late Victorian ghost stories, that is revenge as the most primitive and punitive instinct, the impulse to inflict upon others, the same punishment one has received:

Something was coming swiftly down to it. It moved in the shadow of the hedge, silently and furtively, a dark, crouching figure, dimly visible against the black background... out of the darkness he had a glimpse of a scraggy neck, and of two eyes that will ever haunt him in his dreams. (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 133)

Smith is apparently emotionally distressed, unnerved by this obscure, ambiguous presence, and definitely out of control. The man of the enlightening empire, supposed to impart spiritual, intellectual and rational insight to the colonised is haunted by a creature that represents the colonised world and its obscure forces. He has fallen prey to those he was supposed to free from ignorance and superstition, he is attacked irreversibly by those he previously had attacked, overwhelmed by those he overpowered; exactly like Fleete to whom the leper inflicts the same pain the Hanuman's statue had been subjected to: the transformation into a "beast" and a "mark", "a perfect double of the black-rossette" (Kipling, 1890, p. 87). The narrator who gives to Peycraft one of his Indian great-grandmother exotic and unfamiliar recipes describes his ancestors as "a jolly queer lot" (Wells, 1903, p. 449), strange, and

eccentric figures who deviate from the expected or normal and whose unconventional nature is questionable and suspicious; the family, moreover, "has kept up the knowledge of Hindustani from generation to generation" (Wells, 1903, p. 449). The negative and toxic influence of Eastern languages is continuously emphasised in the text emerging, most importantly, as a permanent component which affects the narrator himself; he often underlines his own temptation to poison Peycraft alluding to his genealogic links to the Hindustani culture, also highlighting the obscure side of his self as a British citizen. The great-grandmother's recipes are "queer things to handle" (Wells, 1903, p. 449) and have all the magical corrosive and revengeful power of the Orient; they had been written by an Indian gentleman who "had a weakness for skins of miscellaneous origin, and his hand-writing was cramped to the last degree" (Wells, 1903, p. 449). The chaotic and corrupting nature of the Orient is underlined by the origin of the skins on which the recipes are written and still by the oddity of the language used, out of the ordinary and unfamiliar, simultaneously arousing inquisitiveness, and eluding explanation or comprehension, "unreadable" (Wells, 1903, p. 449) even for the Hindustani speaking narrator. The maleficent exotic ingredients, whose taste is "beastly" (Wells, 1903, p. 452) and whose appearance is "extraordinarily uninviting" (Wells, 1903, p. 453), constrain Peycraft to float in the air in defiance of gravity and to confine himself into his sitting room, "in a state of untidy disorder" (Wells, 1903, p. 451), to remain imprisoned at home where the usual order has been subverted. Contained in "that queer, odd-scented sandalwood box" (Wells, 1903, p. 451), the recipe causes Peycraft's becoming "noisy and violent" (Wells, 1903, p. 453): Again, the Orient takes its revenge, Peycraft's nature is altered and equated to an animal, his curiosity in Eastern medical science punished.

Another main thematic feature the stories have in common is that the supernatural events remain unexplained, they do not articulate any rationalisation or demystification of the supernatural circumstances showing only how normal laws of cause and effect are simply suspended. The fact that the extraordinary is given no rational explanation, and doubt and confusion remain, is designed to remind that there is something that may not be accounted for within the boundaries of any norm; all certainties may be destroyed. Fleete's transformation into a beast is portrayed as "beyond any human and rational experience" (Kipling, 1890, p. 91), although Strickland rationally tries to think of a case of hydrophobia, "the word wouldn't come, because I knew that I was lying" (Kipling, 1890, p. 91). He also attempts to commit Fleete's life and his own mental stability to science by calling a doctor who confirms that Fleete is dying of hydrophobia and there is nothing can be done for him: the narrator, however, is now firmly convinced that "this isn't any doctor's work. I also knew that he [Strickland] spoke the truth" (Kipling, 1890, p. 91). Strickland's suspicions, the narrator underlines, "were so wildly improbable that he dared not say them out loud; and I who entertained all Strickland's beliefs, was so ashamed of owning to them that I pretended to disbelieve" (Kipling, 1890, p. 92). Both men are overcome with shame, guilt, and remorse for disbelieving rational explanations and scientific approach and entrusting, instead, Fleete's life to the magical and superstitious powers of the other, thus completely subverting their epistemological belief: "It struck me that we had fought for Fleete's soul with the Silver Man in that room, and had disgraced ourselves as Englishmen for ever, and I laughed and gasped and gurgled just as shamefully as Strickland" (Kipling, 1890, p. 95). Attempting to find rational foundations, Strickland suggests the narrator to write the strange story down. He disapproves of the idea since nothing "is likely to clear up the mystery" (Kipling, 1890, p. 95). But the story is there, is here, is being read by the reader; and although "no one will believe a rather unpleasant story and... it is



well known to every right-minded man that the gods of the heathens are stone and brass, and any attempt to deal with them otherwise is justly condemned" (Kipling, 1890, p. 95), the implicit suggestion the text conveys is exactly that the events are possibly true and that the gods of the allegedly savage population have the same, or perhaps a superior, authority and power of those of civilized people, as the native proverb in the epigraph provocatively questions: "Your Gods and my Gods—do you or I know which are the stronger?" (Kipling, 1890, p. 84). While the circumstances in "Lot No. 249" are described by the narrator as "monstruous... entirely beyond all bounds of human experience" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 130), they are contemporarily assumed as "a thing not to be denied" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 130). The boundary between the natural world and supernatural world is transgressed and what happens to the main male characters is attributed to a power that seems to violate and go beyond natural forces. Peterson tries to give a rational and natural explanation; and yet, Smith is submerged in fear and anxiety, he loses his human rationality, his bodily, and mental stability. Completely and decisively defeated by the uncontrollable forces of the Orient, by his own self, "in frantic haste he caught up the knife and hacked at the figure of the mummy... In a quarter of an hour a few charred and brittle sticks were all that was left of Lot No. 249" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 139). The only way the student is convinced to recover his soundness of judgment and lucidity is to destroy the mummy; this is the reason why he is considered mad by the mischievous Bellingham who urges him to "give reasons. You are a madman—a dangerous madman. Why should I destroy my own property?" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 138). The overturning of the standpoint is noteworthy here, since it gives further support to the idea of unfixedity and flux: All subjects are potentially liminal and at risk of experiencing odd transformations, degeneracy, and contamination. From this perspective, the epilogue of the story, despite eluding any rigid and rational elucidation of the phenomenon narrated, gives clear hints about the boundless paths of human nature and the possibility human beings have to discover their own multiple selves. The narrator says: "But the wisdom of men is small, and the ways of nature are strange, and who shall put a bound to the dark things which may be found by those who seek for them?" (Conan Doyle, 1892, p. 140). In "The Truth About Pycraft", oriental magic is partly solved by western technology. The narrator suggests Pycraft, metaphorically but also materially, to "adapt to his new situation" (Wells, 1903, p. 453) and to wear lead underwear, which allows Pycraft to live almost normally, with his feet on the ground. No rational explanation of the circumstance is given but the possibility of a misunderstanding between "loss of weight" (Wells, 1903, p. 452) and "a cure for fatness" (Wells, 1903, p. 452). The fact the narrator "was extremely delighted" (Wells, 1903, p. 452) at Pycraft's raising into the air suggests the idea of an ancestral revenge on the part of the colonised. An allegorical description of the unfamiliar conditions of the new era emerges at the end of the story when the narrator confirms the status of Pycraft as "a mere boring mass of assimilatory matter, mere clouds in clothing, *niente, nefas*, the most inconsiderable of men" (Wells, 1903, p. 454): Indeed, the unsteady and unfixed state of being which overwhelmed late Victorian Britain.

### Conclusions

The encounter the main White middle-class male characters in the stories have with the extraordinary, the irrational and the conflict which stems from it, is depicted as reversible, focusing on the fluidity of life, on unstable and permeable bodies and emotions. The events narrated remain suspended between fiction and reality. The graphic portraits of liminal bodies is instrumental in depicting the tension between the rational and the

irrational, the conflict between the familiar and the mysterious, stemming from the incursion of extraordinary events into the everyday world. Not only marginalised persons like natives, feminists, homosexuals, and poor are potentially subjected to strange metamorphoses, but also an exuberant coloniser, a British boy student at Oxford and a plump London clubman. The White male middle-class hero, typically characterized by rationality, rigid gender boundaries and courage, is banished giving place to threshold identities whose deterministic laws of nature and superiority of race are called into question by the fantasised Orient which, unconventionally, comes to foreground as an active, authoritative and powerful force. The stories maintain the sensation of hesitation emphasised by Todorov and Zgorzelski, being saturated with that peculiar indecision, vacillation, and uncertainty people undergo when, accustomed only to a deterministic view of life, have to face a stochastic, unknown, and uncontrollable experience. Indeed, they testify to the disruption of "the knowledge system of the texts' culture" (Hurley, 2006, p. 204), confirming the presence of a Gothic center where "civilisation and barbarism had acquired an unhealthy proximity" (Smith, 2004, p. 73). The Gothic emerges as a "cultural project" (Hogle, 2006, p. 16) capable of investigating human life in its multiplicity, compelling the readers to abandon the idea of an integral identity and displace themselves on the boundary between Manichean oppositions such as human/beast, civilized/primitive, and man/woman, by which the late 19th-century culture has to redefine experience and rewrite its epistemological and ontological components.

### References

- Arata, S. (1996). *Fictions of loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Boehmer, E. (1995). *Colonial and postcolonial literature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brantlinger, P. (1988). *Rule of darkness: Imperialism and British literature, 1830-1914*. London: Cornhill University Press.
- Briefel, A. (2008). Hands of beauty, hands of horror: Fear and Egyptian art at the Fin de Siècle. *Victorian Studies*, 50, 263-271.
- Conan Doyle, A. (1892). Lot No. 249. In R. Luckhurst (Ed.), *Late Victorian Gothic tales* (pp. 109-140). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Conan Doyle, A. (1894). *Round the red lamp: Being facts and fancies of medical life*. London: Methuen & Co., Print.
- Daly, N. (1999). *Modernism, romance, and the Fin de Siècle: Popular fiction and British culture, 1880-1914*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Darwin, C. (1871). *Descent of man, and selection in relation to sex*. London: John Murray.
- Deikman, A. (1966). Deautomatization and the mystic experience. *Psychiatry*, 29, 324-338.
- Fanon, F. (1990). *The wretched of the earth*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Garrett, K. P. (2003). *Gothic reflections: Narrative force in nineteenth-century fiction*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
- Gilbert, M. S., & Gubar, S. (2000). *The madwoman in the attic: The woman writer and the nineteenth-century literary imagination*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Haining, P. (Ed.). (1987). *The complete supernatural stories of Rudyard Kipling*. London: W. H. Allen.
- Hammond, J. (1992). *H. G. Wells and the short story*. London: St. Martin's Press.
- Hogle, E. J., & Smith, A. (2009). Revisiting the Gothic and theory: An introduction. *Gothic Studies*, 11, 1-8.
- Hogle, J. E. (Ed.). (2006). *The Cambridge companion to Gothic fiction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hurley, K. (2006). British Gothic in fiction, 1885-1930. In J. E. Hogle (Ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Gothic fiction* (pp. 189-208). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hyam, R. (1976). *Britain's imperial century, 1815-1914: A study of empire and expansion*. London: B. T. Batsford.
- Jones, A. M. (2011). Conservation of energy, individual agency, and Gothic terror in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*, or, What's scarier than an ancient, evil, shape-shifting bug?. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 39, 65-85.
- Killen, J. (2009). *History of the Gothic: Gothic literature 1825-1914*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press.
- Kipling, R. (1890). The mark on the beast. In R. Luckhurst (Ed.), *Late Victorian Gothic tales* (pp. 84-95). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Luckhurst, R. (Ed.). (2005). *Late Victorian Gothic tales*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Marsh-Russell, P. (2009). *The short story: An introduction*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- May, E. C. (1994). The nature of knowledge in short fiction. In M. E. Charles (Ed.), *The new short story theories* (pp. 131-147). Athens: Ohio University Press.
- McClintock, A. (1995). *Imperial leather: Race, gender and sexuality in the colonial context*. London: Routledge.
- Morton, A. L. (1945). *A people's history of England*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Myers, G. (1989). Nineteenth century popularisations of thermodynamics and the rhetoric of social prophecy. In P. Brantlinger (Ed.), *Energy and entropy: Science and culture in Victorian Britain* (pp. 307-338). Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Nordau, M. S. (1913). *Degeneration*. London: Heinemann.
- Said, E. W. (1995). *Orientalism*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Showalter, E. (1995). Smoking room. *TLS*, 16, 12.
- Smith, A. (2004). *Victorian demons: Medicine, masculinity and the Gothic at the Fin-de-Siècle*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Spencer, L. K. (1992). Purity and danger: Dracula, the urban Gothic, and the late Victorian degeneracy crisis. *ELH*, 59, 197-225.
- Stott, R. (2002). Scaping the body: Of cannibal mothers and colonial landscapes. In A. Richardson & C. Willis (Eds.), *The new woman in fiction and in fact: Fin-de-Siècle Feminisms* (pp. 150-166). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Stubbs, P. (1979). *Women and fiction: Feminism and the novel, 1880-1920*. Brighton: Harvester Press.
- Todorov, T. (1975). *The fantastic: A structural approach to a literary genre*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
- Wallertsein, I. (1984). *The politics of the world-economy: The states, the movements and the civilizations*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wells, H. G. (1903). The truth about Pyecraft. In J. Hammond (Ed.), *The complete short stories of H. G. Wells* (pp. 447-455). London: J. M. Dent.
- Winnicott, D. W. (1980). *Playing and reality*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Zgorzelski, A. (1979). Is science fiction a genre of fantastic literature?. *Science Fiction Studies*, 6, 296-303.