

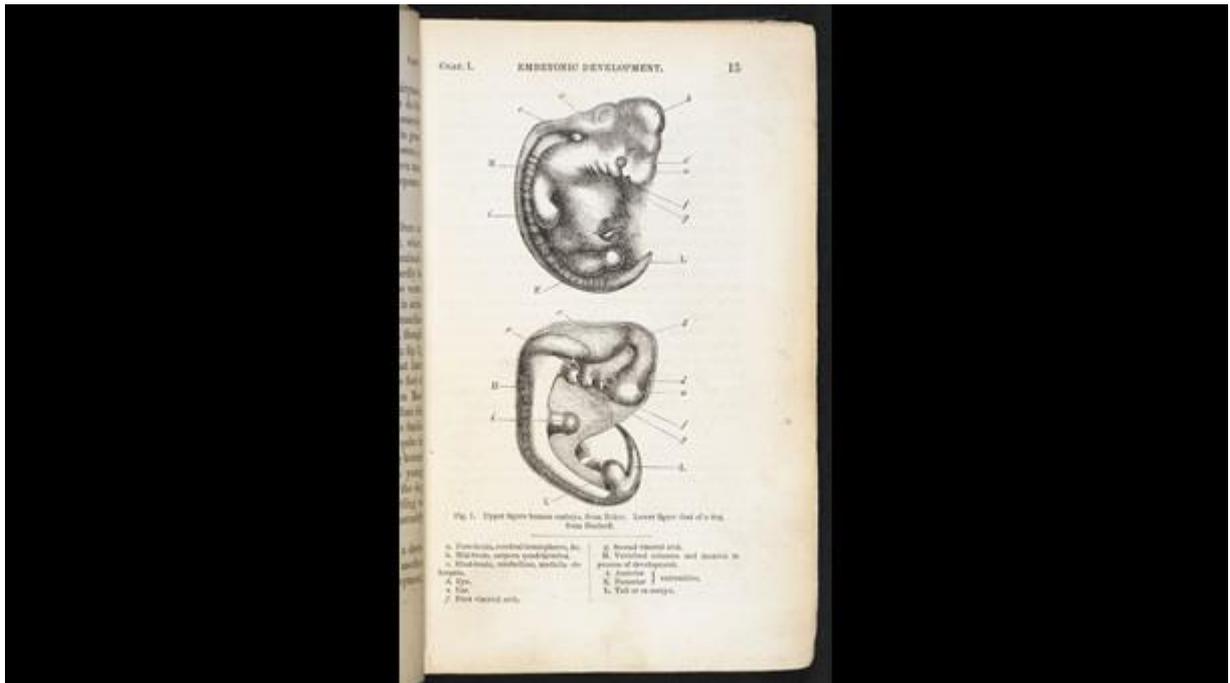
Gothic fiction in the Victorian fin de siècle: mutating bodies and disturbed minds

The Victorian period saw Gothic fiction evolving and taking on new characteristics. With a focus on the late 19th century curator Greg Buzwell traces common themes and imagery found in *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, *Dracula* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. For centuries Gothic fiction has provided authors with imaginative ways to address contemporary fears. As a result, the nature of Gothic novels has altered considerably from one generation to the next. Early Gothic novels, such as Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764) and Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) were set in exotic landscapes and distant times; the action took place in crumbling castles and torch-lit monasteries while the villains tended to be dissolute Catholic noblemen and corrupt, sex-crazed monks. Later, in the early Victorian period, authors such as Charles Dickens borrowed typically Gothic motifs – the innocent abandoned in a threatening environment for example, or the mysterious stranger with secrets to hide – and transplanted them to contemporary Britain to highlight modern concerns. Stories such as *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Bleak House* (1853) used Gothic imagery as a means of drawing attention to the social ills afflicting the poor in modern London. Urban slums with their dark, labyrinthine streets and seedy areas of vice and squalor supplanted ivy-clad castles and catacombs as the settings for Gothic terror. Later still in the Victorian *fin de siècle* the scene changes again: it is no longer the physical landscape that provides the location for Gothic tales but rather, more disturbingly, the human body itself. Works such as Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886); Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891); Arthur Machen's 'The Great God Pan' (1894); H G Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895) and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) all explore the theme of the human mind and body changing and developing, mutating, corrupting and decaying, and all do so in response to evolutionary, social and medical theories that were emerging at the time.

Post-Darwinian nightmares

Late-Victorian society was haunted by the implications of Darwinism. The ideas outlined in Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) and *The Descent of Man* (1871) had by the 1880s and 1890s been assimilated, initially by the scientific community and then by much of the general public. For many, the balance between 'faith' and 'doubt' had tipped disturbingly in favour of the latter, and questions about the origins, nature and destiny of humankind had become matters for science, rather than theology to address. The final chapter of *The Descent of Man* contains a passage in which Darwin concludes that humans are 'descended from a hairy, tailed quadruped' which, via several intermediary stages, had itself evolved 'from some amphibian-like creature, and this again from some fish-like animal'. Such a nightmarish lineage in which human evolution was portrayed as a disturbing variation on the theme of Frankenstein's monster, with humanity being assembled from assorted disparate earlier versions, perhaps lies behind the descriptions of Mr Hyde as 'ape-like' and 'troglodytic' in Stevenson's *Jekyll and Hyde*; the implication is that the brutal and uncivilised Hyde is somehow a reversion to a more primitive stage of human development; a ghastly evolutionary precursor who stands in a direct genetic line behind the eminently respectable Dr Jekyll.

The Descent of Man by Darwin



Charles Darwin's *The Descent of Man*, published in 1871, is the first of Darwin's published works to contain the word 'evolution'. The first part of the book applies the theory of evolution to the human species, and the second looks at the role of sexual selection within the process of evolution.

Illustrations to Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, 1930



Illustration depicting the physical transformation of Jekyll (top figure) into Hyde, 1930.

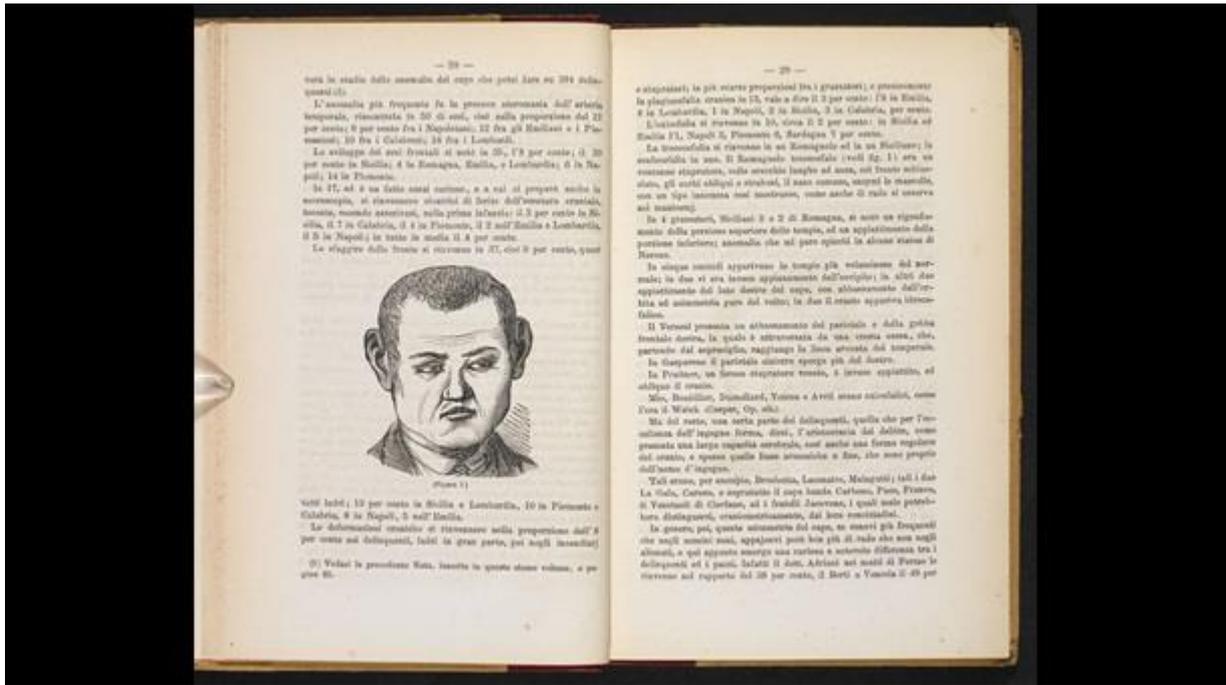
Evolution also raised doubts in another sense. Initially it appeared logical that evolution would always lead to physical and mental improvement with weaker and less-useful characteristics being eradicated over time; however, it was soon recognised that this was not necessarily the case. Evolution is a mechanistic process with no guiding hand or ultimate goal and therefore, it was argued, in certain circumstances degeneration into less-complex forms was just as likely as progress into more complex ones.

H G Wells, who had studied under the biologist T H Huxley, examined in his essay 'Zoological Regression' (1891) the curious case of ascidians (commonly known as 'sea squirts'), organisms that initially have 'a well-developed tail' enabling rapid progress through the water but which subsequently regress into creatures capable of nothing more strenuous than attaching themselves permanently to a rock; becoming in effect 'merely a vegetative excrescence' on a stone. In *The Time Machine*, set far in the future, Wells imaginatively applies a similar level of evolutionary decline onto humans. The Time Traveller (he is never named) discovers that in the year 802,701 AD the human race is comprised of the Eloi – the leisured classes grown elfin and effete through idleness and completely unable to look after themselves, and the Morlocks – the decayed working classes, living underground; brutal, predatory and afraid of the light.

Criminology

The influential Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso (1835-1909) had argued that the 'born criminal' could be recognised by certain physical characteristics – unusually sized ears, for example, or asymmetrical facial features; particularly long arms or a sloping forehead. Notions that cruelty and criminal intent manifested themselves visibly in the features of an individual lay behind Wilde's novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. No matter how vile Dorian's behaviour – his callous pursuit and subsequent rejection of the actress Sybil Vane, for example, or his furtive visits to the Limehouse opium dens – he remains ever youthful and beautiful, while the picture of him locked away in an attic bears every visible scar, line and stain of his corrupt behaviour.

L'Uomo Delinquente



Cesare Lombroso's *L'Uomo Delinquente* (1876) proposes that criminal behaviour was a throwback to earlier evolutionary states of humanity, and could be detected in advance through study of the shape of the individual's skull.

Similarly, Mr Hyde's 'troglodytic' appearance in *Jekyll and Hyde* marks him out as a criminal and as someone who is unacceptable in polite society. The fact that Dr Jekyll, who is highly respected, and Mr Hyde who is a social outcast happen to be one and the same person, allows Stevenson to simultaneously accept Lombroso's theory (in the depiction of Hyde) and refute it (in the appearance of Jekyll). This implication that the criminal could lurk behind an acceptable public persona, and that appearances might provide no real indication of the personality within, rendered *Jekyll and Hyde* a particularly disturbing work during the late 1880s as Jack the Ripper carried out his attacks in Whitechapel.

Fantasy

Gothic imagery, given its fantastical nature, allowed authors to explore in an indirect fashion themes that were not necessarily acceptable subjects for discussion in respectable society. Count Dracula, for example, is feared for his ability to move unnoticed through the crowds of London, potentially afflicting all in his path with the stain of vampirism. On another level, however, this can be read as a fear of foreign immigrants moving unnoticed through London, spreading crime and disease as they go. Indeed vampirism itself is often read in *Dracula* as an analogy for syphilis – a subject that was not fit for discussion in a novel published in England at the time. Similarly Mr Hyde, whose very appearance incites 'disgust, loathing and fear' in the staid lawyer Mr Utterson, is sometimes regarded as a physical manifestation of the Victorian fear of homosexuality: Utterson's loathing for Hyde then becomes shorthand for Victorian society's simultaneous fear of, and fascination with homosexuality. Helen Vaughan, the murderous result of a barbaric scientific experiment in Arthur Machen's short story 'The Great God Pan' wavers 'from sex to sex' in nightmarish fashion, mutating rapidly from male to female and back again. This particularly dark and disturbing idea can be read as an attack on the New Woman – the label for the confident and independent females who emerged into society during the final years of Queen Victoria's reign. The New Woman was

regarded with admiration by some, but seen as rather mannish, sexually-threatening and unnatural by others.

Promotion for the film adaptation of Dracula starring Helen Chandler and Bela Lugosi



Promotional still from the 1931 film version of *Dracula*; the scene shows Dracula at the point of attacking Lucy. The two women in *Dracula* (1897), Lucy Westenra and Mina Murray, embody two different views of womanhood, and meet very different fates.

Gothic fiction has always possessed the ability to adapt to its environment. It mutates to reflect the times in which it lives, and the Victorian *fin de siècle*, with its aesthetes and dandies and New Women; its fears as the implications of Darwinism worked themselves through; its theories on the criminal classes and the consequences of old, decayed Europe haunting new Britain in the form of immigration; all these allowed Gothic fiction to reach new heights of imagination and terror.