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# The Dark Circle: Spiritualism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction

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The Dark Circle: Spiritualism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Fiction

by

Joseph A. Good

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy  
Department of English  
College of Arts and Sciences  
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Bram Stoker, Florence Marryat, Elizabeth Phelps, Sarah Waters

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DEDICATION:

To W.L.J.

"...the next message you need in the treasure hunt is exactly where you are when you need it. The message may be in the form of a teacher..."

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*Lector, si monumentum requiris, circumspice.*

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## ABSTRACT:

This dissertation offers critical and theoretical approaches for understanding depictions of Spiritualism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian fiction. Spiritualism has fascinated and repelled writers since the movement's inception in Hydesville, New York, in 1848, and continues to haunt writers even today. The conclusion of this dissertation follows Spiritualist fiction as it carries over into the Neo-Victorian genre, by discussing how themes and images of Victorian Spiritualism find "life after death" in contemporary work. Spiritualism, once confined to the realm of the arcane and academically obscure, has begun to attract critical attention as more scholars exhume the body of literature left behind by the Spiritualist movement. This new critical attention has focused on Spiritualism's important relationship with various elements of Victorian culture, particularly its close affiliation with reform movements such as Women's Rights.

The changes that occurred in Spiritualist fiction reflect broader shifts in nineteenth-century culture. Over time, literary depictions of Spiritualism became increasingly detached from Spiritualism's original connection with progressive reform. This dissertation argues that a

close examination of the trajectory of Spiritualist fiction mirrors broader shifts occurring in Victorian society. An analysis of Spiritualist fiction from a thematic perspective enables us to understand how themes that initially surfaced in progressive midcentury fiction later reemerged—in much different forms—in Gothic fiction of the fin-de-siècle. From this, we can observe how these late Gothic images were later recycled in Neo-Victorian adaptations.

In tracing the course of literary depictions of Spiritualism, this analysis ranges from novels written by committed advocates of Spiritualism, such as Florence Marryat's *The Dead Man's Message* and Elizabeth Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*, to representations of Spiritualism written in fin-de-siècle Gothic style, including Bram Stoker's *Dracula* and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. My analysis also includes the work of Nathaniel Hawthorne, who conceived of Spiritualism as either "the birth of a new science or the revival of an old humbug."

Hawthorne's ambivalence represents an important and heretofore completely overlooked aspect of Spiritualist literature. He is poised between the extremes of proselytizing Spiritualists and fin-de-siècle skeptics. Hawthorne wanted to believe in Spiritualism but remained unconvinced. As the century wore on, this brand of skepticism became increasingly common, and the decline of Spiritualism's

popularity was hastened by the repudiation of the movement by its founders, the Fox Sisters, in 1888. Ultimately, despite numerous attempts both scientific and metaphysical, the Victorian frame of mind proved unable to successfully reconcile the mystical element of Spiritualism with the increasingly mechanistic materialist worldview emerging as a result of rapid scientific advances and industrialization.

The decline and fall of the Spiritualist movement opened the door to the appropriation of Spiritualism as a Gothic literary trope in decadent literature. This late period of Spiritualist fiction cast a long shadow that subsequently led to multiple literary reincarnations of Spiritualism in the Gothic Neo-Victorian vein.

Above all, Spiritualist literature is permeated by the theme of loss. In each of the literary epochs covered in this dissertation, Spiritualism is connected with loss or deficit of some variety.

Convinced Spiritualist writers depicted Spiritualism as an improved form of consolation for the bereaved, but later writers, particularly those working after the collapse of the Spiritualist movement, perceived Spiritualism as a dangerous form of delusion that could lead to the loss of sanity and self. Fundamentally, Spiritualism was a Victorian attempt to address the existential dilemma of continuing to live in a world where joy is fleeting and the journey of life has but a

single inexorable terminus. Writers like Phelps and Marryat admired Spiritualism as it promised immediate and unbroken communion with the beloved dead. The dead and the living could go on existing in perfect harmony by communicating through the Spiritualist ether, and thus the bereaved party had no incentive to progress through normative cycles of grief and mourning, since there was no genuine separation between the living and the dead-- in the words of one of Marryat's own works of Spiritualist propaganda, THERE IS NO DEATH.

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

### **Definition and Purpose**

How do you cope with the loss of a loved one? This question is one of the fundamental existential dilemmas of life. For the Victorians, this question assumed new importance as faith and tradition began to erode in the face of scientific progress and biblical scholarship. Additionally, as society became increasingly urban, the filth of city slums and lack of effective medical care led to horrific mortality rates that resulted from sporadic outbreaks of contagious diseases; in 1854, a single contaminated water-pump in Broad Street, London, created an outbreak of cholera that killed thousands (Jalland 26). The conventional Christian explanation for loss and suffering was increasingly unsatisfactory to a public caught up in rapid social change (Russell 14). By the middle of the nineteenth century, dissatisfaction with traditional Christianity, combined with the pressures of new speculative forms of science, produced a number of occult movements which attempted to reconcile the traditional view of the afterlife with scientific materialism. One of those movements was Spiritualism.

Spiritualism was a religious movement identified by its combined advocacy of psychic mediumship and social reform. Victorian Spiritualism's ultimate goal was to "redefine death not as the end but the next stage in humanity's progress" (Ferguson 68). In her definitive examination of Victorian psychical research entitled *The Other World* (1985), Janet Oppenheim explains that Spiritualists "believe[d] firmly...in human survival after death and in the possible activity of disembodied human spirits" (3). Spiritualists did not hesitate to "assert the reality of communication with the dead and to accept as genuine most of the phenomena they witnessed at séances" (4). This in part explains why so many serious scientists and eminent intellectuals of the time—including William James, William Crookes, and Alfred Russel Wallace—devoted considerable time and energy to investigating Spiritualism's claims. Spiritualists did not view themselves as eccentrics or occultists. The seriousness of many practicing Spiritualists, combined with their willingness to test their beliefs using scientific methods, persuaded individuals who might otherwise have remained skeptical of Spiritualism's otherworldly assertions. According to Daniel Cottom, Spiritualists "placed themselves in opposition to the established institutions of scientific authority in their day, and both...presented themselves as systematic

investigations that would show up the limitations...of the prevailing opinion of the respectable” (6). Spiritualists represented themselves not merely as daydreamers or dilettantes, but as committed progressives who were willing to pit themselves against the social and religious elites of their time. Porter contends that one of Spiritualism’s principal attractions was its alternative explanation for a world where science increasingly supplanted religion as the means by which people understood reality. This explains why many of the most eminent scientific and scholarly minds of the day, including William Crookes, T.H. Huxley, and Williams James, were willing to examine Spiritualism seriously, in some cases going so far as to attempt scientific experiments to verify Spiritualism’s claims (Blum 120). The Society for Psychical Research was established in order to coordinate scientific investigations into the veracity of Spiritualism (Oppenheimer 16).

In this dissertation, I will explain how the earliest literary representations of Spiritualism depicted the movement as an earnest attempt at social and religious reform. This aspect of Spiritualism is well documented; many historians, including Alex Owen, have documented Spiritualism’s close relationship with various midcentury agitations for reform, especially the women’s rights movement. However, no scholar to date has attempted to explain the change in

Spiritualist fiction that occurred from the movement's inception to its demise at the end of the Victorian era (and its subsequent resurrection in the Neo-Victorian era). Multiple reasons exist for this neglect, but Lawrence Moore hypothesizes that Spiritualism has been an unpopular subject for scholarship because of its affiliation with occult practices (Moore 23). As Cottom notes, "Spiritualism...quickly became a kooky footnote... in standard histories of the nineteenth century" (2). There were relatively few scholarly works written on Spiritualism before 1990. The only major study of Spiritualism published between 1930 and 1970 was Slater Brown's *The Heyday of Spiritualism* (1961) which Moore criticizes as inaccurate and unscholarly. However, in *The Invention of Telepathy* (2002), Roger Luckhurst states that "Victorian studies once ignored the bizarre and eccentric world of mesmerists, Spiritualists, and psychical researchers...but over the last twenty years, a new generation of cultural critics has explored how scientific, technological and spiritual experiments were completely intertwined in the nineteenth century" (3). Clearly, the renewal of critical interest in Spiritualism is related to the expansion of the field of Victorian studies as a whole, and the willingness of scholars to examine what previous generations deemed unseemly or unscholarly. According to Hilary Grimes, "interest in...spiritualism has been growing in Victorian

studies" indicating "a revival of interest in neglected aspects of the period" (5). This in turn has created a cascade of recent works dedicated to analyzing the cultural and historical significance of Spiritualism, particularly the work of Marlene Tromp and Janet Oppenheim. Marlene Tromp's *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (2006) discusses a number of fictional works with "an explicitly Spiritualist focus" (45). Tromp argues that "Spiritualism and its narrative became one way in which Victorians considered ideas about race, gender, and class" (46). Tromp's work offers valuable information and provides a framework for critical considerations of progressive Spiritualist writing, but does not discuss how Spiritualism gradually became a stock element of the literary Gothic.

A definitive study of Spiritualism in literature has yet to be produced. This dissertation will make a unique contribution to the study and understanding of Spiritualism by demonstrating how literary depictions of Spiritualism reflected broader social and political changes taking place in Victorian society. My dissertation will trace the evolution of Spiritualist literature from social and religious critique to Gothic appurtenance, and in doing so I will establish the basis for creating a comprehensive history of Spiritualism in literature. This

dissertation traces Spiritualist fiction from its heyday, where writers such as Elizabeth Phelps (1844-1911) and Florence Marryat (1833-1899) depicted Spiritualism as a vehicle for social and religious reform, to its final phase, when it was appropriated by Gothic fin-de-siècle writers. As Tromp contends, "Spiritualism emerged out of pressing social concerns that were beginning to find their voice in art and would progressively find it in social politics...if we continue to chart these movements, we will gain a fuller understanding of how social change occurs" (194). This dissertation will pick up where scholars such as Tromp have left off by analyzing the specific social and political concerns that transformed representations of Spiritualism in literature.

This dissertation charts unknown territory. My fundamental goal in writing this dissertation is to offer critical and theoretical approaches for understanding depictions of Spiritualism in Victorian and Neo-Victorian fiction. The impetus for this project was relatively simple: several years ago, I went in search of a book on this very topic. After considerable research, I found to my surprise that several books had been written about Victorian Spiritualism, but none had been written about Spiritualism in Victorian literature. It is my hope that the material contained in this dissertation will spark a continued scholarly dialogue on this topic. As the following chapters demonstrate,

Spiritualism has fascinated and repelled writers since its inception in Hydesville, New York, in 1848, and it continues to exert its influence over writers even today.

### **Spiritualism: History and Literature**

Belief in communication between the living and the dead did not originate with Spiritualism. In *Mystics and Messiahs: Cults and New Religions in American History* (2000), Philip Jenkins asserts that Mesmerism and Swedenborgianism were “well-established by the 1830s: these contributed to the new Spiritualist movement, which emerged following the accounts of supernatural visitations in Hydesville, New York state, in 1848” (31). In *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989), Alex Owen explains that Spiritualism was built on earlier religious practices such as “Wesleyan theories of social equality [which] had enabled women to argue for female spiritual authority and the right to teach” (15). In her groundbreaking work *The Other World* (1988), Janet Oppenheim defines Spiritualism as a religious movement that began in 1848 as a result of the so-called Rochester Rappings in upstate New York. Oppenheim explains that Spiritualists “believed firmly...in human survival after death and in the possible activity of disembodied human

spirits" (3). Accordingly, Spiritualists did not hesitate to "assert the reality of communication with the dead and to accept as genuine most of the phenomena they witnessed at séances" (4).

Though David Punter and Glennis Byron correctly assert that the Victorian era's "interest in Spiritualism and the occult" was "prompted by the publication of numerous stories of supposedly true" spiritual manifestations such as the Rochester Rappings involving Kate and Margaret Fox (28), belief in communication between the living and the dead has existed for millennia, as evidenced by the tale of the Witch of Endor in the Book of Samuel. The Spiritualist movement materialized from the proselytizing activities of the Fox Sisters, a pair of young farm girls who lived outside of Rochester, New York, in a rural farm house (Leonard 33). The Rochester Rappings, in which the Fox Sisters claimed they had contacted the spirit of a dead tinker buried in the basement of their farm house, became a widely publicized sensation in 1848 and were described as a religious "breakthrough" by the contemporary press (34). Kate and Maggie Fox became overnight celebrities, and "the new religion of Spiritualism was officially born" (35). The Spiritualist movement founded by the Fox Sisters in 1848 was built on two core tenets: the belief in an afterlife, and the belief that the dead who inhabit the afterlife can communicate with the living

through a psychic intermediary known as a medium. Spiritualism was “a maverick faith that combined the traditional Christian tenet of the soul’s post-life survival with a modern empiricism” (Ferguson 2).

The Rochester Rappings ignited a craze for séances and table-turning that even attracted the attention of Karl Marx. Marx states in *Das Kapital* that “A table...not only stands with its feet on the ground, but, in relation to other commodities, stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will” (164). This is a reference to the Spiritualist practice of table-turning, which involved a table supposedly being turned around and shaken by a spirit the medium had contacted. Interestingly, this trick was accomplished by fraudulent mediums inserting a rod up their sleeve and, in the dark circle of the séance room, slipping it into a groove underneath the tabletop (Melechi 12).

But Spiritualism was more than just a media phenomenon. As this dissertation will prove, Spiritualism tapped into some of the most problematic aspects of Victorian society, emerging from the period’s complex cultural matrix of social and political pressures. Marlene Tromp contends that the Spiritualist movement allowed a context for Victorians to reconsider “ideas about gender, race, and class” (2). In

Chapter Two, I will discuss how Spiritualism “gave a voice to the silenced— to women” (Ferguson 65). This dimension of Spiritualism is particularly important for my argument. As I will argue in Chapter Two, the Spiritualist movement and the Women’s Rights movement were essentially born at the same time in the same place. This will lead to a broader discussion of how Marryat and Phelps depict Spiritualism as a vehicle for enacting social reform. In *Radical Spirits* (1989), Ann Braude asserts that “Spiritualism reached deep into the ranks of radical reform” (63). The Spiritualist movement provided “a religious alternative that supported individualist social and political views of...radicals” including “the early women’s rights movement and...the abolition of slavery” (Braude 6). Spiritualist mediumship had been one of the few forms of work available to lower and middle-class women throughout the 1850s and 1860s (Barrow 17). Practicing mediums came from all walks of life; there were plebian Spiritualists whose audiences were drawn from the lower and working classes, and celebrity Spiritualists such as D.D. Home, who performed for international royalty.

Spiritualism’s resistance to established notions of class made it an appealing alternative to conventional religions. Spiritualism was inherently anti-establishment, recognizing no formal hierarchy.

According to Loggie Barrow, Spiritualism was a phenomenon that transcended class. Barrow argues that Spiritualism “lay at an intersection between many currents of varying depths and compatibility” (146). It was this “resistance to organization [which] contributed to the decline of the movement” (147). Spiritualism declined in the 1880s and never recovered its mass popularity. Frank Podmore, one of the founding members of the Society for Psychical Research, confessed in his 1897 study of Spiritualism that “twenty years ago, the number of [Spiritualist] believers was much greater...the number of avowed Spiritualists in [Britain and the United States] at the time might be reckoned probably by tens of thousands: some Spiritualists writers claimed millions” (2). As the movement lost public credibility, Spiritualism became fodder for fin-de-siècle Gothic authors, who depicted Spiritualism as a symptom of a society undergoing moral and spiritual decay.

The Fox Sisters died at the turn of the century, and at that point Spiritualism virtually disappeared from the literary landscape of America and Great Britain. There remained a number of practicing professional mediums on both sides of the Atlantic, but Spiritualism, which had always resisted centralization and organization, was relegated to the status of a Victorian curiosity, like other forms of

Victorian occultism such as Theosophy, Rosicrucianism, and the Order of the Golden Dawn (Dixon 14). This remained the case until the First World War, when interest in Spiritualism was temporarily revived by the vast scale of carnage. The elimination of an entire generation of young men renewed interest in grieving parents who were desperate for solace. Jenny Hazelgrove explores this phenomenon in *Spiritualism and British Society Between the Wars* (2000), a groundbreaking work which examines the last gasp of the Spiritualist movement. However, Hazelgrove points out that the renewed interest in Spiritualism gradually gave way to other forms of mysticism which were more fashionable at the time and more suited for a generation of writers working in the shadow of the catastrophic Great War. Hazelgrove states that in modernist literature, “the dominant movement was towards myth, towards the revival of the cultic, the mythical, the sacrificial, the sacramental, and the universally significant” (198). Victorian Spiritualism never addressed these issues, and it is therefore unsurprising that Spiritualism virtually disappears from the literary scene during the modernist period.

A surprising exception to modernist literature’s lack of interest in Spiritualism is found in the work of H.D., the avant-garde American poet and novelist who experimented with Spiritualism and briefly

alludes to Spiritualism in some of her novels. Although this dissertation focuses on Victorian and Neo-Victorian literature, future scholars of H.D. and modernism may wish to pursue this line of inquiry further. The connection between H.D. and Spiritualism has only come to light since the publication of the unexpurgated versions of H.D.'s novels by the University of Florida Press in 2009. Previous versions of H.D.'s novels, including the editions published by New Directions Press in 1972, were heavily edited, and the content discussing Spiritualism was removed entirely (Tryphonopoulos xi). However, the editions released by the University of Florida Press consist of H.D.'s original manuscripts in their entirety. The press has also released the previously unpublished H.D. novel *Majic Ring*, much of which was written during H.D.'s sessions with Sigmund Freud and contains explicit discussions of H.D.'s use of Spiritualism as a source of material for her novels. According to Demetres Tryphonopoulos's introduction to the restored edition of H.D.'s *Majic Ring*, "H.D. found respite in Spiritualist activities" and "gathered and transcribed her séances when she joined the Society for Psychical Research and began to participate in séance circles there" (Tryphonopoulos xxviii).

There are additional points of inquiry beyond the scope of this dissertation that will certainly prove to be fruitful areas of investigation

for future scholars researching written work produced by Spiritualists and contemporary observers of Victorian Spiritualism. For example, there has yet to be a scholarly examination of works written as pure Spiritualist propaganda with no literary content *per se*, such as Catherine Crowe's *The Night Side of Nature* (1848) and *Spiritualism and the Age We Live In* (1859). *The Night Side of Nature* is a collection of accounts of supernatural events purportedly related to Crowe by first-hand witnesses. Some of these events include séances and Spiritualist activities, and while the work is certainly interesting reading, it does not significantly contribute to our understanding of how Spiritualism manifested itself in literature. The work lacks recognizable literary elements such as plot and characterization; it is merely a catalog of supernatural events which Crowe organized and published with no accompanying commentary. Similarly, *Spiritualism and the Age We Live In* is a work of undisguised propaganda, consisting of a loose collection of thoughts, meditations and observations on the topic of Spiritualism and its relationship to the modern (Victorian) world. Essentially, Crowe posits that Spiritualism represents "a certain rate of progress" (3); in other words, Spiritualism is yet another innovation in a world that testifies to the fact that the world as Crowe's readers knew it was on the verge of

profound change. This later work did not have the impact Crowe hoped for, and she subsequently faded from the literary scene, though she continued to publish sporadically. Ultimately, certain events in Crowe's life have seem more memorable than her writing; she was taken into custody one night after running naked through the streets of Edinburgh during a fit of hysteria (McCorristine 120).

Another body of work that has failed to attract critical scrutiny is the number of biographies and autobiographies left behind by practicing Spiritualist mediums and committed advocates of the Spiritualist movement. Because this dissertation is concerned with Spiritualism in the Victorian and Neo-Victorian novel, the examination of these biographies and autobiographies works must await future scholarly attention. But virtually every well-known Spiritualist medium of the period wrote an autobiography. Emma Hardinge Britten, famed as both a Spiritualist and a promoter of women's rights, published her autobiography recounting her twenty-year affiliation with the Spiritualist movement in 1899. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle published his *History of Spiritualism* in 1926, after he had formally distanced himself from the movement. Like many Spiritualists, Doyle was initially drawn to the Spiritualist movement as a means of coping with personal bereavement. In *The Final Séance*, an account of the unconventional

friendship between Harry Houdini and Arthur Conan Doyle, Professor Massimo Polidoro claims that “the occasion that would finally convert Doyle to Spiritualism was...the loss of his son Kingsley” (20).

A number of satires on Spiritualism and Spiritualists appeared in work by journalists, novelists, and poets. Arguably, the most famous poem satirizing Spiritualism is Robert Browning’s 1864 poem “Mr. Sludge the Medium.” The famous medium D.D. Home published his autobiography *Incidents in My Life* in 1864, the same year that Browning published “Mr. Sludge.” This was not coincidental: the object of Browning’s bile is clearly Home himself (Porter 112). Browning wrote the poem as a satire of Home, but, more generally, he wrote it as a rebuke of his wife’s interest in Spiritualism (which is perhaps an understandable grudge, given his wife’s death three years earlier). Elizabeth Browning’s involvement with Spiritualist activities has been well documented. In *Through a Glass Darkly: Spiritualism in the Browning Circle* (1958), Katherine H. Porter argues that Elizabeth Browning’s fascination with Spiritualism reflects a broader interest amongst the intelligentsia, who were willing to examine Spiritualism “because...the unsettling discoveries of science were at war with a cultural inheritance in the belief in immortality” (136). Her husband felt differently and penned a number of poems that satirized

Spiritualist mediums, whom he regarded as complete frauds who took advantage of gullible or emotionally vulnerable people. But the divide in the Browning household was temporary; Elizabeth's involvement with Spiritualism, though intense, was fleeting, and Porter speculates that Elizabeth's connection to Spiritualism may have had more to do with the personality of a particular medium Elizabeth befriended than with any genuine interest in Spiritualism itself; this may explain why there is no allusion to Spiritualism in any of Elizabeth Browning's major works (Porter 27). Eventually, the friendly medium was uncovered as a fraud, and Elizabeth lost all interest in Spiritualism.

But Elizabeth Browning's short-lived attachment to Spiritualism was typical of many Victorian Spiritualists, who remained convinced of Spiritualism's truth so long as the mediums involved with the Spiritualist movement were credible. In the end, the only major Spiritualist medium who was never uncovered as a fraud was the clever D.D. Home himself, who made a fortune performing Spiritualist séances for the crowned heads of Europe (Doyle 3). Some writers were less sanguine about Spiritualism than Mrs. Browning, and a small body of satirical novels depicting Spiritualist mediums as fraudulent con artists emerged midcentury. For example, in 1880, the American author William Dean Howells published *The Undiscovered Country*.

The novel, now largely forgotten, features a scathing portrayal of a crooked Spiritualist medium in one of its many subplots. But satirical representations of Spiritualism appeared moot in the wake of the 1888 public confession of the Fox Sisters, the founders of the Spiritualist movement. The only major satirical novel involving Spiritualism to be penned after 1888 was H.G. Wells's *Love and Mr. Lewisham* (1901), and Spiritualism plays a relatively minor role in the story; the hero must convince his beloved that her intention to become a professional medium is absurd, and that his offer of love and marriage is more promising than the lot of an itinerant Spiritualist.

Additionally, there are a number of bizarre literary oddities involving Victorian Spiritualism which have received little, if any, critical scrutiny. For example, there is the curious case of the novel *Jap Herron*, which claimed to be an original work by Mark Twain and was published in 1917. Of course, Twain had been dead for six years by that point, but the individual responsible for foisting this unreadable piece of doggerel on the public claimed that she had channeled Twain's dead spirit during a séance, and Twain had dictated every word of the novel from the spiritualist afterlife known as the Summerland (Blum 233).

Some Spiritualist novelists were prolific writers of Spiritualist propaganda as well. For example, Florence Marryat, the author of *The Dead Man's Message*, lived by her pen and was obliged to write a great deal in order to survive (Hall 33). After she had published her major works of fiction and accumulated enough capital to live comfortably, Marryat turned her attention exclusively to a series of tracts she published for causes she passionately believed in. In 1891, Marryat published *There Is No Death*, a work which reiterated her faith in the spiritualist cause and recited the principal tenets of the spiritualist movement. This work is remarkable in and of itself, given that by this point in time Spiritualism was on the wane. The response was predictably dismal as the work was poorly received (Hall 35). However, just a few years later in 1894, the undeterred Marryat published yet another tract on Spiritualism, entitled *The Spirit World*. Like its predecessor, *The Spirit World* failed to attract critical and commercial attention. However, the fact that Marryat wrote these works so late in life signifies that her devotion to the notion of life without death was undying. This is especially clear when one considers that these works were written after the Spiritualist movement itself had been discredited by the confessions of fraud the Fox Sisters publicly made in 1888 (Weisberg 95). As we will see, the

decline of the Spiritualist movement was a major factor in the transition that occurred in Victorian Spiritualist fiction; eventually, the progressive Spiritualist novels of reformers like Phelps and Marryat would give way to Gothic visions of Spiritualism popularized by fin-de-siècle authors like Bram Stoker and Henry James.

### **The Gothic**

The Gothic is problematic as a genre, particularly as its status in the literary canon and the question of what precisely constitutes Gothic style remain matters of critical debate. As Edmund Burke explains in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757), Gothic literature produces a calculated effect in readers by simultaneously inspiring astonishment and horror. This pertains to the earliest form of Gothic literature which arose as part of the Romantic reaction to Neo-classicism, such as Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). However, the focus of this dissertation is on the Victorian Revival of the Gothic which occurred well after the publication of the last major novel of the Gothic period, Maturin's *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820).

According to Fred Botting, "Gothic excesses and transgressions repeatedly return to particular images and particular loci" (20). This

does not necessarily contradict Chris Baldick's notion of the Gothic as a constantly shifting set of ideas that defies generic stability. Botting's idea of Gothic essentialism that there is a fundamental ensemble of tropes and styles that constitute the literary Gothic, and Baldick's notion that the Gothic is peripatetic and easily transmittable over a vast range of stylistic and generic boundaries, collectively explain how the Gothic has managed to resurrect itself since the Gothic craze in English literature was inaugurated with the publication of Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764). Indeed, Baldick contends that the inherent instability of the Gothic genre makes it ideal for "borrow[ing] the fables and nightmares of a past age" (xiv). The Gothic is not an inflexible term, but is rather meant to indicate "a tradition of fiction that has evolved" (67).

The notion of the Gothic as a stable yet adaptable portmanteau of themes and motifs is echoed by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, who states in *The Coherence of Gothic Conventions* (1976) that the Gothic "is remarkably reducible to a formula" yet "highly adaptable with a range of tone and focus possible within it" (10). Sedgwick goes even further in asserting that the Gothic can be defined "simply as an original, intense exploration of feeling" concerned especially with feelings of mourning and loss (4). This is vital to my argument: the Gothic

genre's adaptability enables it to absorb themes and images from other genres while maintaining a fundamental focus on the consequences of loss. Early Spiritualist writers depict Spiritualism as a consolation for the bereaved, whereas later Victorian Gothic writers use Spiritualism as a symbol for other forms of deficit: loss of sanity, loss of physical and spiritual purity, and loss of identity. Consequently, the inherent flexibility of Gothic style presents Neo-Victorian writers with a powerful tool for resurrecting and reconfiguring elements of the Victorian era.

Despite its range of meanings, there is an essential core of themes that constitutes the literary Gothic—loss, despair, decay, and death. These themes appear in Victorian Gothic depictions of literature, particularly the motifs of loss and decay. Spiritualism was formed partly as a response to society's inadequate explanations for loss. But rather than finding succor in Spiritualism's otherworldly assurances, Victorian Gothic representations of Spiritualism find only horror and destruction.

But the Victorian Gothic appropriation of Spiritualist fiction began only after the movement itself began to lose credibility. Barbara Weisberg notes that by the 1880s, Spiritualism's popularity had begun to wane. This was partly due to "a dramatic change in the quality of

medical care...as more children lived into adulthood [and] there were fewer tragic and untimely deaths to be mourned" (Weisberg 47).

Additionally, women at the end of the nineteenth century had more varied opportunities for employment than ever before; one of the major attractions of Spiritualism was that it was one of the few professions available to respectable middle-class women (Owen 7).

The changes that occurred in Spiritualist fiction reflect broader shifts in nineteenth-century culture. Over time, literary depictions of Spiritualism became increasingly detached from Spiritualism's original connection with progressive reform. This dissertation argues that a close examination of the trajectory of Spiritualist fiction mirrors broader shifts occurring in Victorian society. An analysis of Spiritualist fiction, from its inception to its final incarnation, offers a new critical perspective for understanding how themes that initially surfaced in progressive midcentury fiction later reemerged—in much different forms—in Gothic fiction of the fin-de-siècle. From this, we can observe how these late Gothic images were later recycled in Neo-Victorian adaptations.

## **Chapters**

In Chapter Two, I will examine how the new religion of Spiritualism inspired several best-selling novels that explored Spiritualism's strong affinity with various popular reform movements. As I will argue, 1848 was a significant year for many reasons: it was the year of Spiritualism's inception, and it was also the year of the Seneca Falls Convention organized by the Women's Suffrage movement in the United States (Braude 112). It is important to note that Spiritualism "did not simply believe that the dead still existed, but that this existence was materially manifest, as evidenced by spirit-photographs, séance-room materialization...and rapping on tables" (Ferguson 2). Elizabeth Phelps's novel *The Gates Ajar* (1868) combines depictions of Spiritualist practice with agitations for women's rights. For Phelps, Spiritualism offered an alternative to the oppression of institutionalized religion.

One of Spiritualism's most committed advocates was the Victorian novelist Florence Marryat. Marryat, like Doyle, was initially drawn to the spiritualist movement by the loss of a family member—in this case, a daughter, whom she claimed she was able to contact during a séance (Palmer 144). Marryat, whose father was a noted writer in his own right, never ceased to champion the Spiritualist cause throughout her extraordinarily long life. In Chapter Two, I explore

Florence Marryat's contribution to spiritualist literature by analyzing her single work of spiritualist fiction.

In Chapter Three, I will explore Spiritualism's gradual departure from its progressive roots and explain how Spiritualist fiction gradually became co-opted by Victorian Gothic writers. My argument describes how accounts of Spiritualism gradually shifted from progressive, reform-minded accounts like those of Phelps to the kinds of Gothic depictions that emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Spiritualism became discredited as a social and religious movement. Chapter Three will focus on the pivotal role played by Nathaniel Hawthorne (1804-1864), whose work straddles the divide between early Spiritualist fiction and its later Gothic reincarnation. By discussing representations of Spiritualism in Hawthorne's oeuvre, I will demonstrate how Spiritualism's failure to explain an increasingly complicated universe reflects the anxiety and pessimism that clouded the Victorian moral landscape towards the end of the nineteenth century.

Chapter Four will examine how fin-de-siècle writers Bram Stoker (1847-1912) and Henry James (1843-1916), constructed a new image of Spiritualism. According to Judith Halberstam, fin-de-siècle anxiety over change and reform created "a ripple of Gothic form across a

variety of cultural, scientific, and social narratives” (41). As the century came to a close, a number of novels were written that openly questioned the Spiritualist movement’s viability as a vehicle of social and religious reform. The novels cast doubt on Spiritualism’s authenticity by depicting Spiritualists as exotic occultists rather than respectable progressives. Indeed, by the late 1880s, many writers and artists who had formerly been vocal advocates for Spiritualism began to distance themselves from the movement as a result of a number of public scandals culminating in Margaret Fox’s public renunciation of Spiritualism in 1888. In this chapter, I demonstrate that the Gothic appropriation of Spiritualism was possible only when Spiritualism lost its viability as a social and religious reform movement. This aspect of the Gothic is reflected in *Dracula* (1897) and *The Turn of the Screw* (1900). In interpreting the role that Spiritualism plays in these writings, I rely on Freud’s concept of the uncanny. Freud defined the uncanny as something simultaneously “familiar and agreeable” yet “concealed and kept out of sight” (Freud 224). This includes the “factor of the repetition of doing the same thing” (Freud 236). Freud’s concept of the uncanny is an essential underpinning of my argument in Chapter Four. Victorian Gothic writers do not depict Spiritualism as a positive source of reform, but

rather as a disturbing manifestation of a society buckling under the weight of social hypocrisy and neurotic repression.

In Chapter 5, I discuss how Neo-Victorian fiction resurrects the Gothic image of Spiritualism using tropes and themes that originally emerged during the late fin-de-siècle period. In the Neo-Victorian imagination, Spiritualism remains an accoutrement of the Gothic and uncanny; it is not depicted as a progressive midcentury reform movement, but rather persists as a spectral holdover from the late Victorian Gothic movement. This point is clearly reflected in Sarah Waters's novel *Affinity* (2000) and, more strikingly, in the 2012 filmic adaptation of Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1983).

The recent adaptation of Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* (1983) is especially intriguing, as the 2012 filmic adaptation incorporates a subplot involving Spiritualism that the novel lacks. This is a curious reversal of the trend in Neo-Victorian filmic adaptations to expurgate material relating to Spiritualism. For example, Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1997) depicts the two main characters as Spiritualist charlatans; the highly successful filmic adaptation of this novel, produced in 2007, removes this aspect of the novel. Though here I must speculate, it seems likely that the director and screenwriter of *The Prestige*, Christopher Nolan, removed the novel's Spiritualist

subplot in order to streamline the story and make it readily adaptable for film. The novel is almost four hundred pages long. But the addition of a Spiritualist subplot in the filmic adaptation of *The Woman in Black* emphasizes metaphors of loss and spectrality only latent in Hill's original novel, and demonstrates in a particularly riveting manner the Neo-Victorian genre's privileging of Gothic atmospherics over historical authenticity.

## CHAPTER TWO: SPIRITUALISM AND VICTORIAN REFORM: THE FEMINIST CAUSE IN *THE GATES AJAR* AND *THE DEAD MAN'S MESSAGE*

From its humble beginnings in the 1848 spirit rappings of the Fox Sisters in Rochester, New York, Spiritualism became an overnight sensation. Spiritualism was a religion that appealed not only to the working classes of the time but to the educated upper-classes in America and Britain as well. There are multiple explanations proffered by historians for the sudden popularity of Spiritualism, some of which were covered in the previous chapter: the séance allowed guests to learn something of the Great Hereafter, and it also allowed the bereaved to commune with the spirits of the departed (Smith 2). However, the Fox Sisters soon realized that "Spiritualism had the potential to do much more" (2). In her recent article on Spiritualism and women's writing, Muireann Maguire explains that there was indeed a strong connection between feminist writers and Spiritualism. Maguire argues that "the feminine pre-eminence within Spiritualist literary space...allowed female mediums to gain prominence" (314). Thus, "a Victorian medium's authority derived from her ability to interpret other-worldly messages" (Maguire 315). Not only was the

genre of Spiritualist fiction sympathetic to women's rights, but "the non-hierarchical, intuitive conditions of Spiritualism encouraged women's self-expression" (313).

In the introduction to this dissertation, I outlined the case for critically examining the genre of Spiritualist literature over the course of the Victorian era, from the inception of Spiritualism in 1848 to its decline in the fin-de-siècle period. In this chapter I will analyze the first phase of Spiritualist literature during which writers used Spiritualism as a vehicle for social and political commentary. I have paired the largely forgotten Victorian writers Elizabeth Stuart Phelps and Florence Marryat because they exemplify the earliest phase of Spiritualist literature, a phase defined by its inextricable relationship with Victorian reform movements. Curiously, the two texts examined here have never been compared in literary criticism on this subject, possibly because of their obscurity—both books have been out of print for almost half a century. This is an unfortunate oversight, as analyzing *The Gates Ajar* with *The Dead Man's Message* provides us with a view of how diverse the Spiritualist feminist critique of Victorian society was. Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* concerns the limited religious and vocational options available to Victorian women, whereas Marryat's *The Dead Man's Message* is centrally concerned with the

restrictions placed on women's conjugal and sexual happiness by the strict social codes that defined Victorian ideas of marriage. In this sense, both Phelps and Marryat were engaged in a broader movement that resisted midcentury conventions governing femininity, such as those articulated in Coventry Patmore's famous poem "The Angel in the House" (1854).

According to Marlene Tromp, "women Spiritualist authors offered a culturally alternative means of determining a man's worth and a woman's position relative to him" (62). Tromp explains that Spiritualists were concerned with women's happiness and independence because a central tenet of Spiritualism held that women, as mediums, were an essential element of Spiritualist practice. Women were more spiritually advanced than men (Tromp 62). Indeed, women comprised the vast majority of mediums precisely because it was believed that feminine emotional sensitivity gave women spiritual prowess that men did not naturally possess. Thus, from the Spiritualist point of view, marriage had to be an enriching experience for women. This is a radical critique of the Victorian idea of marriage as an institution, particularly when considered from the individual viewpoints of Phelps and Marryat, who turned to Spiritualism to examine their unhappy family lives. In *The Dead Man's Message*

(1894) and *The Gates Ajar* (1868), Spiritualism offers social and religious alternatives outside the severely prescribed responses available to respectable Victorian women coping with spousal abuse or the death of a loved one.

The trilogy of Spiritualist novels Phelps authored has been cited as a prime example of the way in which Spiritualists used their religious convictions to advocate for not only religious, but also social and political reform (Braude 113). However, critical attention has only recently turned to this relatively obscure corner of Victorian literature, and in the case of Phelps, the critical connection in her writing between Spiritualism and reform has scarcely received any critical attention at all. In order to understand why critics have overlooked Phelps's vital role in uniting Spiritualism with Victorian reform, we must consider how and why she has been so long overlooked by the critical establishment. As far as Elizabeth Phelps is concerned, it is important to bear in mind that she was one of the best-selling authors in nineteenth-century America, outsold only by Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Stuart 12). Recently, Phelps has attracted critical attention because she is "one of the few writers of the period whose characters are strong and independent women" (Kelly 35).

Phelps's entry in *Nineteenth-Century Fiction Writers*, which includes what purports to be a complete bibliography and biography, makes no mention of any of the three Spiritualist novels that Elizabeth Phelps wrote between 1868 and 1887. The entry, written in 1999 by Patricia Maida, dutifully notes that "during her thirty-seven years Elizabeth Stuart Phelps combined a literary career with the roles of mother, homemaker, and minister's wife" (1). It does, interestingly, mention that "after Phelps's death, her family made a concerted effort to establish her literary reputation" (14). This effort included an obituary written by her daughter that was clearly crafted with an eye towards posterity. The obituary reads in part, "Elizabeth Stuart Phelps Ward: The author of *Sunnyside*, *The Angel on the Right Shoulder*, and *Peep at Number Five*, lived before women had careers and public sympathy in them" (15). Maida, like Phelps's daughter, is interested in emphasizing Phelps's contribution to feminism. However, there is some cultural amnesia at work here. This is highlighted by the failure of both biographers—daughter and critic—to mention Elizabeth Phelps's involvement in Spiritualism or the publication of her three Spiritualist novels, *The Gates Ajar* (1868), *Beyond the Gates* (1872), and *The Gates Between* (1887). Despite the fact that Spiritualism was a dominant theme in Phelps's novels over such a long period of time,

neither Maida nor Phelps's daughter make any mention of these novels. These omissions are particularly curious given that *The Gates Ajar* was Phelps's first best-seller, written when she was only twenty-four. The novel cemented Phelps's status as a major American writer, and it went through fifty-five printings between its initial run in 1868 and its final edition brought out by Houghton Mifflin in 1884 (Owen 55).

There is little mention of Phelps's efforts on behalf of other reform movements of the period; Stuart indicates that Phelps was well-known as a "champion of women, non-restrictive clothes for women, temperance...and anti-vivisectionism" (4). But the connection between Spiritualism and anti-vivisectionism is especially vivid in Marryat's *The Dead Man's Message*, where the tyrannical Professor Aldwyn is made to atone for the suffering he inflicted on the various animal lab subjects he mutilated in the name of science. The connection that Marryat establishes between the anti-vivisection movement and the women's rights movement in *The Dead Man's Message* is perhaps unique in Victorian literature; in the Spiritualist afterlife, Aldwyn is forced to repent for the pain he inflicted on "the poor dumb brutes whom [he] tortured in the name of science," and to confront "the spirits of the dogs, and rabbits, and cats which [he]

vivisected for [his] curiosity, and who died agonizing, lingering deaths under [his] cruel hands" (Marryat 132). The professor's inhumane treatment of animals is equated to the inhumane treatment of his wife; in order to progress through the spheres of the Spiritualist afterlife, he must reckon with the tortures which he inflicted on both the animals in his laboratory and the women in his household. For researchers investigating the Victorian anti-vivisection novel, *The Dead Man's Message* offers an interesting and heretofore unexplored possibility for broadening our understanding of this phenomenon. The most frequently cited Victorian anti-vivisection novel, Wilkie Collins's *Heart and Science* (1883), was written much later.

In an article on Phelps from *Feminist Writers* by Pamela Kester-Shelton and published in 1996, we find the same sort of literary blind spot encountered in Maida's account of the writer. Kester-Shelton is more emphatic in her discussion of Phelps's contributions to feminism, noting that "Elizabeth Stuart Phelps, professional writer, advocate of workers' rights and of women's right to work, wrote prolifically on a variety of topics and created many strong, progressive female characters" (1). She quotes from Phelps's own account of herself, stating that "as [Phelps] would write in her 1896 autobiography, *Chapters from a Life*, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps stated she was 'proud ...

that I have always been a working woman, and always had to be” (13). Yet, once again, there is no mention of Phelps's involvement in Spiritualism, and no account of the three Spiritualist novels that, combined, took a total of nineteen years to write and publish. Again, given Phelps's commitment to Spiritualist fiction, amply attested to by her devotion of so many years to crafting her Spiritualist trilogy, we are forced to ask why Phelps's biographers and critics have chosen to ignore this part of her life and work.

Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar suggest that Spiritualism has been neglected by the critical establishment because of the disparaging treatment it received at the hands of male writers during the Victorian era. In the revised edition of *The Madwoman in the Attic* (2000), Gilbert and Gubar contend that writers such as William Dean Howells and Henry James “associated the feminist movement with mediumism...in order to discredit the political feminist movement by linking it with ‘irrational’ psychic phenomenon” (473). However, Gilbert and Gubar conclude that there was “an important nexus between feminism and Spiritualism” (474). That “nexus” was the freedom and empowerment the new religion of Spiritualism offered women who were profoundly dissatisfied with the way Victorian society defined both life and death in strictly patriarchal terms. Spiritualism

offered Phelps and Marryat the opportunity to explore the possibilities of an afterlife which was not constructed solely for the pleasure and edification of men. According to Alex Owen, "in the Spiritualist afterlife, women could marry whom they chose, or carry on a number of 'Spiritualist' marriages simultaneously" (217). The Spiritualist afterlife was liberated from the constraints of typical Victorian values. Thus, as in Marryat's *The Dead Man's Message*, the Spiritualist afterlife could be imagined as a space in which despotic Victorian patriarchs were made fully aware of the suffering they inflicted on their wives while alive.

What's at stake in my analysis of this first phase of Spiritualist literature, and what Gilbert and Gubar hint at but fail to pursue, is a fuller understanding of the vital role Spiritualist literature played in the creation of the women's rights movement of the nineteenth century. Spiritualism offered women the opportunity to liberate themselves from oppressive socio-economic conditions. In this sense, Spiritualism was fundamentally a woman's experience; indeed, every major Spiritualist medium of the Victorian era, with the exception of Daniel Dunglas Home, was a woman (Wilson 14). Spiritualism was concerned with female alienation from the male spheres of existence; this is particularly clear in *The Dead Man's Message* where, at the outset of

the novel, the heroine is totally excluded from the pursuit of scientific research and scholarship that the oppressive *pater familias*, Professor Aldwyn, finds so rewarding. It also plays a role in Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*, where the heroine finds a satisfying vocation as a wandering Spiritualist minister.

The key to understanding the selective omissions of Phelps's biographers lies in a relatively recent revival of interest in Victorian sentimental literature. In 2000, the University of Illinois Press republished all three of Phelps's Spiritualist novels. The edition was furnished with an introduction by the eminent critic of American literature, Nina Baym. The fact that these novels, so long out of print, were republished recently by a major academic press, indicates a sudden resurrection of critical interest in Spiritualist literature. These books are marketed as Spiritualist novels. Though they were published separately in Phelps's lifetime, they are presented together for the first time as a trilogy in a single volume by the University of Illinois Press edition. According to Nina Baym, the reissuing of Phelps's lost Spiritualist trilogy reflects the resurgence of interest in Spiritualist literature, a resurgence that has been driven primarily by feminist literary critics who are interested in exploring the intersection between Spiritualism and Victorian women's writing.

In *The Abyss of Reason* (1989), literary scholar Daniel Cottom argues that the lack of significant critical interest in Spiritualist literature was due to the fact that Spiritualism was seen by the academic world as obscure and occult; in Cottom's words, critical interest in Spiritualism was not "serious scholarship" (14). Indeed, according to Joy Dixon, twentieth-century critics have found it "difficult to perceive those moments when 'progressive' politics, such as feminism, have been founded on claims that are as much spiritual as historical or economic" (232).

However, attitudes have recently shifted among scholars of Victorian literature. In the past twenty years, dozens of works devoted to Spiritualism and Spiritualist literature have been published by major academic presses. This shift reflects the renewed interest of feminist critics in search of theoretical approaches to understanding the connection between Spiritualism and women writers; some major works in this vein include Alex Owen's *The Darkened Room* (2004), which was published by the University of Chicago Press, and Marlene Tromp's *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (2007), which was published by SUNY Press. As Nina Baym states in her introduction to the University of Illinois Press edition of Phelps's Spiritualist novels, *The Gates Ajar* "picked up

on numerous emotional and theoretical issues agitating the culture” (xxii). Here, Baym is arguing for the broader cultural relevance of Spiritualist fiction. Spiritualism is not, per Cottom, an obscure bit of academic arcana. Rather, the systematic study of Spiritualist literature has a much wider relevance in understanding the shift in social, political, and religious thought that occurred during the mid to late nineteenth century in America and Britain.

To understand how Spiritualist literature depicts these shifts, we must situate Phelps's novel *The Gates Ajar* in the context of the nascent feminist movement and demonstrate how early Spiritualist fiction questioned the dominant sexual orthodoxies and gender inequalities of the period. The strong connection between Spiritualism and feminism reflected in Phelps's novel is properly understood as an outgrowth of broader cultural and historical forces exerting their influence on the writer. Early Spiritualist writing is properly defined by its relationship with Victorian social reform movements—in the case of Phelps, the women's rights movement. Phelps was both a Spiritualist writer *and* a feminist; the two categories overlap and reinforce each other in her work, and scholars of early feminism who ignore or marginalize Spiritualist fiction risk overlooking a connection that was integrally related. To redress this critical neglect, I propose

broadening the existing parameters of Victorian women's writing to include the genre of Spiritualist fiction. This sort of work has only just begun among literary critics; in 2011, Desiree Henderson confirmed that Phelps's work suffered from "decades of neglect and disdain by literary critics until feminist scholars reconsidered its value and meaning" (130).

In *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (1985), Ann Braude claims that "Spiritualism formed a major—if not *the* major—vehicle for the spread of women's rights in the nineteenth century" (xx). However, while Braude is correct in contending that Spiritualism and feminism were intimately linked during the middle of the nineteenth century, her argument tells only part of the story. This dissertation will pick up the thread of inquiry where critics like Braude have left off by demonstrating the how early Spiritualist fiction functions as an extension of Spiritualism's desire to produce social and religious reform. As long as the Spiritualist movement enjoyed credibility and popularity, reformists eagerly married it to their various causes (particularly feminism). However, as I will discuss in later chapters, once the Spiritualist movement lost its credibility with the public, it also lost its viability as a means of championing reform in literature.

After the Fox Sisters, the founders of the Spiritualist movement, came forward as frauds at the end of the century, Spiritualist literature became the province of writers who were less interested in Spiritualism's potential for advancing social and political change. This loss of credibility continues to affect the ways in which feminist scholars approach writers like Phelps. Spiritualism became a literary trope for writers interested in crafting Gothic stories that depicted Spiritualism as an element of the irrational, the uncanny, and the occult.

In this sense, it is imperative to note that both the Spiritualist movement and the feminist movement launched themselves in more or less the same place at the same time. Spiritualism was formally inaugurated by the Rochester Rappings that occurred in Hydesville, New York, in March of 1848 (Weisberg 42). Only twenty miles away in Seneca Falls, the first Women's Rights Convention, organized by Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, was held in June and July of that same year. Spiritualism and feminism thus emerged from the same matrix of social and cultural pressures in a year which was generally remarkable for the amount of revolutionary upheaval exploding throughout the world.

Early Spiritualist literature differed significantly from its later progeny, which was less concerned with social movements such as feminism. To reclaim *The Gates Ajar* as part of the feminist literary canon, it is necessary to review the historical connections between Spiritualism and feminism. This entails what Stuart calls a "feminist historical reconstruction" that properly establishes Phelps as a major feminist writer and, simultaneously, a committed and proselytizing Spiritualist. Stuart maintains that Phelps was "virtually written out of studies of American literature" (1). Indeed, Phelps is "usually dismissed...as a purveyor of sentimental fantasy" (Stuart 3).

However, *The Gates Ajar* is not merely an example of Victorian sentimental literature; it is a work of Spiritualist propaganda that explicitly and radically advocates for women's rights. The novel demonstrates a strong and unequivocal connection between the earliest forms of Spiritualist fiction and Victorian reform movements, particularly the women's rights movement. One year after publishing *The Gates Ajar*, Phelps stated in her 1869 autobiography, *Chapters from a Life*, that she approved the "enfranchisement and elevation" of her own sex (Phelps 249). Phelps states that she believed in women "and in their right to their own best possibilities in every department of life" (250).

These ideas are echoed in the way *The Gates Ajar* frames heaven as a feminist utopia. The novel's heroine, Winifred, challenges established patriarchal organizations for her own welfare and, though a woman, becomes a lay Spiritualist minister. She offers a collaborative model for comforting the grieving by preaching the Spiritualist message to other women in her community. For example, when a community member, Mary, loses her adored brother in the Civil War and appears inconsolable, Winifred persuades her to use her grief as instrument of self-discovery. Winifred convinces Mary that her brother is only physically dead, and that he is watching over her from the Spiritualist afterlife. Mary eventually comes to believe that her brother is, indeed, with her in a spiritual sense, and this liberates her from the burden of grief; she refuses to go into proper Victorian mourning, insisting that her brother is only dead in the corporeal sense. Formal mourning reached its zenith during Queen Victoria's prolonged grief over the death of her husband, Prince Albert; indeed, the most reproduced and readily identifiable symbol of the era was the mourning Queen Victoria herself. Victorian women in mourning were thus "expected to follow a complex set of rules, particularly among the middle and upper classes, with women more bound to adhere to these customs than men. Such customs involved wearing heavy, concealing,

black costume and the use of black crepe veils. Special black caps and bonnets were worn with these ensembles. Widows were expected to wear these clothes up to four years after their loss to show their grief" (Bedikian 35). Victorian women's mourning rituals were dictated by the period's leading voices of fashion and etiquette. According to Herbert F. Tucker, "etiquette books...enunciated rules for mourning on the part of women" (119). During the first year of mourning, women "were expected to act as veritable outcasts and refuse all invitations to leave the home" (Tucker 119).

Thus, Mary's refusal to participate in the cumbersome rituals of Victorian mourning liberates her in both a physical and religious sense. She is not weighed down (literally and metaphorically) by the oppressive social and sartorial codes of Victorian mourning. She refuses to spend the prescribed amount of time in a state of complete withdrawal as demanded by the rules of Victorian mourning; in the words of Garrett Stewart, Mary's resistance "unsettles and undermines the Victorian culture of mourning" (325). She refuses to take part in what James Stevens Curl describes as the "Victorian celebration of death" (112). Instead, Mary continues on with her life, using her faith in Spiritualism as her guide.

Stuart relates that *The Gates Ajar* “inspired a whole new genre of writing about the afterlife” (4). The novel represents “a rejection of the death-oriented, patriarchal, unfeeling religion” embodied in typical Victorian male-dominated attitudes. It is “a devastating analysis of heterosexuality and its implications for the liberation of women” (Stuart 5). According to Deborah Barker, “the enormous popularity of the domestic novel brought to literature previously marginalized groups, both as characters and as writers” (33). Thus, unlike women writers of previous generations, Phelps was more concerned with issues of social reform than with domestic management. Part of *The Gates Ajar* is written from the perspective of the spirit after death, and the novel includes episodes with spirit manifestations, mediums, and clairvoyants. Mary, the bereaved sister in *The Gates Ajar*, offers Phelps the ideal vehicle for criticizing what Barker calls the ranks of male writers “who condemn women’s...ambitions” (2). The ability to communicate with her beloved brother through the supernatural channels of Spiritualism is a profoundly cathartic experience for Mary; Spiritualism allows her to reconsider and subsequently broaden her perception of reality.

In *The Gates Ajar*, Phelps challenges social conventions underpinned by midcentury Victorian Christianity; her heroine achieves

spiritual and religious autonomy, and in doing so, is led to question other conventions of the time that rely on Christian teaching for their authority. Mary's idea of a "Spiritualist paradise beyond the stars" is a direct challenge to the conventional notion of a Christian heaven. By moving beyond the strictures of these conventions, Mary frees herself from the oppression inherent in Victorian respectability. The larger implication is that Christianity is complicit in the repression of women. Thus, Phelps posits that women's liberation requires a religious shift away from traditional forms of Christianity. This shift echoes political arguments and alternatives advanced by other early feminists, notably the redoubtable feminist critic of Christianity Victoria Woodhull, who joined the Spiritualist movement in 1870 and printed numerous tracts against Christian practice (Gabriel 150).

Mary states that in the Spiritualist afterlife, women's bodies "will be free from the distortion of guilt [and] shall return to the pure ideal in which [God] moulded them" (Phelps 120). This sentiment resonates with other Spiritualist writers who called for free love and sexual liberation; Spiritualism specifically rejected "the existence of hell and original sin" (Braude 19). Feminists like Phelps are proposing adjustments to Christianity, and here we should note an important distinction between Phelps and Marryat. Marryat is much more radical

in her critique: in *The Dead Man's Message*, she eschews Christianity altogether.

In *The Gates Ajar*, Mary seeks an alternative to the oppressive blandishments of Christianity in favor of the more palatable ideal of a less strictly Christian, more humanistic afterlife. As Mary becomes more and more familiar with the tenets of Spiritualism, she perceives how proscribed her world has been as a practicing Christian; she understands that Christian society places limits on who and how women can love through its institution of marriage. This is a limit that Spiritualism dispenses with. By embracing the mystical notion of a Spiritualist afterlife, Mary can become the kind of literary woman Phelps fancied herself. Mary wants to become "a woman who knows something about fate, free-will...who is not ignorant of politics...who can understand a German quotation, and has heard of Strauss and Neander" (Phelps 108).

Luce Irigaray's "Women on the Market" provides a critical perspective for understanding how Spiritualism represented a threat to male-dominated nineteenth-century American society. According to Irigaray, the social roles imposed on women have historically been "mother [and] virgin" (144). This echoes sentiments of midcentury Victorian chauvinism, particularly Coventry Patmore's

conceptualization of women embodied in his 1854 poem "The Angel in the House." Irigaray states that "modesty, ignorance [and] passive acceptance" are the historically accepted characteristics of women. These are precisely the feminine stereotypes that Phelps's heroine assails in *The Gates Ajar*. Through their mutual discovery of Spiritualism, Mary and Winifred transcend the narrow options available to them in Victorian society. Spiritualism empowers Winifred by permitting her a vocation as an itinerant Spiritualist preacher; this provides her with a respectable vocation, which would not have otherwise been an option inside conventional Victorian society.

Here, *The Gates Ajar* is expanding upon the precedent established a generation earlier by the small number of wandering women Methodist preachers who practiced just prior to the introduction of Spiritualism in England. An example of an itinerant female Methodist preacher in Victorian literature can be found in Dinah, of George Eliot's novel *Adam Bede* (1859). There are obvious parallels comparisons between Dinah in Eliot's *Adam Bede* and Phelps's Mary. Through Dinah's role as an itinerant preacher, she is freed "to go out without subjecting herself to risks that the conventional heroine typically faces, risks of rape or death" (Lefkowitz 2). The role also enables Mary to go on the mythic quest, an option that was not

available to women in nineteenth-century literature. To become a heroine, “the woman character had to embrace the roles of wife and mother or die, largely because the nineteenth-century novel had to obey the ‘structuring dialectics’ of the social and economic limits of the middle class” (Lawless 2). In essence, Eliot “rescripted the life of a female character in the role of a woman preacher” (3). Like Mary, Dinah’s authority is independent of her gender; characters like Dinah and Mary present a powerful counter-narrative to the patriarchal debates about the nature of women found in Victorian fiction. An example of the conservative, patriarchal Victorian view of women’s nature can be found in Ruskin’s “Of Queens’s Gardens.” Ruskin states that women’s “power is for rule, not for battle—and her intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement and decision” (Smith 177).

Additionally, preaching also liberates Mary from the stultifying rituals of female mourning; she subscribes to the Spiritualist belief that her brother’s spirit persists in a supernatural world where they will ultimately be reunited. As Mary observes, “Nothing ever truly dies...there is no death” (Phelps 169). Winifred states that although Mary’s brother Roy will be an angel,

He is not any less Roy for that—not less any real than your own Roy who will love you and wait for you and be very glad to see you, as he used to love and wait and be glad to see you when you came home from a journey on a cold winter's night. (53)

By advancing the Spiritualist utopian image of love after death, *The Gates Ajar* consoled an entire generation unable to find consolation in conventional channels of mourning—church, state, and family.

After her brother's death, Mary remembers him, the "pretty soft hair she used to curl about her finger, the flash in his eyes, his strong arms that folded round her and cared for her" (Phelps 9). Thus, as Lisa Long comments, "it is extremely important for Mary to discover that her brother is in heaven—not a heaven where they will be rejoined come the Christian resurrection, but a heaven where they will both continue their life together" (Long 131).

As Mary discovers, she does not have to forgo the pleasures of her brother's love for the rest of her existence; through Spiritualism, she can contact her brother time and time again, summoning him from the Spiritualist afterlife known as the Summerland. Spiritualism thus has a distinct advantage over the ambiguities of the Christian afterlife offered by Mary's church. Whereas formerly she had to wait with

“baited breath” each night for the return of her brother which would only occur with her death, now, with her newly discovered mediumistic powers, she can reach out and contact him at will; it is the dead brother who is subject to the call of the living sister.

In terms of structure and theme, Phelps is the more conventional Victorian writer of the two, despite the fact that her novels were written after Marryat published *The Dead Man's Message*. According to Barker, Phelps is “representative of midcentury Victorian thought and opinion” (12). The same could hardly be said for Florence Marryat's work, which is more daring and less concerned with questions of respectability. Her brand of feminism is more advanced than Phelps's, as it reflects ideology more commonly found writers outside the Spiritualist milieu, such as Harriet Martineau and George Eliot. Phelps uses Spiritualism principally as a means of achieving religious freedom, whereas Marryat uses Spiritualism as a tool sexual liberation. As John Sutherland states, Marryat was perceived by her contemporaries to be “a purveyor of dangerously inflammatory fiction, unsuitable for reading by young ladies” (412).

Like Elizabeth Phelps, Florence Marryat's involvement with Spiritualism has been overlooked by literary critics. In 2009, a new edition of Florence Marryat's Spiritualist novel *The Dead Man's*

*Message* (1849) was published; the novel had been out of print since its initial publication. Marryat had a long and prolific, if not always rewarding, career. Born in 1818, the daughter of a sea captain who was a hugely successful writer in his own right, Florence Marryat authored a vast number of works on a bewildering range of topics. She was known for her ability to quickly adapt her style to suit changing literary tastes. Accordingly, her novels range in mode from midcentury domestic fiction to Gothic sensationalism; her final work was a critically panned vampire novel that had the bad luck to be published in 1897, the same year as Bram Stoker's significantly more successful *Dracula*.

Even though renewed interest in Victorian Gothic literature prompted Valencourt Press to release Marryat's vampire novel in a scholarly edition in 2010, the majority of Marryat's considerable body of work remains out of print. According to Georgina O'Brien Hill, Florence Marryat is principally remembered as "editor of the fashionable metropolitan periodical, *London Society*" (333). However, O'Brien indicates that Marryat was also a "passionate believer" in Spiritualism who sought to prove the authenticity of Spiritualist mediums like Florence Cook and Mary Rosina Showers (334). Alex Owen states that Marryat was "the only séance sitter who ever claimed

to have both seen and touched the naked body of a spirit" (227). Like Phelps, Marryat understood Spiritualism's potential as a means of liberation, especially for the burgeoning feminist movement.

But despite stylistic differences, Marryat's *The Dead Man's Message* clearly established a precedent followed by Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*. In *The Dead Man's Message*, "the position of the female medium signified the potential for a subversion of power in which women were able to command...public space through their dominance of the séance" (Hill 345). In both Phelps and Marryat, the Spiritualist woman author has a view of a hidden or unknown truth and is empowered to speak and communicate publicly regarding private matters. In *The Dead Man's Message*, Marryat depicts a professor's wife who is able to communicate with her dead husband as he progresses through the Spiritualist afterlife. Using her mediumistic powers, Mrs. Aldwyn is able to contact the late Professor Aldwyn as he moves through the spheres of the Spiritualist Summerland.

Professor Henry Aldwyn is forced to journey through a series of Swedenborgian spheres in order to correct the wrongs—in some cases, violent wrongs—he committed while alive. These include various abuses committed against his wife. In her examination of Victorian spousal abuse *The Private Rod: Marriage, Sensation, and the Law in*

*Victorian Britain* (2000), Marlene Tromp states that physical abuse was common during the era. Indeed, Marryat knew spousal violence firsthand (109). But *The Dead Man's Message* is more than a revenge fantasy against men who brutalize their wives. In Lacanian terms, it is a reversal of the male gaze. As explained in Lacan's *Seminar XI*, the term 'gaze' refers to a state of awareness when we "sense ourselves as beings who are looked at" (84). The male gaze objectifies women, who are "subordinated to the neurotic needs of the male ego" (Storey 83).

Marryat diminishes the male figure in her novel as much as possible, making him the object of derision on every level. The insufferable Professor Aldwyn, an older man with a much younger, prettier wife, is sexless and antisocial; he "lived in his books; he cared for nothing else" (Marryat 5). His grown children have observed the way he treats their mother over the years and consider him "beastly" (9). Mrs. Aldwyn, the novel's heroine, is actually the professor's second wife; his first wife Susan died in childbirth. But the children of his first marriage, who consider his second wife to be their mother, actively wonder how she tolerates the professor. The professor's son observes that his stepmother "is just as miserable as [she] can be" (9).

As part of her feminist critique, Marryat emphasizes the violence, unhappiness, and general dysfunction of the household arrangement between the professor and his wife. Marryat writes that “the domestic tyranny that went on in the house, morning, noon, and night...made the children of this man hate and despise him” (13). The second Mrs. Aldwyn married her husband “chiefly for the reason that most women marry: because he had proposed to her, and no other eligible man was present to take the shine out of him” (29). There are very specific critiques coded in this statement. Marryat’s depiction of the Aldwyns highlights the inequality and oppression she sees as inherent elements of Victorian marriage. The deeper implication is that the inequality and unhappiness created by the sentimental Victorian ideal of marriage contributes to the repression of women. According to Marryat, the institution of marriage is automatically flawed because it derives from women’s lack of alternatives to conventional married life. Marryat thus criticizes Victorian marriage as an institution that is inherently degrading to women.

This critique would later influence Phelps’s notion that women’s lack of choice in determining their fate in Victorian society was a profound source of unhappiness. But Phelps would take a slightly different tack than Marryat. Marryat locates the true suffering

engendered by Victorian social inequality within the family structure itself, and particularly in the brutal and uncaring role the husband/father automatically assumes in the essentially unequal distribution of power in Victorian gender roles. According to historian Howard Kerr, the position taken by Phelps is more typical of the attitudes held by practicing Spiritualists of the period (56). On the other hand, Marryat's *The Dead Man's Message* taps into more radical feminist critiques reminiscent of the Seneca Falls conventioners, many of whom held opinions that were considered scandalous by the standards of the time. Both Marryat and the Seneca Falls feminists addressed the specifically sexual aspect of the oppressive patriarchal culture of the era. Thus, while Phelps may have reflected a more conservative attitude concerned chiefly with the exclusion of women from the professional and political spheres of life, Marryat's bolder criticism attacked the sexual oppression of women that she understood to be a result of the imbalance of power inherent in Victorian marriage.

Indeed, one cannot stress too emphatically the essential link between early Spiritualist literature and the Seneca Falls Convention that occurred almost simultaneously with the birth of Spiritualism. One of the meeting's organizers, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, delivered an address that advanced an idea of history which contradicts the

chauvinist, male-dominated attitudes that underpinned Victorian society. Such attitudes are on ugly display in *The Dead Man's Message*, where Professor Aldwyn alienates his wife and disowns his son for sticking up for his stepmother. Stanton "argued for the historical existence of matriarchy and created an important new vein in feminist theory: the idea that women, particularly mothers, have special experiences and capabilities that lead them to express a life-affirming, pacifist, creative world-view" (Humm 217). It is Spiritualism which enables Professor Aldwyn to embrace his nurturing, maternal side; through Spiritualism, he becomes a whole being, one who is able to fully integrate the male and female aspects of his psyche. This radical view of humanity emphasizes the highly unconventional nature of Marryat's critique. The idea that personal fulfillment was only possible through the integration of both the male and female elements of the psyche is derived from Swedenborg, who was a seminal influence on Spiritualists and who held that in heaven, angels were perfect beings who possessed the characteristics of both sexes (Garrett 68).

Early on in the novel, the son confronts the father for trying "to vilify [his] mother's name" (18); the son, Gilbert, is accordingly disowned and thrown out of the house on the spot. His stepmother

and sister are horrified, and the professor, rather than demonstrating any kind of remorse or sense of personal responsibility for the disintegration of his family, proceeds to give instructions for the dinner party he had planned to hold with colleagues that night. What the professor cannot see, however, is that this night is to be his last on earth; after a rich meal and a few tumblers of rum, he settles into his favorite chair in his library, and subsequently has a heart attack and dies in his sleep.

Once he has been removed from the physical plane of existence and taken to the Spiritualist afterlife, Aldwyn is able to observe "how little love he gained from himself in his own lifetime" (Marryat 48). After his physical death, he awakens "on an illimitable plane of open country" (63). This physical representation of boundless, sunlit open countryside is how Spiritualists conceived the Summerland, the initial sphere of the Spiritualist afterlife (Brandon 129). According to the spirit guide sent to assist him, the professor is "standing in one of the first or lowest spheres...in the Spiritual World" (64). As Professor Aldwyn eventually discovers, the Spiritualist afterlife is constructed not to punish sinners in the conventional Christian sense, but to make them aware of their mistakes and prepare them for a higher state of being in another sphere of existence. In order to proceed to the next

sphere of the Spiritualist afterlife, the professor must “purify himself through the exercise of love” (70). He must acknowledge how he and other men used the conventions of marriage to justify brutish and abusive behavior. As the spirit of his first wife Susan informs him, “I cannot tell you how much I had to dissemble whilst I lived on earth, in order to preserve the peace of our house. My life was a life of deception” (73).

According to Marryat, the highest spheres of the Spiritualist afterlife are free from the kind of unequal tyrannical marriages that make life miserable for women. In the Spiritualist Summerland, the professor discovers that women make their own marriage arrangements—they can even take more than one spiritual marriage partner. He is informed by the spirit of his first wife, who has taken several different partners in the afterlife, that “the only thing which survives the pettiness of earth is Love” (67). The spirit of the professor’s first wife informs him that she was “mated soon after I passed over. My affinity is no one I ever knew on earth” (74). The word ‘affinity’ had a special meaning in Spiritualist argot. In *Radical Spirits*, Ann Braude states that “Spiritualists believed that marriage commonly resulted from parental or social pressure [or] women’s lack of economic alternatives. They wished to elevate marriage to a higher

moral plane so that it would become a union, not a curse" (119). Hence, Spiritualists proposed "an egalitarian bond of mutual attraction"; they "advanced a doctrine of spiritual affinities, arguing that the natural order contained one or more true mates for every individual and that the union of true affinities endured forever" (119). Like Susan in *The Dead Man's Message*, those who did not find their true affinity on earth would do so in the Spiritualist afterlife, known as the Summerland. A century later, Sarah Waters would use the idea of Spiritualist affinities as a central theme in her Gothic Neo-Victorian novel on Spiritualism, going so far as to name the novel *Affinity* (2000). Waters's novel, and the ways in which it plays with the Spiritualist idea of affinities, will be explored in greater depth in Chapter Five. But it is important to note that the word 'affinity' held implicit sexual overtones for Spiritualists like Marryat, a fact reflected in Waters's usage of the term.

Here we see a distinction between *The Gates Ajar* and *The Dead Man's Message*. Marryat's novel is engaging in a different kind of role reversal; specifically, *The Dead Man's Message* concerns sexual power dynamics. In Phelps's *The Gates Ajar*, the Spiritualist plotline concerns a sister mourning for her lost brother. Occasionally, Phelps describes the relationship between the sister and brother in veiled, possibly

erotic terms, but it could also be a quiet gesture towards companionate marriage. In any case, Mary declares in the depths of her grief that she is “never to kiss [her dead brother Roy], never to see him anymore” (Phelps 7). She remembers running her fingers through her brother’s brown, curly hair. This is tame stuff, a far-off precursor to the more overtly erotic incestuous symbolism we see in later Spiritualist literature such as Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1901).

However, Marryat’s novel offers a clearer connection with later Spiritualist literature, a connection that I contend has been entirely overlooked by critics. *The Dead Man’s Message* contains themes and ideas that were of great interest to fin-de-siècle Spiritualist writers (see Chapter Four). But later writers do not share Marryat’s interest in reform; though they are clearly influenced by her frank discussion of sex, Marryat’s broader critique concerns marriage and domestic compatibility. *The Dead Man’s Message* condemns boorish Victorian chauvinism and demonstrates the important role that women’s sexual liberation played in framing the early feminist movement.

Thus, though Phelps and Marryat overlap at certain points in their depictions of Spiritualism, there is a distinct contrast of tone between *The Dead Man’s Message* and *The Gates Ajar*. That contrast

is at least partially a result of the temperament and circumstances of the writers themselves. Phelps was married to a parson at Andover and, though generally happy with her family life, felt desperately stifled in a religious and professional sense; she clearly entertained aspirations for becoming a preacher herself (Duin 104). This explains the heavy emphasis in *The Gates Ajar* on Spiritualism's ability to offer women a professional and religious alternative to what respectable Victorian society generally offered. Marryat, on the other hand, was a widowed woman who lived by her pen; like the heroine in *The Dead Man's Message*, Marryat had suffered an unhappy marriage with an older man, and she wanted her audience to understand how existing Victorian marriage structures frequently stifled women's sense of independence and self-worth.

In this sense, *The Dead Man's Message* is an inversion of the typical Victorian marriage plot. The Victorian marriage plot demanded that novels end in marriage "not only because that institution marks the end of a successful courtship, but also it puts an end to all effective narrative possibilities" (Hager 14). Marital love "enjoyed a privileged status...in Victorian culture and fiction" (Dever 112). Marriage was seen as a "legal contract, a means of regulating sexual desire [and] a method of property transmission" (114). However, in

*The Dead Man's Message*, a wife confronts her dead husband via psychic powers and Spiritualist communion, thereby forcing him to atone for his sins against her. He ultimately comes to realize something that his wife has understood for a long time—that marriage, as an institution, creates and reinforces inequality. Thus is it no surprise that Victorian critics decried *The Dead Man's Message* as an assault against the institution of marriage (Tromp 117). Tromp asserts that “the upending of the traditional marriage plot suggests a shift in the traditional Victorian notion of marriage” (60). In other words, Spiritualist novels like *The Dead Man's Message* “participated in the evolution of [the institution of] marriage and became a voice in the shifting cultural and material face of marriage” (60). Indeed, these novels comprise a powerful and yet frequently overlooked element of how feminists critiqued gender inequities in Victorian society. As part of this first phase of Spiritualist literature, Marryat and Phelps participated in the broader nineteenth-century movement towards a more tolerant and more respectful attitude towards women in America and England. The Spiritualist novels of Marryat and Phelps should be regarded as influential (and unfortunately forgotten) elements of the early feminist movement. By reevaluating Spiritualism's role in the feminist movement and the contributions made by two of

Spiritualism's most vocal advocates, Marryat and Phelps, the historical importance of Spiritualist literature can finally be situated in its proper cultural context.

As Henry Aldwyn progresses through the various spheres of the Spiritualist afterlife in *The Dead Man's Message*, his widow Mrs. Aldwyn prays that "his sins may be forgiven, and that he may find hope and peace at last" (53). Once his spirit has departed his body, he is confronted by his guiding spirit (a "control spirit" in Spiritualist argot) who informs him that death is not the end of existence; in a nod to Swedenborgianism's influence on Spiritualism, some of spectral figures Henry encounters exactly resemble people he knew in life.<sup>1</sup> During a séance, Henry is informed that he "must ask his spirit guide to take [him] back to...remedy the evils you have wrought on earth: unjust and ungenerous" to his wife (77). Here, in the afterlife, Henry must make repent for the wrongs committed against his family. He wonders, "would the sins [of his life] and the miseries of it all lie at the door to the next world? Would he be obliged to expiate the frailties or crimes [caused] by his undue harshness?" (Marryat 59).

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<sup>1</sup> In Volume VIII of *Arcana Coelestia*, Emmanuel Swedenborg explains that the spirits of the departed will find themselves in a house exactly resembling the one they died in for a period of three days before they are approached by angels. The angels will take the form of people the departed knew in their former life. See Leonard Fox's *Conversations with Angels: What Swedenborg Heard in Heaven* (1996).

In *The Dead Man's Message*, Henry Aldwyn is forced to atone for his cruelty as a husband and father. In addition to realizing how miserable he made both of his wives, he must be brought to understand how he ruined his son's life. He must essentially be feminized; he must adopt a nurturing, maternal concern for his estranged son in order to progress to the next level of Spiritualist existence. This forces him to abandon the role that Victorian patriarchal society has expected of him. The concept of patriarchy was crucial to Victorian feminism because the feminist movement "needed a term by which the totality of oppressive and exploitative relations which affected women could be expressed" (Humm 159). Dorothy Dinnerstein and Nancy Chodrow, contemporary feminist critics, argue that the concept of patriarchy supports and perpetuates misogyny; "only with the full participation of men in child care can the deep roots of misogyny be eradicated" (139). This is precisely what Henry Aldwyn must realize as he progresses through the Spiritualist afterlife. He must watch helplessly as his son Gilbert, now a dispossessed and penniless sailor, fights for his life against typhus. Gilbert states that it was his father that brought him to this sad state of affairs; he declares that his father "broke [his] mother's poor heart, and then dared to defame her before *me*, her son" (Marryat 168). Gilbert's ensuing

banishment forces him into a downward spiral of misery, poverty, and sickness.

Horrified, Henry is forced to watch as his son languishes in despair and illness. Henry's guiding spirit tells him, "You could not foresee the evils your harshness would produce" (165). Finally, Henry understands the evil he worked as an uncaring, brutish father and husband. He "perceived, as in a nightmare dream, how much too late it was to remedy the evil he had done on earth, how it would permeate into the coming ages" (174). Henry asks his guide if he can help Gilbert in some way, but the spirit informs him that only higher spirits than Henry can help Gilbert, spirits who have already achieved a superior state of being by understanding and accepting the totality of their earthly sins, "whom they have wronged, by their example and precept" (177). By the novel's end, it is uncertain when Henry will arrive at that point. But at least he has made his first step into the next phase of Spiritualist existence by acknowledging his many faults as a father and husband. He has learned to embrace his nurturing, maternal side.

Henry's "submissiveness and humility before his wife offers a profoundly different notion of manhood and marriage than those models that dominated the Victorian period" (Tromp 60). In fact,

Marryat's critique is even more far-reaching than Tromp suggests. *The Dead Man's Message* emphasizes the radical and subversive element of Spiritualism by critiquing the ethics of marriage and declaring that a successful marriage is not determined by traditional moral standards, but by values that accord with women's needs and wishes. Ann Braude states that "the women [in Spiritualist fiction] take on a different notion of marriage than those models that dominated the period" (60).<sup>2</sup> This is particularly true of Mrs. Aldwyn in *The Dead Man's Message*; she becomes the hero of the novel by inverting traditional gender roles, assuming the strong and independent role in her marriage while her husband, Henry, must meekly atone in the afterlife for the despicable way he treated his life while he was alive. Henry's wife informs him that her Spiritualist faculties enable her to see the earthly faults she was blind to while he was alive. This is not the abstract cerebral imagining of the Christian penitent, however; it is a literal, physical visualization brought on by her mediumistic access to higher knowledge in the planes of Spiritualism. Thus, Spiritualism becomes a powerful tool for advancing equality in married relationships:

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<sup>2</sup> *Pride and Prejudice* and other "marriage plots" come to mind here.

I could see you were not worth grieving for. If you picked up what you believed to be a diamond of value in the street, you would preserve it with the utmost care; but, if a jeweler proved to you that it was only glass, you would throw it back into the nearest gutter. Spiritualism is the great jeweler who tests our diamonds for us, Henry, and when we perceive their worthlessness we cease to lament their loss. (77)

Both Phelps and Marryat believed that the material world would be rewritten in the spiritual afterlife, and that people liberated by Spiritualism would be free to pursue the things that make them happy once they have entered the Spiritualist afterlife. As Tromp states, "Spiritualism offered a culturally alternative means of determining a man's worth and a woman's position in relation to him" (62). This is reflected in *The Dead Man's Message*. The woman's position in marriage is not subordinate to the man's; rather, in the Spiritualist afterlife, they form a partnership of total equals. Through Spiritualism, "marriage could be spiritually affirming and enriching for both parties" (65).

In both Phelps's and Marryat's novels, oppressed women are transformed into strong, independent and unconventional heroines

through their belief in Spiritualism. Spiritualism encourages them to take chances, strike out on their own, and achieve a form of independence that was previously unrealizable. Thus, the strong alliance and intellectual cross-pollination between feminism and Spiritualism facilitated the radical challenge women like the Seneca Falls conventioners represented to conventional society and religion. In *The Dead Man's Message*, Mrs. Aldwyn abandons the traditional Victorian mourning period and quickly finds love in the arms of a handsome young cousin who is her intellectual equal. In *The Gates Ajar*, Winifred finds satisfaction and professional fulfillment in her vocation as an itinerant Spiritualist preacher. In both cases, the missing element that was unobtainable as long as the heroine was oppressed by convention is discovered once she embraces Spiritualism and accepted the Spiritualist vision of life after death. Both *The Gates Ajar* and *The Dead Man's Message* demonstrate that the first wave of Spiritualist literature was closely connected with Victorian reform movements; these novels have a proselytizing function that attempt to demonstrate how women can liberate themselves from the confines of Victorian patriarchy if they are willing to embrace Spiritualism's essential tenets and practices. This literature is written by confirmed believers in the Spiritualist movement; however, as we shall see, the

arc of Spiritualist literature corresponds to the fortunes of the Spiritualist movement itself.

Spiritualist literature as a genre begins with pragmatic positivist work like the novels of confirmed reformers like Phelps and Marryat. But as faith in Spiritualism waned, skepticism crept into literary depictions of Spiritualism. In Chapter Three, we will see how the subsequent phase of Spiritualist literature consisted of writers who, now some distance from the initial explosion of interest in Spiritualism, were increasingly agnostic to its concept. The case of Nathaniel Hawthorne is particularly interesting, as he was clearly torn on the subject; he wanted to believe in Spiritualism and its ability to contribute to progressive reforms. However, unlike Phelps and Marryat, he ultimately remained unconvinced.

### CHAPTER THREE: LIFTING THE VEIL ON MIDCENTURY SPIRITUALISM: HAWTHORNE'S *BLITHEDALE ROMANCE* AND "THE MINISTER'S BLACK VEIL"

During a trip abroad in the 1850s, Nathaniel Hawthorne spent an afternoon with Elizabeth and Robert Browning in their Florentine exile. Elizabeth's penchant for Spiritualism was well-known (albeit short-lived), and she arranged for Hawthorne, who expressed genuine curiosity over the particulars of Spiritualist séances, to receive an introduction to the foremost practicing medium in the English émigré community, Madame Isa Blagden (Mellow 505). Hawthorne, along with his daughter Lizzie, participated in a séance with Mrs. Blagden one afternoon at the Villa Brichieri. Hawthorne confessed to his daughter that he was skeptical about the whole affair; nevertheless, he observed that the medium's "integrity is absolutely indubitable, and she herself totally believes in the spiritual authenticity of what is communicated through her" (506). Hawthorne biographer James R. Mellow concludes that Hawthorne "could neither *believe* nor *disbelieve*" in Spiritualist phenomena. In a letter written that same year to Dr. Wilkinson, attending physician of the Royal London Hospital, Hawthorne explains his position on Spiritualism by stating, "Do I

believe? Of course I believe; for how is it possible to doubt either the solemn word [of the medium] or the sober observation [of mediumistic phenomenon]?" But in this intriguing letter, Hawthorne simultaneously states that "I do not really believe, for I cannot consent to let Heaven and Earth, this world and the next, be beaten together like the white and yolk of an egg" (Mellow 507). Hawthorne's skepticism prevented him from wholeheartedly embracing the tenets of Spiritualism, but his inclination towards the mystical made it impossible for him to dismiss Spiritualists' claims out of hand. His daughter, Lizzie, was an enthusiastic and practicing Spiritualist, making it even harder for Hawthorne to be objective about the so-called "new science."

Hawthorne's ambivalence towards Spiritualism echoes a broader uncertainty in midcentury Victorian culture. Spiritualist fiction of this particular era bridges the early evangelical writings with the fin-de-siècle Gothic excesses that came later. This literature is characterized by a questioning of Spiritualism's claims, paradoxically coupled with an admiration of Spiritualism's outré mysticism. In *Servants of the Supernatural* (2007), Dr. Antonio Melechi argues that the English and American public of the Victorian midcentury was "primed for Spiritualism's success by earlier popular forms of the occult, including the eighteenth-century vogue for Mesmerism" (46). But for

Hawthorne, the nineteenth century's increasingly scientific world of order and progress made wholesale acceptance of mysticism problematic. As reflected in Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), skepticism became an increasingly visible element of Spiritualist fiction.

In *Spiritualism and Society* (1969), Geoffrey K. Nelson states that "by 1850 Spiritualism had spread widely throughout the eastern states of America" (24). According to Nelson, "the midcentury saw the establishment of many settlements and communities in America...based on Spiritualist and socialist beliefs" (18). Like Hawthorne's semi-fictional American community of Blithedale, "the communities were also strong on religious beliefs and were held together by the religious fervor of their members" (18). In real-life communities like Blithedale, radical politics and radical religious ideas were intertwined. Nelson specifically mentions Brook Farm, the model for Blithedale, as a "socialist community...which had connections with the Spiritualist movement" (20). Nelson relates that "the vast majority of Spiritualists seem to have been sincere, respectable, and moderate people genuinely convinced of the truth of the cause they promoted" (21). However, Hawthorne created Blithedale as a flawed utopia: its believers turn out to be scheming, skeptical deceivers.

Writing in 2007, Bridget Bennett observes that Spiritualism's "appeal among abolitionists, and also those involved in the early women's rights movement, suggests its movement from the margins into mainstream culture—even literary culture—needs to be investigated" (40). Such an investigation has yet to materialize in the body of criticism surrounding Spiritualist fiction, despite the fact that a considerable amount of scholarly attention has been paid to the various reform movements affiliated with Spiritualism (i.e., abolitionism and women's rights). In this chapter, I will redress this oversight by situating Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* and "The Minister's Black Veil" (1856) at a critical nexus in Victorian culture. Hawthorne represents a departure from the fiery reformist agitation of Spiritualist writers like Florence Marryat. Hawthorne's attitude towards Spiritualism reflects a growing public skepticism over Spiritualism's claims. The narrator of *Blithedale*, a thinly veiled projection of Hawthorne himself, does not dismiss Spiritualism's claims out of hand; but, like other reforms espoused by the residents of Blithedale, Spiritualism begins to lose its appeal once the hypocrisy of its advocates is revealed.

It is important to recall that, in the 1850s, Spiritualism had not yet lost its progressive momentum and its viability as a vehicle for

social and religious reform. The Fox Sisters were still popular; in 1851, they staged their first public Spiritualist demonstration in New York City (Weisberg 105). Spiritualism, along with a host of other Victorian curiosities like phrenology, was popularly accepted as serious science (Cottom 75). However, Nelson states that during the 1850s, the early advocates of Spiritualism began to share headlines with “charlatans, fakes, and frauds of every variety” (66). The 1850s were a period of tension and change for Spiritualism and its practices. Hawthorne’s depictions of Spiritualism in *The Blithedale Romance* and “The Minister’s Black Veil” can be seen as part of a continuum beginning with the evangelical Spiritualist novels of Phelps and Marryat and ending with the fin-de-siècle Gothic nightmares of Bram Stoker and Henry James. By the time “The Minister’s Black Veil” was published, the “veil” was slowly being peeled off of the edifice (or artifice) of Spiritualism. However, the final unveiling didn’t occur until the end of the century, when the Fox Sisters finally came forward as charlatans and the Spiritualist movement dissolved.

Despite midcentury Spiritualism’s affiliation with social and religious reform movements, Spiritualist fiction of this period has attracted limited critical scrutiny. Midcentury Spiritualist literature is best understood as reflecting a transition from the proselytizing

religious Spiritualist fiction of the 1840s. The early phase discussed in the preceding chapter was characterized by earnest attempts to reform religion and society through Spiritualism, as epitomized by the novels of Phelps and Marryat. According to Bennett, the goals of Spiritualism and Utopianism overlapped, creating Utopian communities that adopted Spiritualism because the movement challenged “the diversity and heterodoxy of prevailing American notions of class, gender, and ethnicity—and indeed life or death” (31).

Interpretations of *The Blithedale Romance* have generally focused on Hawthorne’s investigation of midcentury utopian communes. Rarely have critics addressed the Spiritualist subplot of *Blithedale*. When they do, they generally see it as an extension of Hawthorne’s overarching critique of naïve, ersatz utopianism. For example, Craig White sees Hawthorne’s depiction of Spiritualism in *Blithedale* as a reflection of the “sometimes lurid reputations [of utopian communities] and their practice of these occult sciences” (16). White refuses to acknowledge the presence of Spiritualism in Hawthorne’s work as indicative of anything besides a desire to critique midcentury utopianism; like other critics, White focuses mainly on Hawthorne’s critique of the utopian naiveté of the Blithedale inmates. Critical interpretations of Hawthorne thus treat his depictions of

Spiritualism as Gothic window-dressing. Samuel Chase Coale understands the presence of Spiritualism in *Blithedale* to be merely an extension of Hawthorne's interest in "witchcraft, Mesmerism, Spiritualism, and other popular supernaturalisms" (Coale 63).

This is a severely myopic view. As a man haunted by the past (both his personal past and past of his infamous Salem family), a man, moreover, with mystical inclinations, Hawthorne was certainly intrigued by Spiritualism. In *Blithedale* and "The Minister," Hawthorne depicts Spiritualism as a bridge that permitted the past and the present, the dead and the living, to exist in everlasting communion. Bennett confirms that "of all the canonical nineteenth-century writers, it is Hawthorne who seems most engaged in the ways in which magic and the supernatural might lend themselves to an investigation of the present and the past" (62). In *Blithedale* and the "The Minister's Black Veil," Spiritualism links the past with the present, the physical with the metaphysical, the quick with the dead. Both works explore the way in which Spiritualism alternately veils and unveils various realities, at times offering tantalizing hints of deeper planes of existence normally rendered invisible to the material world. These two works are mutually concerned with the ambiguities suggested by the "veil" of Spiritualism.

Indeed, as historian Jill Galvan observes, midcentury literary depictions of Spiritualism reflect a concern for representing Spiritualists as “people who act as go-betweens [and] can mediate communications between senders and receivers” (240). Hence, Hawthorne’s treatment of Spiritualist mediums is more consistent with prevailing views than may be apparent at first glance. Through the character of Coverdale, Hawthorne demonstrates that the powers of the Spiritualist medium bridge past and present by uniting the living with the dead. Like a medium, Coverdale communes with the dead and brings them into the world of the living—this is especially the case with Priscilla, whose spectral presence is slowly coaxed back from the land of the dead by Coverdale’s love. But just as importantly, Coverdale pierces the mysticism of the Blithedale community in order to achieve a greater understanding the world as it truly is, not as it is ideologically conceived.

*The Blithedale Romance* is replete with examples of literal and metaphorical veil lifting. From its outset, the novel considers the dichotomies that a veil imposes on the viewer/narrator. A veil conceals things; there are two sides to every veil, one that keeps the wearer blind to the world, and the other than conceals the wearer’s identity. The veil thus acts as a barrier between physical world and

the Spiritualist “other world.” In the case of Hawthorne, this dichotomy reflects an individual who was alternately intrigued and repelled by the growing public interest in mysticism and the supernatural.

The veil was an important symbol for Victorian Spiritualists. Mediums draped themselves with long veils during séances in order to block out the physical world and concentrate on their inner senses. Additionally, the veil was a frequent metaphor in Spiritualist argot. Spiritualists claimed that the world of the living and the dead were separated by a veil that could only be breached by a Spiritualist medium under the guidance of a control spirit. The entire Spiritualist paradigm was underpinned by the notion of a veil that lay between the two worlds. Rosicrucian Spiritualist Pascal Beverly Randolph emphasized this aspect of Spiritualism when he stated that “many things attributed to an origin purely mundane are really the work of beings beyond the veil” (Deveney 126). But midcentury Victorian skeptics doubtful of Spiritualism used the metaphor of the Spiritualist veil in a decidedly different manner. An intriguing example is found in a biography of the popular mid-century Victorian preacher Henry Ward Beecher entitled *The Veil Removed*, published anonymously in America in 1855 and reprinted in England in 1874.

*The Veiled Removed* is a mean-spirited piece of invective that attributes Beecher's enthusiasm for charitable works to a secret penchant for Spiritualism and free love. Here the anonymous biographer exploits the well-known connection between Spiritualists and reform groups often affiliated with Spiritualism, such as the abolitionist movement, women's suffrage, and the nascent free love movement. Despite being a hack writer of the lowest quality, the anonymous author of *The Veil Removed* was at least well informed on one aspect of Beecher's life: the preacher was tried for adultery shortly after *The Veil* was published. Adultery aside, the author boldly asserts that Beecher was essentially a closet Spiritualist and an advocate of free love. Like Hawthorne's *Blithedale*, *The Veiled Removed* suggests a strong connection between Spiritualism and free-love; in the author's words, they "walk hand-in-hand." Hence, the author of this biography is ostensibly performing an important public service by lifting the "veil" of concealment from Beecher; the author is exposing a supposedly pious man as a sham and a menace to society. However distasteful this publication (by a self-admitted "class-mate" of Beecher) might be, its use of the veil as a metaphor for Spiritualism offers insight into the contentious midcentury debate surrounding Spiritualism's authenticity.

In his article "Apology for the Text: Or, Wigs and Veils," Brian Britt argues that the object of the veil can be used to represent the "strategies of interpretation...and the subversive potential...of literature" (2). According to Britt, "The transcendental dimension resists definition and speaks of mystery, silence, and negativity" (5). He explains that "in the most general sense, the veil is any boundary that reveals and conceals at the same time" (9). On the one hand, as Pascal Beverly Randolph explains, Spiritualists conceived of the veil as a spectral barrier that separated the world of the living from the dead; in order for a séance to be successful, the mystical veil had to be lifted. On the other hand, the skeptical mid-century Victorian saw the "veil" of Spiritualism as nothing more than a means of concealing social improprieties behind high-minded idealism. Both sides of the veil are explored in Hawthorne's *Blithedale Romance*, as Hawthorne himself was deeply divided on the issue of Spiritualism. In *Blithedale*, Hawthorne the skeptic confronts Hawthorne the mystic. Thus, not only does the veil of Spiritualism represent the midcentury conflict between mysticism and rationalism, but, as we see in the "Minister's Black Veil," it also acts as an extended metaphor for the ongoing struggle in midcentury America between virtue and corruption. Mr. Hooper, the Minister in Hawthorne's story, is as much a victim of the

struggle between mysticism and rationalism as Coverdale. Unlike Coverdale, however, Mr. Hooper retreats entirely into mysticism; he becomes obsessed not only with his own sins but with the sins of the Puritan dead that haunt his (and Hawthorne's) consciousness.

Hawthorne's short story "The Minister's Black Veil" operates as a commentary of how the veil functions as a barrier between the worlds of the living and the dead. In "The Minister's Black Veil," the veil functions as a symbol of impenetrable mysticism. The titular character in the story dons a black veil which separates him from the world of the living; in essence, the minister has already accepted a living death by his act of self-veiling. In a move reminiscent of Melville's Christ-like Bartleby of Wall Street, the Minister refuses to explain his actions to anyone on the other side of the veil (his single explanation, on his deathbed, is not really an explanation at all, but more of a bitter accusation). Once veiled, the minister withdraws from life, and the community around him becomes alienated by the inarticulate horror the black veil represents.

Conventional interpretations of this short, mysterious story—labeled a parable by its author—have ranged far and wide over the scope of scholarship. Poe, for example, thought that he detected "a crime of a dark dye" in the minister's veil (138). This interpretation is

echoed by Frederick Crews, who believed there was some “sexual scandal” in the Minister’s past. Other critics have stressed the veil as a symbol of ambiguity. In his reading of the story, Nicholas Canaday asserts that “Hawthorne is not stressing secret sin in his tale—especially sexual sin” (142). In his article “Facing the Veil,” Clark Davis argues that Hawthorne’s narrative strategy relies on “veiling” as a form of “indeterminacy” or moral reticence. According to Davis, the veil represents Hawthorne’s own “self-veiling...as if Hawthorne insists on distance” between himself and the morally problematic issues he grappled with. Ronald Sheasby understands Hawthorne’s parable as “narrated omnisciently by an author who omits as much as he describes” (385). It is in any case agreed upon by nearly all critics engaging with “The Minister’s Black Veil” that the Minister dons his veil on the day of a young lady’s funeral. Again, this has generally been interpreted as an acknowledgement of secret sin. But I propose there is an altogether different interpretive possibility that has been overlooked by Hawthorne critics. “The Minister’s Black Veil,” like *The Blithedale Romance*, is an extended consideration of Spiritualism and of the problem of choosing between a life of reason and a life of mysticism, particularly when one is by nature inclined to have both.

As Davis points out, Mr. Hooper the Minister (like the Veiled Lady in *Blithedale*) refuses “to show one face by showing another in its place” (7). Specifically, Mr. Hooper has obscured his face behind a long black crepe veil, which he refuses to remove even at the moment of his death. Critic Jeffrey Pusch links the veil in the work to the veil of Moses (and the Veil in *Blithedale* to that of the Jewish mystical figure Zekinah). Pusch’s more general (and therefore more useful) observation is that the veil separates “life from death” (3). Indeed, without disputing his notion that Hawthorne’s veil imagery alludes to the Old Testament, Pusch points out that the “veil as separation” supports the argument that both the Minister and Priscilla deliberately separate themselves from their communities using their veils. They perform acts of ritual ostracism by donning veils, removing themselves from the world of the living and embracing communion with the spirits of the dead.

On his deathbed, Hooper exclaims that he sees “a black veil on every image” (23). On one level, Cooper is criticizing his fellow Puritans for refusing to acknowledge their sinfulness in the same dramatic manner he has. On a deeper level, Hawthorne is intruding into this narrative from behind the minister’s black veil, accusing his dead puritan ancestors of the narrow-mindedness and moral hypocrisy

for which the Puritan settlers became infamous. Thus, is it not only the minister who has donned the black veil, but Hawthorne as well. Reaching back through time and space, Hawthorne has found a means of communing with his dead ancestors and criticizing his puritan heritage. In his article "Nathaniel Hawthorne and the Spirit of Science", Alan Smith states that Hawthorne was directly descended from Justice Hathorne, the infamous judge who presided over the Salem witch trials of 1692. According to Smith, Hawthorne "was haunted by an ancestor who was complicit in the Salem witch trials, he added the *w* later in life" (4). Thus Hawthorne attempted to insert his own distorting veil between the worlds of the living and the dead by changing his name from *Hathorne* to *Hawthorne*.

The veil serves essentially the same purpose in *The Blithedale Romance* and "The Minister's Black Veil." These two considerations of the Spiritualist veil ultimately have the same message, but they resolve themselves in different ways. The veils simultaneously reveal and obscure; they reflect the ongoing struggle among midcentury Spiritualists between mysticism and rationalism. In *Blithedale*, the ambiguities of the Spiritualist veil represent Coverdale's (and, by extension, Hawthorne's) struggle with reason and mysticism. Coverdale's desire to know the identity of the mysterious Veiled Lady

eventually destroys his idealism; the balance is thereafter tipped in favor of cold, harsh rationalism. Once the Spiritualist's veil is pulled off the Veiled Lady in *Blithedale*, it exposes nothing but charlatanry. But Hooper's black veil, which embodies the mystical and ineffable mystery of death, will only be removed once Mr. Hooper has passed into the afterlife; in Hooper's own words, the veil "can only be taken off after death" (Hawthorne 22). Thus, the removal of the Spiritualist's veil from Priscilla in *Blithedale* teaches Coverdale a heartbreaking lesson about life—heartbreaking, but practical and realistic. The veil of Mr. Hooper symbolizes a terrifying mystical conceit: it represents the mystery of death itself confronted by the living. Hawthorne never definitively aligned himself with rationalism or mysticism. Rather, all his life he sought to integrate the two ways of thinking into his own vision of the universe. Like the great Spiritualist debate raging through the middle of the nineteenth century, Hawthorne the writer—and Hawthorne the individual—was caught somewhere between two extremes. In "The Minister's Black Veil," Hawthorne explores the mystical aspect of Spiritualism that fascinated him.

However, in *The Blithedale Romance*, the emphasis is clearly on the 'rational' element of the Spiritualist debate. Indeed, part of the tension in *The Blithedale Romance* stems from the fact that the veil

has not been totally pulled off Spiritualism. According to Nelson, "it seems that not only did some deliberate frauds take up Spiritualism but that some persons with genuinely mediumistic gifts...had taken up this profession" (23). A veil seemed to divide the truly gifted from the merely opportunistic, and this is reflected in the relationship between Coverdale and Priscilla. Although he begins the story as a convert to the various utopian causes of Blithedale, which include Mesmerism and Spiritualism, Coverdale, the true medium of the story, tears away the veil of the sham medium, the mysterious Veiled Lady, who appears at the outset of the novel conducting a Spiritualist séance in a public exhibition hall. The fraudulent medium is unmasked by the man with genuinely superior powers of sympathy and perception. *The Blithedale Romance* thus provides an ironic commentary on midcentury Spiritualism's desire to eliminate barriers between physical and metaphysical reality in order to critique fundamental aspects of human experience.

The first chapter of *Blithedale* takes place shortly after the protagonist, Coverdale, has paid a visit to the Veiled Lady, a local Spiritualist who performs on stage as part of a "wonderful exhibition" (Hawthorne 5). For Coverdale, Spiritualism is either "the birth of a new science, or the revival of an old humbug" (5). This ambivalence is

compounded by the emphasis Coverdale places on the trappings of the Spiritualist stage show; he is fascinated by the “skillfully contrived circumstances of stage-effect.” These stage effects “at once mystified and illuminated” the séances conducted by the Veiled Lady. Thus Hawthorne reinforces the dual nature of midcentury perceptions of Spiritualism: the inner mystical aspect is inseparable from the public nature of the medium’s performance. From this point on, we understand that Hawthorne’s depiction of Spiritualism in *Blithedale* will fluctuate between these two apparently contradictory poles: Spiritualism is either mystical and personal, or public and vulgar.

Coverdale describes the Spiritualist medium as “enshrouded within the misty drapery of the veil” which allows her to “tread a step or two across the boundaries of the spirit world” (Hawthorne 6). The veil itself is “white, with somewhat of a subdued sheen...falling over the wearer from head to foot. It was supposed to insulate her from time and space, and to endow her with the many privileges of a disembodied spirit.” However, the medium “is still bound by the laws of actual life.” The medium is accordingly an ambiguous and intermediary figure on the boundaries of the worlds of the living and the dead; she is simultaneously subject to the laws of the physical

world but able to gain access to the numinous realm of the dead. The medium is ambiguous, marginalized, and caught between two worlds.

This ambiguity is emphasized when Coverdale—whose very name implies concealment—consults the medium for advice regarding his intention to join the Blithedale community. Her response is equivocal. According to Coverdale, the medium's answer is "nonsensical in its first aspect, yet, on closer study, unfolding a variety of interpretations, one of which certainly accorded with the event" (7). At the end of the first chapter, Hawthorne establishes a connection between the spectral figure of the Veiled Lady and the residents of Blithedale. Moodie informs Coverdale that Zenobia's name is "a public name...a sort of mask...like the white drapery of the Veiled Lady, only a little more transparent" (8). This is an important hint to the reader. Zenobia, the fiery writer urging women's suffrage, is neither loyal to Blithedale nor to the feminist cause. In fact, Zenobia is a complete sham, with a hand in the artful contrivances of the Veiled Lady's stage act. Thus, Hawthorne suggests, all forms of blind faith are equally problematic. The convictions of the Blithedale community turn out to be lies, and the Spiritualist medium, concealed behind a veil of mystical hokum, is a fraud.

The metaphor of the veil is extended to Coverdale's retrospective analysis of Blithedale. He understands *ex post facto* that Blithedale was "an illusion, a masquerade, a pastoral, a counterfeit Arcadia" (Hawthorne 21). This realization is only possible after he learns the true nature of the Blithedale inhabitants. The malice and greed of the community of Blithedale are concealed beneath a veil of reformist zeal. This veil literally and metaphorically enshrouds the character of Priscilla, who is drawn to Coverdale like a ghost from the outer world. She is "some desolate kind of creature, doomed to wander about...tempted in a human dwelling, though she would not remain long enough to melt the icicles out of her hair" (Hawthorne 27). Her spectral nature is an element of Hawthorne's critique of the Spiritualist "veil." Initially, she refuses to provide her name. She is other-worldly, a spirit tumbling in from the Plutonian shore of midnight outside the comfortable confines of the Blithedale habitat. Only after she has been fortified with physical sustenance does she "begin to look like a creature of this world" (31).

Zenobia invents a fanciful explanation for the sudden appearance of Priscilla. We later discover she has a vested interest in doing so: Priscilla is Zenobia's illegitimate half-sister, and Zenobia is eager to suppress the scandal surrounding Priscilla's mysterious origins.

Zenobia describes Priscilla's entrance during the storm as that of "a shadowy snow-maiden" who appears on the scene like a ghost "precisely at the stroke of midnight" (Hawthorne 33). This description employs one of the standard tropes of Spiritualism: the ghost dragged from the other world at the stroke of midnight by the summons of the living (Botting 65). Hence, this invented story acts as a kind of veil, obscuring Priscilla's true identity and making her in essence less than a human—a mere ghost. Zenobia describes Priscilla's entrance during the storm as that of "a shadowy snow-maiden" who appears on the scene like a ghost "precisely at the stroke of midnight" (Hawthorne 33). Coverdale, however, sees things differently. Priscilla is no more a ghost than Zenobia. Like her half-sister, Priscilla is flesh and blood, and even the "veil" of Spiritualist mysticism cannot convince Coverdale that there is more to Priscilla and Zenobia than meets the eye.

Indeed, after contracting an unknown disease and spending many weeks convalescing, Coverdale acquires insight into the mystery of Zenobia and Priscilla in the form of a fever dream. Like a medium, Coverdale crosses over the border separating the rational waking world of fact, into the irrational spiritual realm of dreams. Here, on the verge of death, he acquires his insight.

If he had died, "Hollingsworth would have gone with me to the hither verge of life, and have sent his...hopeful accents far over on the other side, while I should be treading the unknown path" (42). F.O. Mathiessen interprets this passage as an "expression of Coverdale's profound affection for Hollingsworth" (139). Indeed, Mathiessen is not alone in detecting a homoerotic subtext in the relationship between Coverdale and Hollingsworth. Benjamin Scott Grossberg points out that Blithedale is intended to be "a sexual utopia." Coverdale states that Blithedale "seemed to authorize any individual, of either sex, to fall in love with any other, regardless of what would elsewhere be judged suitable or prudent" (Hawthorne 99).

Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel* (1966), argues that Hollingsworth's persona is "aggressive and phallic" and that Coverdale's love for Hollingsworth is more than the chaste ideal many critics have made it out to be. There appears to be a covert homoeroticism at work in *The Blithedale Romance* that further reinforces the leitmotif of veiling, as if non-normative sexuality is more disturbing to the midcentury Victorian than non-normative spirituality; it is important to note that this leitmotif will recur in Neo-Victorian resurrections of Spiritualist narratives, particularly in Sarah Waters's novel *Affinity* (2000). This veiled commentary on sexuality feeds into

Hawthorne's broader critique involving the novel's chief conflicts: reality vs. fantasy, reason vs. mysticism. We should remember that it is Hollingsworth who pairs off with Zenobia and *not* Coverdale. Yet we can argue that the unrequited love between Coverdale and Priscilla, like the unrequited love between Coverdale and Hollingsworth, is based on an illusion that remains intact only as long as the object of desire remains veiled. Thus, the veil sustains that which is illusory, and the text demonstrates a patterned interest in removing these illusions. When Priscilla is finally unmasked as the dupe in Westervelt's Spiritualist sideshow, and Hollingsworth demonstrates his monomaniacal loyalty to Blithedale (and nothing else), the scales fall from Coverdale's eyes. By the novel's conclusion, Coverdale understands that his love for both Priscilla and Hollingsworth has been nothing but a hopeful illusion.

At the midpoint of the novel, however, Coverdale still believes in the possibility of love in this world and life in the next. Despite his growing conviction that the reformist zeal of the Blithedale community is nothing but lechery and hypocrisy masquerading as high-minded idealism, Coverdale's belief in a mystical dimension underlying reality has not been entirely destroyed. He has yet to fully penetrate the veil of mystery surrounding Blithedale. Coverdale has a moment of

profound rational insight or mystical experience; we're not sure which, and this is an intentional move on Hawthorne's part to preserve the ambiguity of the story. Coverdale hears voices telling him that Zenobia "is a sister of the Veiled Lady" (45). Initially, he dismisses this as the poor imaginings of an overtaxed brain. He still clings to a faith in the superior logic of the rational, physical world, but his illness has given him an opportunity to move past that realm. However, as we will later discover, Zenobia is indeed the sister of the Veiled Lady.

Has Coverdale intuited something using the rational part of his mind, or has he had a mystical experience that has given him some preternatural clairvoyance? Is his dawning realization that the Veiled Lady is a sham merely the result of his growing disillusionment with the Blithedale community? Or, like a true Spiritualist medium, has his illness invested him with preternatural powers that allow him to pierce the veil of reality and cross over into the Other World? This passage's rhetoric parallels the popular narratives of Spiritualist "awakenings through illness" so closely that it seems difficult to accept the resemblance as merely coincidental. As Alex Owen states in *The Darkened Room* (1989), "illness held a unique meaning for Spiritualists. It was an important aspect of the mythology of mediumship" (206). But rather than piercing the Spiritualist veil, it

appears that Coverdale's mystical experience is giving him deeper insight into physical reality; thus, his Spiritualist experience is inverting the typical Spiritualist paradigm. He undergoes the typical rite of passage for Spiritualists by suffering and then emerging from a life threatening illness; but instead of establishing a contact with the world of the dead, his experience sharpens his perceptions of the world of the living.

Rather than reaching out into the Spiritualist ether, Coverdale is brought into closer proximity with the hidden truths of the physical world by his mystical experience. Thus, Hawthorne contends, Spiritualism may be a mystical state of being, but it does not ultimately lead to contact with the Hereafter. The veil of Spiritualist mysticism only obscures the sordid truths and imperfections that human beings conceal. Hawthorne has it both ways: he holds out for the possibility of mystical experience, but in the end, he believes mysticism only gives us further insight into the state of the things in the material world. To paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, the medium is the message. And the message is, simply, that the mystical experience, like all the other illusions obscuring reality (love, altruism) is merely a veil that conceals man's darker motivations. Coverdale must learn the hard way that *homo homini lupus*: man is wolf to man.

This dynamic is essential to understanding *The Blithedale Romance*. Coverdale, the novel's beleaguered hero, enters the Blithedale Community with the best of intentions. He reveals that he "once had faith and force enough to form the generous hopes of the world's destiny—yes—and to do what in me lay for their accomplishment" (Hawthorne 11). But he quickly detects among his fellow travelers in Blithedale "a lack of faith"; he learns that things are not always what they seem, particularly with Zenobia, whose exotic name is merely a *nom de plume* she assumed "as her magazine signature" (13).

Coverdale constantly feels himself to be on the verge of the Spiritualist other-world. The language he uses to describe a storm breaking over Blithedale is revealing. He states that the storm is a "symbol of the cold, desolate, distrustful phantoms that invariably haunt [us]" (18). The steam rising from garments drying on the hearth "looked vaporous and spectre-like" (18). These descriptions critique the human tendency to read or interpret things as symbolic or meaningful, to invest them with more than mundane significance. They suggest a sort of self-deception, as Coverdale invests the physical with a spiritual meaning he projects onto it.

For example, when Priscilla suddenly shows up on the doorstep of the Blithedale refectory, Coverdale states that "she was some kind of creature, doomed, to wander about in snow-storms, and that...though we had tempted her into a human dwelling, she would not remain long enough to melt the icicles from her hair" (27). There are two ways of interpreting this last sentence. Either Coverdale feels that Priscilla (whose name he does not learn until much later) is a feral child about to return to the primordial conditions of the forest outside Blithedale, or Priscilla is a spirit pulled from the netherworld, attracted by the sights and sounds of the living, who may vanish back to the spirit realm at any moment. Given the extensive borrowing of Spiritualist rhetoric in *Blithedale*, the later interpretation seems the more consistent. The conceit of Priscilla as a spirit summoned by Coverdale extends throughout the novel. Later Coverdale describes Priscilla as "a slight mist of uncertainty...kept...from taking a very decided place among creatures of flesh and blood" (49). She is described in spectral terms; at one point, Coverdale calls her a "sprite...haunted by the rustic fireside" (35).

Eventually, the lies and deceit of the material world convince him that his faith in mysticism is little more than misguided naiveté.

Coverdale wants to be "transported... from the system of society"

(Hawthorne 13). He describes with genuine zeal the "exultation with which the spirit will enter on the next stage of its eternal progress, after leaving the heavy burthen of its mortality in an earthly grave" (61). But he is shattered by the ugly scandals Zenobia and Priscilla try to veil from the public and reflects that he should "rejoice that I could once think better of the world's improvability than it deserved" (20). He perceives the presence of Zenobia, who presents herself as a mystic and reformer, as a "show like an illusion, a masquerade, a pastoral, a counterfeit Arcadia in which we grown-up men and women were making a play" (21). He recalls that "while our enterprise lay all in theory, we had pleased ourselves with delectable visions of the spiritualization of labor" (65). The reality turns out to be something quite different.

It is thus not coincidental that, as Coverdale slowly begins to uncover the true nature of the Blithedale community, the character of the Veiled Lady once again is introduced into the narrative. A story by Zenobia entitled "The Veiled Lady" is inserted into the flow of the novel at exactly the halfway point. Structurally, this suggests that the entire novel of *Blithedale* represents a struggle between mysticism and rationalism, and that the Spiritualist mysticism of the first half of the novel has reached its zenith; from here on in, *Blithedale* will focus on

the cold facts of rationalism and disillusionment. Additionally, the emphasis placed on the story by inserting it into the exact center of the novel's action indicates that Hawthorne is pointing to his own authorial role in the incident. By privileging this metatextual element of the novel, Hawthorne highlights his past experience at Brook Farm. Coverdale's experiences are based on Hawthorne's own struggles with mysticism and reason.

The story begins when Zenobia proposes to explain "the life of this shadowy phenomenon" that is known as the Veiled Lady (Hawthorne 108). There is great speculation as to what precisely is hidden by the veil. Zenobia states that "some upheld that the veil covered the most beautiful countenance in the world; and others—certainly with more reason, considering the sex of the Veiled Lady—the face was the most hideous and horrible, and this was her sole motive for hiding it. It was the face of a corpse; it was the head of a skeleton" (110).

Zenobia's story explains that the mystery surrounding the Veiled Lady—specifically, the prospect of seeing the "most beautiful countenance in the world"—motivates a young man from a nearby town to hide in the Veiled Lady's dressing room while she is on stage one day. When her act is finished, the Veiled Lady, described as

having a “bodiless presence” which “came through the wall” and “floated to-and-fro over the carpet” in dressing room in the theater (111). The young man begs the Veiled Lady to pull her veil asunder and identify herself, the Veiled Lady replies that her “lips are forbidden to betray [her] secret” (112). She is a “sad and lonely prisoner, in a bondage which is worse than death” (113). The man pulls the veil from the lady—and there is nothing underneath. The veil “fluttered slowly down, and lay upon the floor” (114).

The meaning of this story is obvious. Without fully exposing herself, Zenobia is slowly lifting the veil from her own concealed identity. As we learn later in *Blithedale*, she is responsible for forcing her half-sister Priscilla to take up the veil and act as the Veiled Lady. Zenobia’s story, which is permeated with the rhetorical hocus-pocus of Spiritualist narratives, is in fact a warning to Coverdale that his infatuation with Priscilla will only end in disaster. At this point in the novel, Coverdale has yet to connect his fascination with the Veiled Lady with his burgeoning love for Priscilla, whom he still describes as “ghostly” and “ethereal.” But to emphasize her point about the bondage and enslavement of the Veiled Lady (and, by way of implication, Priscilla), Zenobia ends her tale with a particularly Gothic coda. The Veiled Lady finds “a dark magician” in the woods who

entraps her, and “she becomes his bond slave forever more” (116).

To drive her point home, Zenobia finishes her tale by taking up a piece of gauze and flinging it over Priscilla’s head. Priscilla “stood droopingly in the midst of us, making no attempt to remove the veil” (116).

Priscilla’s symbolic taking of the veil is reminiscent of the Catholic practice of veiling nuns, and this conflation of mystical imagery with Catholicism manifests itself in an intriguing way in *Blithedale*. It should be pointed out that this combination of Christian imagery with Spiritualist mysticism is distinctly reminiscent of the works of Elizabeth Stuart Phelps analyzed in Chapter Two of this dissertation. In staunchly Protestant 1850s America, Catholicism was seen with suspicion; the great wave of migrants from Catholic countries in had only just begun and would not reach their crest until the end of the century. As theologian Jennifer Gamber explains, Hawthorne in particular and the Northeast in general identified as Episcopalian (87).

Hawthorne stands at a halfway point between the earlier works of Protestant evangelical Spiritualist literature and the later Gothic Spiritualism of fin-de-siècle literature. In an intimate conversation with Zenobia, Coverdale admits that he has “always envied the Catholics their faith...that sweet, sacred Virgin Mother who stands

between them and their deity...permitting his love to stream upon the worshipper...through the medium of a woman's tenderness"

(Hawthorne 122). This curious statement has been left untouched by previous critics of *The Blithedale Romance*, as it seems to contradict the sentiments of the reform-minded Blithedale community and the at least partially rational mindset of Coverdale himself. Here, Hawthorne criticizes the human tendency to seek meaning in abstract mysticism, whether through Catholicism or Spiritualism. However, this critique is softened by Hawthorne's sympathy for Coverdale, a sympathy borne from Hawthorne's recognition of his own need to find meaning in mysticism despite the better judgment of his rational nature.

Thus, if we understand *Blithedale* to be an extended meditation on the constant struggle between rationalism and mysticism—a struggle so apparent in Hawthorne and the culture in which he lived—this seemingly inconsequential rumination takes on great significance. Coverdale wants to believe in something greater than himself, but neither Spiritualism nor rationalism will satisfy his need to achieve a more profound understanding of himself or the world he inhabits. In *Blithedale*, the consequence of Spiritualism's failure to provide the mystical revolution it promised becomes clear. By midcentury, the Spiritualist movement began to lose steam; Coverdale's

disillusionment is indicative of the rapidly dwindling interest in utopianism mysticism. Ultimately, Spiritualism fell into the realm of fin-de-siècle exoticism. Writers who were no longer interested in Spiritualism as a social or religious movement perceived its potential as vehicle for the grotesque, the uncanny, and the disturbing.

#### CHAPTER FOUR: FOR THE DEAD TRAVEL FAST: SPIRITUALISM AND GOTHIC HORROR IN STOKER'S *DRACULA* AND JAMES'S *THE TURN OF THE SCREW*

According to literary historian Talia Schaffer, the Victorian fin-de-siècle "was what writers of the period named their own sense of malaise and uneasiness" (382). In this chapter, I provide analyses of Spiritualist narratives written during the fin-de-siècle. My discussion centers on two works, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) and Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1900). For James and Stoker, Spiritualism becomes a vehicle for social and sexual violation. In each work, the Victorian institutions of home, feminine virtue and family are molested by evil spirits. Through his use of Spiritualism, James questions the Victorian shibboleth of childhood innocence. In the case of *Dracula*, I contend that the stakes are higher. England itself, the center of the Victorian Empire, is under attack. Spiritualism thus offers both Stoker and James a means of exploring and critiquing the tightly controlled forces of sexual irrationality that lay just beneath the surface of "respectable" Victorian society. In both *Dracula* and *The Turn of the Screw*, Spiritualism is a vehicle that permits the id to violently burst forth on the unsuspecting ego. But authors'

motivations for using Spiritualism run deeper than the singular desire to provoke Gothic thrills and chills; Spiritualism enables them to critique Victorian society in a manner that is less direct—and hence less dangerous— than an explicit head-on assault. Both authors may have had personal reasons for avoiding ugly confrontations with critics and moralists. For Stoker, publishing *Dracula* in 1897, the trial and humiliation of Oscar Wilde in 1895 would have been a recent memory.<sup>3</sup> In James's case, his ambiguous sexuality may have left him feeling vulnerable to Victorian homophobia. He would be understandably reluctant to incorporate explicit sexual content into his writing; this argument has been advanced by several of James's major critics, most notably Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Epistemology of the Closet*. Sedgwick makes the point that "for James, in whose life the pattern of homosexual desire was brave enough and resilient enough to be at last biographically inobliterable, one would have hoped that in criticism of his work the possible differences of different erotic paths would not be so ravenously subsumed under a compulsorily—and hence, never a truly 'hetero'—heterosexual world" (44).

Therefore, to protect themselves from public opprobrium, Stoker and James cloaked their critiques of Victorian moral hypocrisy in

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<sup>3</sup> Stoker was personally acquainted with Wilde through Stoker's famous employer, Sir Henry Irving, and dined with Wilde at least once in the Beefsteak Room at the Lyceum Theater. See Morris B. Kaplan, *Sodom on the Thames* (2005).

Spiritualism and occultism. This was a reasonable strategy; by the 1890s, Spiritualism had already lost its viability as a reform movement, and (unlike the relatively new tenets of Freudianism) it was no longer considered offensive to public taste. Indeed, satires of Spiritualism had been gaining in popularity since Robert Browning published "Mr. Sludge the Medium" in 1864. Stoker gave Spiritualism its fangs back; he turned the tables on Victorian society, using the discredited Spiritualist movement as a cover for his critique of society's moral and sexual hypocrisy. Once done, he packaged the whole into a highly marketable Gothic thriller that has never since been out of print.

However, even though Spiritualism was increasingly passé by the 1890s, it still had certain connotations of disreputability that even late Victorian readers would have understood. Readers of every stripe would have seen newspaper accounts of the exploits of the medium Florence Cook, whose fiancé was one of the Victorian era's major celebrities, the arctic explorer Elisha Kane.<sup>4</sup> During Florence Cook's séances, she was occasionally required to undress before performing, to ensure she literally had no tricks up her sleeves. Similarly, séance sitters were often offered "kisses or other bodily contact as proof of [a

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<sup>4</sup> For more on the fascinating and deeply dysfunctional relationship between Elisha Kane and Maggie Fox, see *Exploring Other Worlds: Margaret Fox, Elisha Kane, and the Antebellum Culture of Curiosity*.

spirit's] materiality" (Tromp 77). Spiritualism enabled prim Victorians to indulge in inappropriate physical contact without risking public respectability.

Spiritualists believed that the medium manifesting the spirit *was* the dead in a living body (a state not dissimilar to Dracula's being *undead*—that is, simultaneously dead and alive). Women could manifest male spirits, and vice versa.<sup>5</sup> Florence Cook was known to manifest as the spirit of a dead sailor and pinch the cheeks of female séance sitters. The American Spiritualist duo known as the Brothers Davenport used a darkened cabinet in which male séance attendants would secure the brothers by various forms of bondage, including ropes and chains across their legs and chests.<sup>6</sup> According to Alex Owen, within the séance circle, "women frequently and flagrantly transgressed gender norms. Female mediums...often assumed a male role and sometimes also a trance persona at total odds with the Victorian idea of respectable womanhood" (Owen 11). The séance circle offered a religiously sanctioned space in which seemingly fixed

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<sup>5</sup>However, Janet Oppenheimer's history of spiritualism suggests that male-to-female manifestations were rarer (and therefore more radical) forms of gender transgression in spiritualist narratives. See Oppenheimer, *The Other World*.

<sup>6</sup>For a fuller account of the homoerotic spiritualist ceremonies of the Brothers Davenport, see John Patrick Deveney's *Paschal Beverly Randolph: A Nineteenth-Century Black American Spiritualist, Rosicrucian, and Sex Magician*. Deveney discusses Randolph's exhaustive biography of the Brothers Davenport in detail.

notions of gender were negotiable. Even potentially homoerotic situations were not considered outré by practicing Spiritualists. Female mediums sometimes manifested as male spirits, kissing and fondling female sitters. Male mediums occasionally did the same with male sitters.<sup>7</sup> Male mediums were also known to assume a female spirit voice or personality.

Spiritualism by the fin-de-siècle was both titillating and banal, exciting without being scandalous. In "Bram Stoker and the Society for Psychical Research," literary critic Stephanie Moss argues that Stoker was intimately familiar with Spiritualists and their methods, and the particulars of the mediumistic ritual. This is important to bear in mind, as Stoker probably did not believe in Spiritualism as a religious system.<sup>8</sup> Stoker did not garner his intimate knowledge of Spiritualist practice firsthand; like James, Stoker was intrigued by the literary possibilities posed by Spiritualism and may have collected information from secondhand accounts in popular Spiritualist papers of the time

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<sup>7</sup>The most famous male medium of the period, Daniel Dunglas Home, was rumored to be homosexual and writes frequently of manifesting female spirits eager to embrace their male loved ones in his autobiography, *Incidents in My Life*.

<sup>8</sup>Interestingly, though there is no evidence to suggest that Stoker was a practicing mystic, he moved in circles frequented by mystics. In her biography of Stoker, *Bram Stoker and the Man Who was Dracula*, Barbara Bradford discusses Stoker's affiliation with Constance Wilde, who was, for a time, a devoted spiritualist. Additionally, Stoker was a friend (and erstwhile rival) of Constance's husband Oscar Wilde, who was a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn.

that were widely available in London, such as the Spiritualist free circular *Light*.<sup>9</sup> Unsurprisingly, *Dracula* is peppered with discussions of occultism and pseudo-science. At one point, Van Helsing explains, “it is not the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain. But yet we see around us every day the growth of new beliefs” (Stoker 171). Van Helsing states that there is “something magnetic or electric” about *Dracula* (278). Readers of the day would have understood the “magnetic or electric” ideas of Van Helsing to be a coded reference to Spiritualism, which held that reality was suffused by a sort of electrical ether that permeated both mind and matter and enabled communication between the worlds of the living and the dead.<sup>10</sup> This spiritual ether flowing between the two worlds was a theory accepted by several prominent doctors and scientists.<sup>11</sup> For example, it is a

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There were many spiritualist periodicals published in London and New York through the 1890s. The most popular of them, *The Medium and Daybreak*, was published from 1870-1895 (curiously, the year of Wilde’s downfall). *The Medium and Daybreak* was edited by James Burns. *Light*, which began in 1881, is the longest running spiritualist newspaper in history, and continues to publish to this day. See K.G. Valente, “‘Who Will Explain the Explanation?’: The Ambivalent Reception of Higher Dimensional Space in the British Spiritualist Press, 1875-1900.” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 41:2 Summer 2008. 16-48. Print.

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This idea came from the earlier work of the Viennese hypnotist Anton Mesmer. See Dr. Antonio Melechi, *Servants of the Supernatural*.

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And maniacs, as well. In *Dracula* we see a curious exchange between Renfield and Van Helsing. Renfield states that “the fly...has one striking feature; its

well-documented but curiously little-known fact that Alexander Graham Bell's first attempt at creating a telephone was based on his desire to tap into the universal ether in order to communicate with his dead mother (Ronell 1).

Many of the earliest practitioners of psychoanalysis were practicing Spiritualists, or had studied Spiritualism in great detail. During the fin-de-siècle, the word 'psychology' had close connotations with the occult; for example, Henry James's father, an eminent psychologist, was also a practicing Spiritualist (Taylor 27). Furthermore, Carl Gustav Jung's entire doctoral thesis was based on the Spiritualist trances of his cousin, Helene Preiswerk. Both Jung and Freud were deeply influenced by the earlier work of Dr. Theodore Flournoy, who theorized that the utterances of Spiritualist mediums in trances provided evidence of the myth-making power of the unconscious mind.<sup>12</sup> Thus, though some critics of the period scoffed at Spiritualism as an outmoded novelty or an affectation of fin-de-siècle eccentrics,<sup>13</sup> for Stoker and James, Spiritualism represented a

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wings are typical of the aerial power of the *psychic* faculties. The ancients did well when they typified the soul as a butterfly" (113). Perhaps this reflects Stoker's attitude towards metaphysical propositions in general; only a lunatic and a potty Dutch professor are automatic believers in spiritualism and the occult. Everyone else in the novel needs convincing.

<sup>12</sup> See F.X. Charet, *Spiritualism and the Foundation of Jung's Psychology*

<sup>13</sup>

powerful tool for the exploration of the darker elements of the human psyche and critiquing Victorian society.

Indeed, it is precisely late-century Freudian psychology that has changed the potential meaning of Spiritualism. The tone of *Dracula* is much different than that of an earlier Spiritualist narrative, such as *The Gates Ajar*. Unlike itinerant Spiritualist writers who believed the age of Spiritualism, inaugurated in 1848, would culminate with a harmonious union between the living and the dead, *Dracula* considers communion between the living and the dead to be dangerous; the worlds of the living and the dead must not intermingle. Dracula is a marauding phantom whose unrepressed sexuality must be contained. The male representatives of the rational world must chase the phantasm back to the borders of its irrational domain and eradicate it. In Freudian terms, the ego must reassert its primacy over the id, which has become the dominant psychological element.<sup>14</sup>

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The most effective (and certainly the most famous) critic of spiritualism was none other than Harry Houdini, who frequently used his shows to expose spiritualists as frauds and personally issued challenges to local spiritualist mediums wherever he went on tour. See William Kalush, *The Secret Life of Harry Houdini*. It may also be worth noting that Houdini remained lifelong friends with Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, whose faith in spiritualism never wavered. See Massimo Polidoro, *Final Séance: The Strange Friendship between Houdini and Conan Doyle*.

<sup>14</sup> The basic Freudian model held that the mind was divided into conscious and unconscious spheres. The unconscious sphere was derived from repression and consisted of thoughts and impulses which were unacceptable to the conscious ego. Freud later elaborated on his bipartite model of the human psyche and asserted that it consisted of three parts—the id, the ego, and the superego. According to Freud,

The application of Freudian psychoanalysis as a tool for reading Spiritualist narratives is particularly apt given the significant influence Freud's ideas achieved in Spiritualist circles. For example, Freud's paradigm of the conscious/subconscious mind was taken up by one of Spiritualism's major exponents, Frederic W.H. Myers. In 1903, Myers published *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death*, a tract which merged conventional Spiritualist tenets with Freudian psychoanalysis. Myers argues that the psyche consists of a conscious "supraliminal" mind and also a subconscious or "subliminal" mind. Myers essentially recycles Freud's theory of sexual repression first iterated in the case study of Dora, where Freud states that "a stream of water which meets with an obstacle in the river bed-bed is dammed up and flows back into old channels" (Freud 434).

Thus, under cover of Spiritualism and the occult, Stoker suggests that human sexuality, if completely liberated from the suffocating constraints of society, is potentially destructive. According to Punter, "vampires seduce us and take us to dark places [and] awaken us sexually in ways that are taboo" (136). However, feminist critic Sonja Foss observes that Stoker's *Dracula* "did indeed construct and maintain particular gender definitions" (141). Like *Jekyll and*

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the id was "the realm of the illogical...it is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality" (319).

*Hyde* and *Dorian Gray*, *Dracula* offers a metaphor for the damage inflicted on the human psyche when social prohibitions of sexuality are intolerably oppressive. But Stoker stops short of Stevenson and Wilde; we cannot deny, per Foss, that *Dracula* reinscribes normative notions of Victorian gender and ultimately fulfills the Victorian expectation of a happy ending, with sexuality safely tucked inside the bonds of holy matrimony and child-bearing. *Dracula* resembles Freud's concept of a dream, in which the id expresses what it most longs for and enacts an elaborate representational drama of wish-fulfillment, until the ego subsequently reasserts itself upon waking. Taking this Freudian reading further, we can explain the broad discrepancy between midcentury Spiritualism and fin-de-siècle Spiritualism. In midcentury realist Spiritualist narratives, the spirit world is superior to the living corporeal one. It is a utopian summerland where desire and conflict do not exist. However, in the fin-de-siècle Spiritualist narrative of *Dracula*, the Spiritualist afterlife becomes a world of irrational menace. The topography of Transylvania is analogous to the Freudian id that Victorians found so threatening. It is from this wild and untamed liminal land that Dracula, the evil spirit, is summoned. The dichotomy between British civilization and the untamed wilds of Eastern Europe—a theme that Stoker would later

revisit in his 1909 novel *The Lady of the Shroud*—alludes to Freud’s grand theory of civilization elaborated in *Civilization and its Discontents*. According to Freud, there must be some mediating mechanism to keep human sexuality in check; there must be an ego (society) to control the id (the individual). Otherwise, society collapses and chaos ensues. Stoker deviates from midcentury Spiritualist narratives by suggesting that Dracula, a spirit summoned from the land of the dead, has broken free of his spirit medium.<sup>15</sup> In an inversion of the usual Spiritualist paradigm, the spirit has actually *attacked* his control medium. In other words, the id has broken free of the controlling ego because it cannot be further suppressed. When Jonathan initially encounters Dracula and provides the Count’s first infusion of male blood, hell literally breaks loose.

This reading of *Dracula* is supported by the fact that there is no mention *anywhere* of Dracula consuming male blood prior to his encounter with Jonathan. Dracula has had several brides over the centuries, but until he meets the virginal young English lawyer, he has never had a *groom*. Thus, the perennial Victorian bugbear of homosexuality proves to be the enabling force for Dracula’s crossing

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<sup>15</sup>The theme of the rampaging spirit broken free of its medium, is taken up in Arthur Conan Doyle’s short story “Playing with Fire,” which was published three years after Stoker’s *Dracula*.

over into the land of the living. Indeed, many critics have cited the infamous homosexual Cleveland Street Scandal of 1889 and the subsequent criminalization of homosexuality as critical subtexts of Stoker's novel. Nina Auerbach writes in *Our Vampires, Ourselves* that "the British 1890s were haunted not only by the undead, but by a monster of its own clinical making, the homosexual...I suspect that Dracula's primary progenitor...is Oscar Wilde in the dock" (83). The panic surrounding the Cleveland Street Scandal reached deep into Stoker's circle of theater acquaintances, including the ubiquitous Wilde.<sup>16</sup> Historian H.G. Cocks explains that homosexuality was a "nameless offense" in the Victorian era, having an "unspeakable" quality that was clearly challenged by the flagrance of the Cleveland Street and Wilde scandals. The cultural hysteria surrounding homosexuality is reflected by the Labouchere Amendment to the Criminal Offenses Act of 1885, which criminalized any behavior between two men that could be construed as erotic (Cocks 5). In fact, the word *homosexual* did not enter into the English language until introduced in Krafft-Ebing's medical treatise *Psychopathia Sexualis*,

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<sup>16</sup> It is worth pointing out that Wilde's life dovetailed Stoker's in many curious ways; this is a point highlighted in Richard Ellman's definitive biography of Wilde. Both Stoker and Wilde were intrigued but not committed to occult elements (Stoker spiritualism, Wilde freemasonry), they were both engaged to the same woman, they moved largely in the same social circles, and (least explored but potentially most significant of all) they were both originally Irish. Talia Schaffer suggests that Stoker based Dracula on Oscar Wilde (382).

which was published in 1892 (14). The work of Krafft-Ebing subsequently exerted a significant influence on Freud's own theories of sexual identity. Though Freud's theories were generally embraced by artistic and intellectual circles, critic Alan Sinfield is quick to point out that Freud encountered enormous resistance among the general public and in the popular press. Indeed, Freudianism became closely identified with fin-de-siècle fears of social decay and degeneracy (Sinfield 14).

Stoker's *Dracula* is a response to various forms of cultural hysteria that reached a boiling point during the fin-de-siècle; not only is *Dracula* a challenge to prevailing Victorian sexual orthodoxy, but the novel also critiques the period's characteristic xenophobia. Stoker's twin commentary on sex and race reflects a profound moral anxiety over the exploitation inherent in late Victorian imperialism. *Dracula* reflects the Victorian fear of violation and rape, a neurosis with its origin in the brutality of colonialism and domestic abuse.<sup>17</sup> As Patrick Brantlinger suggests in his examination of Victorian xenophobia, *Rule of Darkness* (1990), *Dracula* is an extension of the repressed violence lying just beneath the surface of Victorian life; the oppressed and

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<sup>17</sup> The brutality of marriage in an age of sexual inequality is vividly conveyed by Wilkie Collins's term "the marital rod," used to great effect by the character Count Fosco in *The Woman in White*.

blood-sucking<sup>18</sup> foreigner “invades the very heart of the civilized British Empire” (9). Matthew Biberman points out that “bloodsucker” has been a common anti-Semitic slur for centuries, and the fact that most Jews in Stoker’s time lived in the Eastern European pale of settlement (which included Transylvania) is not coincidental (56). In Freudian terms, *Dracula* represents the eclipse of the modulating ego by the rampaging id. This is reflected in Van Helsing’s exhortation to his fellow vampire-hunters:

if we fail in this fight he [Dracula] must surely win; and then where end we? To fail here is not merely life or death. It is that we become as him; that we henceforward become foul things of the night like him—without heart or conscience, preying on the bodies and the souls of those we love best. (237)

Thus, in the same way that Stoker uses Spiritualism to critique Victorian sexual hypocrisy, he uses Spiritualism to disparage another problematic element of Victorian society: racism. Dracula’s transformation from barbaric Eastern “other” to well-dressed Victorian gent walking the streets of London evokes precisely the kind of fear Brantlinger refers to. As Brantlinger points out, Dracula threatens to

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<sup>18</sup>

create a demonic empire of the dead from the living British Empire. Initially, Dracula is a spectral menace much like the ghosts summoned in earlier midcentury séances, confined to the land of the dead. It is not until Jonathan enables his release (thus acting as both the medium *and* the messenger) that Dracula is able to leave the confines of his spectral castle and attack the living heart of Victorian civilization. Jonathan realizes that “this [Dracula] being I was helping to transfer to London...perhaps for centuries to come...might satiate his thirst for blood and create new and ever-widening circle of semi-demons to batten on the helpless” (Stoker 67).

General criticism of *Dracula* has tended to overlook the novel’s connection to Victorian Spiritualism. Having explained metaphorical significance of the novel’s beginning in which a spirit is summoned into the world of the living from beyond the grave, we must turn our attention to the falling action of the novel, where Stoker crafts a scene clearly intended to evoke the image of a Spiritualist séance. Once Dracula is on the run, Mina must enter into a séance in order to commune with the Count and track his whereabouts. However, she can only access her mediumistic powers once she has been violated by the marauding spirit of Dracula, baptized in his blood, essentially raped and deflowered. Unlike earlier Spiritualist mediums whose

powers were determined by their virginal purity, Mina is a Spiritualist whose powers have been sharpened, indeed enabled, by the sexual violence of the séance ritual. During the chase, Van Helsing observes that as a result of her Spiritualistic connection with Dracula, Mina's "eyes have seen where we were blind" (Stoker 471). As historian Roger Luckhurst relates in *The Invention of Telepathy* (2002), the metaphor of second sight was a common means of expressing supernatural prowess in the Victorian era. Here Stoker drops a clue by using the argot of the Spiritualist subculture.

The séance between Mina and Dracula, enabled by the comingling of their blood, is part of a powerful fin-de-siècle critique of the midcentury Victorian idea of womanhood, the angel of the house immortalized by Coventry Patmore in his poem of 1854. According to Alex Owen, illness was usually a precursor to the manifestation of Spiritualist talent. Owen states that "illness held a unique meaning for Spiritualists. It was...an obligatory *rite de passage*" (206).

Furthermore, in *The Doctor in the Victorian Family* (2009), Tabitha Sparks argues that Stoker uses vampirism as a metaphor for venereal disease (122). The implication we can draw from this passage in the novel is that Mina's contraction of vampirism from Dracula has made her stronger, not weaker. Her illness has given her special powers.

The idea of illness as a source of empowerment is a perennial theme in fin-de-siècle literature; indeed, the theme of bodily infirmity as source of spiritual empowerment emerged from a considerable body of sickroom literature that began well before the period.<sup>19</sup>

As a result of Mina's violent mediumistic contact with Dracula, she transcends the strictures of conventional gender roles and overcomes the hypocrisy of Victorian sexual mores. She states that she is merely "a poor weak woman." However, she declares only one page later that "were death, or the fear of death, the only thing that stood in the way I would not shrink to die. But death is not all...I give up certainty of eternal rest and go out into the dark where may be the blackest things that the world or the nether world knows" (Stoker 330). Two elements of Mina's stirring rhetoric must be contextualized. Firstly, it should be noted that her reference to the "nether world" is typical Spiritualist argot; Victorian readers would have understood the very specific construction of that sentence, in which "the world" is juxtaposed with "the nether world," as a reference to the Spiritualist belief that reality was divided between the worlds of the living and the dead. Importantly, the barrier between these two worlds is permeable

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<sup>19</sup> The prominent journalist Harriet Martineau, who was afflicted with uterine cancer, wrote an entire memoir of her experience as an invalid and published it in 1837 as *Life in the Sickroom*. It was a best-seller.

now that Mina has agency to make contact with the “nether world.” Mina’s determination to risk her soul in a final confrontation with Dracula is a powerful example of Stoker’s use of Spiritualism to contest the boundaries of Victorian womanhood; Mina has been contaminated by Dracula’s blood, and using the mediumistic link established by Dracula’s act of spiritual rape, she is bound to arrest Dracula’s circle of violence and destroy him.

But this is more complicated than it seems, for with each new assault, Dracula becomes less spectral and more corporeal. When Jonathan notices a newly rejuvenated Count in Piccadilly Square, he exclaims, “I believe it is the Count, but he has grown so young” (Stoker 172). Dracula becomes less phantasmal; like the ghost at the séance table, he becomes increasingly human as the séance progresses. He moves farther into the world of the living and is increasingly capable of blending in with living people; as the incident in Piccadilly Square clearly reveals, he can nearly pass for one of them.

The dichotomies invoked by Stoker’s use of Spiritualism—sexuality and innocence, occidental and oriental—echo the characteristic duality of other prominent Gothic fin-de-siècle thrillers. In the same way that Oscar Wilde’s Dorian Gray is simultaneously the man-about-town and a brutal sexual predator, and Jekyll/Hyde is a

single man who fractures into two distinct warring psychical entities, Dracula is a divided persona: he is a specter who is also flesh and blood. This is a foundational element of Spiritualism: the ghost, conjured from the other world, becomes, for a time, human by manifesting itself in the body of a human. But for Stoker, this is highly problematic, as Dracula doesn't merely inhabit the body of the medium but has a physicality of his own. In Jungian terms, he is the *shadow* of Victorian *persona*. He is the sum total of the qualities that Victorian society sought to suppress, broken forth in the form of a bloodthirsty rampaging maniac. It is hard to imagine an image further removed from the peaceful spirits the Fox Sisters described during their first séance in 1848.

Like Stoker's *Dracula*, James's *The Turn of the Screw* connects Spiritualism with sexual violence. James crafts a harrowing Gothic narrative to critique the kind of "nameless" sexual offenses that Victorian society desperately tried to ignore; the unnamed narrator of the tale, reading from the Governess's account, remarks that the tale is unrivaled "for general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain" (James 292). The use of the word "uncanny" James's remark is not coincidental, of course. Freud's concept of the uncanny, or the *unheimlich*, is essentially defined as a sensation that is simultaneously

familiar and alien (Freud 32). In "The Turn of the Screw," the uncanny is reflected in the reappearance of Quint and Jessel; the ghosts of the late governess and her lover represent hidden sexual tensions beneath the surface of the pleasant Victorian country house. These hidden tensions cannot be repressed; the trauma they represent endures in the spectral visitations of the dead.

The concept of the uncanny clearly intrigued James, as it appears in much of his work. Indeed, Maud Ellmann states that "Freudian ideas were in the air at the time...James [was] composing [his] novels" (32). She further contends that "Henry James, during his 1904 visit to the United States, consulted a doctor influenced by Freud, a treatment that the novelist experienced as beneficial" (32). But for this dissertation, I must confine my focus on James's use of uncanny to an analysis of the connection he establishes between Spiritualism and sexuality. This is a theme James revisited multiple times. For example, in James's work *The Bostonians* (1885), Spiritualism is linked with lesbianism, feminism, and the suffragette movement. According to Howard Kerr, James's intent in *The Bostonians* was to critique Spiritualism for its connection with feminism and women's liberation (106). Kerr argues James's depiction of the feminist trance-lecturer Spiritualist, liberated from conventional

feminine strictures by Spiritualism, is sexually “corrupted by these new freedoms” (257). However, in James’s later work *The Turn of the Screw*, Spiritualism takes on a much darker tone. Here, James is no longer exploring the connection between Spiritualism and midcentury Victorian politics; in *The Turn of the Screw*, James employs Spiritualism to explore the horrors of Victorian childhood sexual abuse.

In general, childhood sexuality was a forbidden topic amongst Victorians. For proof, one need only review the ways in which Freud’s essays on infant sexuality were received upon publication. One of the more interesting discussions of the prevalence of childhood sexual abuse in Victorian England is the argument offered by Louise A. Jackson in her book *Child Sexual Abuse in Victorian England* (2000). The Victorian middle-class notion of childhood was a romanticized image of innocence. Jackson points out that knowledge of sexual abuse of girls was relatively prevalent, but “male victims were barely recognized at all” (112). At the heart of *The Turn of the Screw* is a terrifying example of male sexual abuse that has parallels with the predatory relationship between the youthful Jonathan Harker and the ageless Dracula. As Jackson explains, prosecutions for pederasty are almost completely absent from legal records of the time. Indeed, according to literary critic Lee Edelman, Victorian society was so intent

on ignoring the existence of same-sex violence that homosexual rape was excluded from consideration in the 1836 reform to the legislative designation of capital offenses (Edelman 5).

Quint's sexual initiation of Miles, which violates the boy's innocence, had a specific cultural significance for Henry James. Victorian society turned a deliberately blind eye to this particular brand of violence, and it is my contention that James's *The Turn of the Screw* attempts to generate awareness of sexual violence that was, at the time, literally unspeakable. Hence, like Stoker, James uses Spiritualism to cloak his critique of the sexual violence that was a common but unspeakable feature of Victorian society. Critics have ascribed James's depiction of Spiritualism to his genuine desire to tell a genuinely unnerving gothic story. However, I contend that James's use of Spiritualism is not merely a result of his desire to tell a compelling ghost story (though it does make for a very compelling Gothic tale, as we have already discussed). Though *The Turn of the Screw* is certainly a chilling and uncanny work, there James's use of Spiritualism, like Stoker's, has a critical aspect to it. The possession and subsequent corruption of the children of Bly Manor certainly recalls Mina's violation by Dracula. In his exploration of Spiritualism and

sexuality, James describes a relationship between the characters of Quint and Miles so shocking it was 'nameless' by Victorian standards.

Henry James seems to have had what is popularly termed a love/hate relationship with Spiritualism; he had a naturally dark curiosity but was also a natural skeptic. Like Stoker, James was not a Spiritualist, and his critiques suggest he understood Spiritualism as mystical humbug; however, James also understood Spiritualism's literary potential, and he exploited it in two fundamentally different ways. In *The Bostonians*, James uses Spiritualism as a vehicle to critique the nascent feminist movement. But it is imperative to understand that James's ideology had changed in the time between the two novels. In *Ghostly Communion: Cross-Cultural Spiritualism in Nineteenth Century Literature*, John Kucich asserts that James's use of Spiritualism in *The Bostonians* was "a means of critiquing specific American ideologies and...a vehicle for examining ideology in general" (120). Specifically, James uses the character of Verena Tarrant to criticize Spiritualism and feminism.

James understood Spiritualism and feminism to be related cultural innovations. In this he was certainly not alone. In fact, the practicing Spiritualist and feminist stalwart Victoria Woodhull once asserted that "Spiritualism [was] natural outgrowth and logical

consequence of the movement for women's suffrage" (Gabriel 113). However, according to Kucich, James was revolted by the histrionic excesses of practicing Spiritualists like Vera Tennant—and his own father. James's father was "perhaps the leading American advocate of Emanuel Swedenborg...whose explorations of the spiritual world provided much of the theoretical framework for American Spiritualism" (121). Thus, Kucich suggests, by the time Henry James (junior) reached adulthood, he had developed a decidedly negative view of mysticism as a result of his father's spiritual proclivities. This helps contextualize James's use of Spiritualism as a front for darker human motivations.

James realized the inherently Gothic aspect of Spiritualism, its capacity to incite and disturb the reader. As James's biographer Martha Banta observes, "James's maturity as an artist came during *The Yellow Book* years of the 'decadent nineties,' when the reading public delighted in the exotic and bizarre" (174). Banta also asserts that *The Turn of the Screw*, in its depiction of possession, madness, and murder, is nothing if not "exotic and bizarre" (175). It is therefore not unreasonable to argue that James, like Stoker, felt the decadent mode to be a superior tool for using Spiritualism as a means of criticizing the darker elements of Victorian society, such as violence

and sexual abuse. Certainly, by the 1890s, James had become deeply intrigued by the fin-de-siècle Gothic mode; the transition from the realist style of *The Bostonians* to the Gothic style of *The Turn of the Screw* may well have resulted from a creative fusion between the circulating currents of fin-de-siècle Gothic. In the introduction to his anthology of Victorian Gothic fiction, Roger Luckhurst suggests that “James’s morbid sensitivity to the question of life after death combined with the Gothic cultural matrix of the fin-de-siècle period” to produce a stylistically different Spiritualist narrative than he had crafted just a few years before in the 1880s (iix).

James’s interest in the connection between sexuality and Spiritualism, first manifested in *The Bostonians*, remains evident in *The Turn of the Screw*. However, he takes a much different approach to depicting Spiritualism in *The Turn of the Screw*. As the Founder of the Society for Psychical Research Frank Podmore stated, James’s desire for “supreme impressions [and] affectations of mind by mind” were the chief aesthetic motivations in James’s writing of *The Turn of the Screw* (290). In *The Bostonians*, James is principally interested in critiquing midcentury progressivism as it relates to Spiritualism. By the time he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*, Spiritualism had already lost its credibility as a reform movement, and James, still interested in

Spiritualism, moved on to use Spiritualism as a means of critiquing the darker social climate of the fin-de-siècle and its various social ills. Like Stoker, James uses Spiritualism partly as a means of darkening the tone of his story, but also as a way of obliquely exploring sexually disturbing themes in a way that was still socially acceptable to a general readership. James, like Stoker, uses Spiritualism as a front for criticizing the social dilemmas of the late period Victorian culture—the violence and sexual abuse of the innocent, which was ignored by society and legal authorities alike. As historian Joanna Bourke notes in her article on sexual violence in the Victorian era, “nineteenth-century matrimonial law...allowed for significant levels of injury” (3). In *Reconstructing the Criminal* (2004), Martin J. Wiener observes that “serious violence, especially against women” was common in Victorian England.

Thus, like Stoker’s *Dracula*, James’s *The Turn of the Screw* highlights the connection between Spiritualism and sexual exploitation. There is the suggestion that in addition to witnessing sexual acts between Quint and Jessel, Miles himself has experienced sexual initiation at the hands of Quint. The narrator comments that “Quint and the boy had been perpetually together. It was in fact the very appropriate truth that [the Governess] had ventured to criticize the

propriety, to hint at the incongruity, of so close an alliance" (48). The suggestion is further expanded by Mrs. Grose's assertion that "when they had been together [it was] quite as if Quint was [Miles's] tutor." James is insistent on the point, constantly dropping hints throughout the text of the physical proximity between Miles and Quint and the 'unnamable' vices that Quint has shared with his protégé. James is careful to emphasize at the outset of his tale that the corruption of Miles by Quint "at so tender an age, adds a particular touch" to the story (291).

Additionally, the Governess guesses that both Flora and Miles witnessed Quint and Jessel engaging in sexual acts. Indeed, there is the further suggestion that Flora and Miles actively participated in sexual activity with Quint. When Mrs. Grose asserts that Quint "did what he liked," the governess tries to clarify this statement. Referring specifically to Jessel, the governess asks Mrs. Grose, "With *her*?" Mrs. Grose darkly replies, "With them all" (James 45). Miles and Flora have experienced what Victorians would consider a significant trauma; in his essays on childhood sexuality, Freud asserts that children who witnessed adult sex often viewed it as a sadistic assault (3). However, it appears that the trauma has manifested itself in different ways in the two children. Miles forms an attachment to Quint as a result of his

witnessing and participating in sexual acts; Flora merely mimics adult actions in her sadistic torture of the governess, whereas Miles actually *enjoys* them. The governess believes that Miles is possessed, and subsequently in spiritual *and* physical contact, with the deceased Quint. At the conclusion of the *The Turn of the Screw*, as the governess attempts to forcibly exorcise the spirit of Quint, Miles cries out, "Peter Quint! You Devil!" In this final exclamation, Miles finally acknowledges the presence of Quint's spirit and its influence. But there are two acts of abuse here—the sexual exploitation of Miles by Quint, and the governess's killing of Miles in order to sever his homosexual connection with Quint's spirit. Like Verena Tarrant in *The Bostonians*, the governess is exactly the kind of highly strung, psychologically unstable woman whom James thought most susceptible to the unwholesome influences of the Spiritualist movement. In fact, as critic Susan Wolstenholme points out, "the governess [causes] Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, who have presumably been at Bly all along, actually to appear" (587). Thus, James uses Spiritualism as a kind of duck-blind that enables him to explore the 'unspeakable' connection between Quint and Miles.

Here we must explore a significant difference between the séance involving Mina and Dracula, and the spiritual connection

between Miles and Quint. Mrs. Grose's confession about the licentious relationship of the two dead servants is, as we have seen above, prompted by the governess's own decision that Quint is "infamous"; it is the governess who first interprets in homoerotic terms the fact that Miles spent time alone with Quint (and Mrs. Grose picks up on it and "elaborates"). Whereas Mina grows stronger as a result of her contact with Dracula, becoming a new kind of Victorian heroine by overcoming the taint of her sexual contact with the undead, Miles is destroyed by his inability to sever his connection with Quint. The crucial difference between the Spiritualistic contact between Mina/Dracula and Quint/Miles is that Mina is a woman—she is able to resist and ultimately overcome Dracula's spiritual rape because it occurs in the context of a heterosexual encounter. However, Miles is just a boy. In the same way that Stoker panders to Victorian expectations by uniting Mina and Jonathan in holy matrimony, James placates his readers by bringing his tale of Spiritualistic pederasty to a morally satisfying conclusion—the boy, sexually and spiritually violated by the lecherous Quint, is murdered by the governess who thereby restores his virtue. The morally tainted Miles is thereby redeemed by the governess's homicidal act of purification.

Thus, we are once again confronted by the unsettling moral commentary of James's tale. Miles is exploited by the governess who satisfies her own sense of moral rectitude by literally murdering the morally tainted Miles. However, Miles seems a willing accomplice to Quint, who in both life and death opens up a world of sexual possibilities to the "beautiful boy." The notion that children are sexual beings with libidos and sex drives was deeply disturbing to Victorians, who perceived childhood as a state of innocence outside of the erotic sphere of the adult world. In *Victorian Childhood: Themes and Variations*, historian Thomas Jordan explains that the Victorians conceived of childhood "as a state of innocence" (Jordan 65). Freud argued that the definition of sexual maturity was far more elastic than most Victorians were willing to concede; this idea had appeared sporadically in Freud's writings over the years, and was finally set forth in a series of three essays published shortly after James's *The Turn of the Screw* (Jordan 11). The connection between James and Freud has not gone unnoticed by critics. According to Freud's biographer Peter Gay, Freud's essay "The Theory of Infantile Sexuality" was a veritable bombshell that deeply offended public sensibilities (Gay 18). In fact, recent scholarship has suggested that Freud's concept of childhood sexuality was even more controversial than the version published in

his essay on the topic, and that he deliberately censored material he had prepared on the sexual seduction of children (Masson 46).

Psychiatric scholar Mark Jones has written that "James's novel...was followed closely by Freud's three essays on sexuality" (1). Jones explains that "James implies a potency in childhood sexuality concerning [their] corruption by ghosts" (1).

There is a clear affinity between Freud's and James's notions of childhood sexuality and seduction. Moreover, these ideas clearly emerged from the same notions of degeneracy and sexual aestheticism that decadent artists of the fin-de-siècle (including James) found so compelling. Jones asserts that "an adult who seeks to enter into an overtly sexual relationship with a child, risks hijacking the normal sexual development of the child by introducing an adult perspective of what sex is or could be" (3). As Jones perceptively explains, "what *turns the screw* is adults' fear about children's apparent mental innocence of sex" (4). James himself stated that he wanted to give "the impression of the communication to the children of the most infernal imaginable danger and evil" (xii). Barbara Hardy argues that traditional critics have generally been more interested in the question of the governess's sanity, reluctant to pick up on James's hints that the story has a significant sexual component (119). This is

precisely where my interpretation inserts itself into the critical discourse surrounding *The Turn of the Screw*. James leaves a trail of hermeneutical clues that, taken together, make a strong case for a homoerotic reading of *The Turn of the Screw*. The “namelessness” which Professor Cocks indicates as being representative of the Victorian attitude towards homosexuality is cleverly deployed by James, who uses the opacity of the Victorians’ attitude towards homosexuality—its “namelessness”— to infuse his story with unmistakable clues as to the nature of Miles’s transgressions committed under the spiritual influence of Quint.

The reason for Miles’s mysterious expulsion from school, which the governess refuses to discuss, to even *name*, has homoerotic resonances. Even Miles’s school itself is reluctant to name of his particular transgressions; the governess informs Mrs. Grose that Miles’s school “goes into no particulars. They simply express their regret that it should be impossible to keep him” (James 304). Once more, without naming the sin in question, the Governess concludes that “that can have only *one* meaning” (304). When she explains to the housekeeper Mrs. Grose that Miles is being sent down for having contaminated his classmates, Mrs. Grose doesn’t understand the word. The Governess is then more explicit; she explains to contaminate is to

corrupt (305). To a Victorian reader, contamination in the spiritual sense could mean only one thing: sexually inappropriate behavior.

Critics such as Thomas Laughlin have agreed that “a thematic of male-male desire operates within the matrices of a Jamesian freeplay of the signifier” (154). Yet, as Laughlin points out, “the fate of a proper homosexual subject is confined to the closet” in James’s rhetoric. This is certainly true up to a point, but De Grasse fails to consider the sexual dimensions of Spiritualism and spirit-possession. In *The Turn of the Screw*, James comes as close as he possibly can to liberating himself from the epistemological closet by describing the physical and spiritual union between a man and a boy. This is a critical oversight, as we have seen; in *The Turn of the Screw*, James creates a homoerotic fantasy using Spiritualism as a kind of literary smoke-screen. Taken together, the evidence is highly compelling. The governess refuses to even *name* the transgression for which Miles has been sent down from school. In fact, the closest the Governess comes to discussing the situation is by describing the world of Miles’s school as “little, horrid [and] *unclean*” (314). As the Buggery Act of 1533 specifically described the act of homosexual relations as “unclean”; it seems hard to believe that James would use this specific

word without meaning to evoke images of same-sex intimacy (Arata 56).

Even if she cannot name it, the Governess understands that there is a terrible secret at Bly, “a mystery of Udolpho or an insane, unmentionable relative kept in unsuspected confinement” (James 312). She does not learn until the end of the story, however, that this nameless evil is not part of the house or the landscape, but part of the children, the seemingly innocent children, who the Governess has described as “incredibly beautiful” (307). In *The Turn of the Screw*, evil lies in the most seemingly innocent place of all; this is an idea that lies at the heart of most Victorian sensation fiction.

Ultimately, the extent to which Quint exploits Miles, or Miles willingly accompanies Quint down the road of sexual adventurism, is not settled. Most critics have interpreted this ambiguity as James’s desire to “leave the specifics of that evil to the imagination of the reader” (Sandock 18). What is unequivocally clear is that the possession of Miles and Flora by the malevolent spirits of Quint and Jessel is an act of spiritual possession—the ghosts are called back from the land of the dead and the children communicate and even bond with them. The license that Quint took with Miles in life is the same as he takes in death. When the governess queries Mrs. Grose about

Quint, she is told that Quint was “too free with *everyone*” (James 323). All Mrs. Grose is willing to concede is that Quint and his protégé were “definitely and admittedly bad” (324). However, James qualifies this mysterious statement by indicating that “there had been matters in life—strange passages and perils, secret disorders, vices more than suspected” that had passed between Quint and Miles. The word “disorder” has a particular resonance here, as only ten years before James published *The Turn of the Screw*, Kraft-Ebbing had published his *Psychopathia Sexualis* which labeled homosexuality as a “disorder” and achieved wide currency in medical and literary circles (Savoia 27). Indeed, when the Governess finally presses Mrs. Grose to describe precisely what had passed between Quint and Miles, the Governess reluctantly admits, “There was everything” (James 331). She adds that, in the absence of the master of Bly, Quint “did what he wished...with *all* of them” (331).

The relationship between Quint and Miles may or may not have been completely known to Mrs. Grose—or, perhaps, she was willing to turn a blind eye (certainty the entire staff of Bly are terrified by the prospect of the master coming down from London). The fact that Mrs. Grose may have been complicit in Quint’s corruption of Miles does nothing to mollify the Governess’s moral indignation over the situation.

As Mrs. Grose advises the governess, "Quint... had gone off with the fellow...and spend hours with him" (James 336). At this point, the Governess understands that there is something fundamentally at odds with Miles's innocent beauty and his penchant for wickedness. She concludes that Miles "was under some influence operating in his small life" (339). In other words, Flora and Miles are possessed. There is certainly a sexual aspect to Quint's spiritual possession of Miles; Quint has been "hungrily hovering" for the boy all along (James 349). The motif of bodily possession is highlighted when the Governess reflects that, once possessed by Miss Jessel, Flora "is not a child...she's an old, old woman" (378).

There were only two fundamental tenets to Victorian Spiritualism. Firstly, Spiritualists held that the living could communicate with the dead. Secondly, Spiritualists believed that when they channeled the spirits they summoned, they effectively *became* those spirits in body. The ramifications of this bodily union were profoundly disturbing for prim Victorians; when Spiritualism was at the height of its popularity, many Spiritualist mediums manifested spirits of the opposite gender. Historian Janet Oppenheim states in her history of Spiritualism *The Other World* that "the spirit had control over the medium's body...and could do as the spirit liked" (419).

When the Governess claims that Miles and Flora “are talking to the dead,” James drops his strongest and most convincing hint that the story is not merely about ghosts, but about Spiritualism (311). However, the communication back and forth between the dead is not the benign spirit rapping described by progressive midcentury Spiritualists like the Fox Sisters. The Governess explains to Mrs. Grose that the connection between Quint/Jessel and Miles/Flora has never been severed. When Mrs. Grose wonders why the connection still exists, the Governess declares that the purpose of the spirits of Quint and Jessel is to “ply them with...evil...to keep up the work of demons” (James 352). Quint and Jessel are not merely content with the havoc they raised while alive; they are trying to corrupt the children completely, even from beyond the grave.

The governess refers to the spirits as “outsiders” (James 358). Like Stoker, James is concerned with the invasion of the private spaces of Victorian life by “outsiders,” foreign forces that threaten the very fabric of English Victorian life. In the same way that Dracula violates the sanctity of the Victorian family with his uncontrollable and sexually charged bloodlust, so too do the “others” of Quint and Jessel threaten another Victorian institution—the innocence of children. The Governess discovers during her encounter with the spirit of Jessel in

the classroom that Jessel wants to “share the torments of the damned with [her]” (James 367). This dynamic of the safe domestic space as opposed to the wild untamed outland is emphasized when the Governess relates that Flora is channeling spirit of Jessel from beyond; as Jessel’s hold on Flora grows, Flora begins to speak “as if she had gotten from some outside source each of her stabbing words” (383).

This theme—the threat posed to safe, domestic England by the untamed, sexually uninhibited “other”—epitomizes one of the chief anxieties of English fin-de-siècle society. By invading Bly, the quintessential English country house, and violating its most intimate areas such as the schoolroom and the nursery, the spirits of Quint and Jessel are determined to corrupt Miles and Flora to the full extent of their ability. The Governess understands that the Miles is on the precipice of moral ruin—she reflects that “the imagination of all evil has been opened up to him” (374). Thus, in both *Dracula* and *The Turn of the Screw*, what is at stake is the very way of life that Victorians had come to cherish, the values that defined them as society. Both James and Stoker understand that these values are far less stable than they appear. By using Spiritualism as a means of invoking one of Victorian society’s darkest fears, Stoker and James come as far as they possibly can in terms of expressing the limits of

Victorian sexual mores without directly challenging them. Thus, Stoker and James remain in Sedgwick's epistemological closet, but by using Spiritualism as a motif in their work, they have at least cracked the door open.

## CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION: LIFE AFTER LIFE AFTER DEATH: SPIRITUALISM IN NEO-VICTORIAN LITERATURE

In tracing the course of literary depictions of Spiritualism, my analysis has ranged from midcentury Victorian novels written by committed advocates of Spiritualism, i.e., Florence Marryat's *The Dead Man's Message* (1849) and Elizabeth Phelps's *The Gates Ajar* (1868), to representations of Spiritualism written in fin-de-siècle Gothic style. As I have demonstrated, the appropriation of Spiritualism as a Gothic literary trope was not sudden. Rather, it was gradual, reflecting the decline and fall of the Spiritualist movement by the end of the Victorian era. Now, given the significant critical interest in Neo-Victorian literature, it would be an oversight to conclude this dissertation without discussing how Neo-Victorian authors resurrect images of Victorian Spiritualism in their work. According to Louisa Hadley, Neo-Victorian fiction "provides a narrative account of the Victorian era [and] also explores the way in which the Victorians have been narrated in the present" (164). Neo-Victorian novels "grapple with the demands of how to package the Victorian past for the tastes and demands of contemporary readers" (Mitchell 3).

Despite the fact that Neo-Victorian writers have the entire gamut of Victorian literature to plunder and reconfigure, there is nevertheless a trend among them to deploy Spiritualism as a specifically Gothic trope in imitation of fin-de-siècle writers like Bram Stoker and Henry James. Novels such as Christopher Priest's *The Prestige* (1997) and Iain Sinclair's *White Chappell, Scarlet Tracings* (1999) reference Spiritualism as a means of connecting with the Victorian past. For the purpose of this chapter, however, I have confined my analysis to the work which most epitomize this Neo-Victorian trend towards the Gothic: Sarah Waters's *Affinity* (2000).

In Chapter Four I discussed the concept of the uncanny as a vital underpinning of the Gothic idiom. In *Powers of Horror* (1982), Julia Kristeva revises Freud's theory of the uncanny as a means of explaining the relationship between Gothic "others" and mainstream groups. Kristeva's notion of the abject, in which a member of a comfortably mainstream group can nevertheless recognize something disturbingly familiar in a member of an oppressed minority, is a useful means of understanding the relationship between the two main characters, Margaret and Selena, in Sarah Waters's *Affinity*.

Christine Ferguson argues that Neo-Victorian Spiritualist fiction [is] "a radical form of Gothic experimentalism" (877). Ferguson

contends that Neo-Victorian Spiritualist fiction privileges Gothic representations of Spiritualism over earlier representations from the Victorian midcentury. This privileging expands on Frederick Jameson's critique of postmodern historical fiction as a "random cannibalization of the past." Neo-Victorian writers are, in Jameson's words, rendering a "false sense of history." Unlike Phelps and Marryat, Neo-Victorian writers do not depict Spiritualism as a progressive social movement; rather, they present Spiritualism through the lens of "Gothic experimentalism" (Ferguson 877). This distortion is built on late representations of Spiritualism that emerged in works like *Dracula* and *The Turn of the Screw*; Waters, like Stoker and James, is using the Gothic idiom to critique Spiritualism and, in a broader sense, Victorian society.

But here I depart from contemporary critical opinions by asserting that while Neo-Victorian Spiritualist fiction does in fact cannibalize the past, its pastiches of Spiritualism are not random.

They serve a specific critical purpose. In the case of *Affinity*, Spiritualism is not only a Gothic accoutrement; it is a means of critiquing the historical past and revising it. This enables Sarah Waters to write a Victorian thriller that uses Spiritualist rhetoric to create a "Neo-Victorian lesbian Gothic" novel (Heilmann 111). Though

*Affinity* appears to imitate the Victorian domestic novel in its concern with family structures and the dynamics of home life, Waters critiques the Victorian notion of family by conflating home with the Gothic tropes of confinement and transgression.

Here we see the versatility of the Neo-Victorian genre; despite her Gothic co-opting of Spiritualism, Waters is nevertheless refining the social critique function used by midcentury Spiritualist writers. The figure of the medium Selena, who links home with prison, reveals Waters's "concern with the interaction of Spiritualism and transgressive desire" (Hadley 86). Transgression is an essential element of the Gothic (Botting 5). Alex Owen explains in *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1989) that nineteenth-century Spiritualism provided opportunities for women to challenge their limited roles in Victorian society. Waters's Neo-Victorian depiction of Spiritualism thus offers a contemporary reconfiguration of James's and Stoker's Spiritualist images. For Waters, Spiritualism is indeed transgressive and subversive. But she is also considering Spiritualism's claim of empowerment and liberation. Waters thus demonstrates that the Neo-Victorian genre is much more than mere pastiche. Neo-Victorian writers frequently pick up where Victorian literature leaves off by correcting omissions and filling

unexplained voids in Victorian literature, addressing subjects that Victorian writers had to pass over in silence.<sup>20</sup> Waters unites the disparate threads of Spiritualist literature, using Spiritualism as a means of social critique, but also employing it as a means of accentuating the Gothic qualities of their writing.

In *Affinity*, Waters is channeling Henry James's *A Turn of the Screw* (1898). The aggressive spirit guide conjured by Selena Dawes is named Peter Quick, an obvious nod to the ghost of the murderous Peter Quint in *A Turn of the Screw*. But *Affinity* is not merely pastiche; it is reinvention. Waters reconfigures James's tale to refute its tacit misogyny. Waters echoes the subtle suggestions of a homoerotic connection between Quint and Miles in James's *A Turn of the Screw* by creating an erotic triangle involving the Spiritualist medium Selena Dawes, the middle-class Margaret whom she seduces, and the mysterious spirit Selena claims to channel, Peter Quick. Quick is *not* a male spirit nor even truly male. Rather, Quick is the villain's lover/accomplice disguised as a male spirit. As Heillmann states, "Waters adopts Peter Quint's deviant libidinousness in a novel about any hysteric's lesbian awakening and in her own twists of the screw

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<sup>20</sup> For example, Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966) can be seen as a feminist attempt to fill the void in *Jane Eyre* (1847) by giving the heretofore silent Bertha Mason a voice.

subverts contemporary readerly expectations and interpretations” (112).

Thus, *Affinity* recasts James’s *The Turn of the Screw* “in order to investigate the oppressed position of women who form primary relationships with members of their own sex” (Palmer 118). Waters takes on James’s novel as an astringent critique of his anti-feminist views; she imitates and indeed resurrects his work, but infuses it with a modern feminist sensibility. Like James’s novel, surveillance and imprisonment are two of the major Gothic motifs in *Affinity*. Indeed, there exist multiple systems of surveillance that ensure female characters in *Affinity* are never completely alone; wherever they go, women are being monitored and scrutinized by other women. The prison guard at Millbank is staffed entirely by women; Margaret’s home life is controlled and monitored by her mother. Both systems form a panopticon in which characters are monitored without knowing exactly who is monitoring them. However, Waters inverts the gendering of the panopticon. The disciplinary gaze is usually gendered as male, but in *Affinity*, the disciplinary gaze is female. Millbank prison is literally a Benthamite panopticon, yet it is described in almost feminine terms as being reminiscent of a flower:

The prison, drawn in outline, has a kind of charm to it, the pentagons appearing as petals on a geometric flower...It is as if the prison had been designed by a man in the grip of a nightmare or madness— or had been made expressly to drive its inmates mad. (Waters 8)

As Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Betham's panopticon was designed to make inmates self-guarding; they could never be certain when they were being watched from the guardhouse's central tower, and thus they assumed they were under constant surveillance. Foucault argues that prisoners internalized the punitive measures of the panopticon and were, in a sense, their own jailers. But the panopticon is a power system applicable to a society at large. The industrialization of the Victorian era meant that large numbers of people were thrust together for the first time in unfamiliar urban areas; thus, Foucault suggests, the panopticon was not merely expressed in architectural terms in jails like Millbank. The panopticon became part of the Victorian psyche, as external forces struggled to assert control and prevent further decay of the social order. It is not surprising, then, that *Affinity* begins in a prison and continues to a prison, trailing Margaret from Millbank to her well-appointed middle class home. Structure and order are imposed on her from all sides.

Margaret's progress through Millbank to the very center, where Selena is concealed, can be interpreted as a psychological journey. In order to locate the object of desire, her "affinity," Margaret must abandon the rational surface world of London (which represents conscious identity) and discover its hidden truth, the erotic core of the irrational underworld concealed by prison gates. Selena asks Margaret, "Doesn't it seem to you, now that you are here, that *anything* might be real, since Millbank is?" (Waters 86). The horrors that prisoners endure are so far removed from Margaret's ordinary life that believing in Spiritualism is relatively unremarkable in comparison to believing that Millbank is real and not a nightmare.

As Palmer explains, Margaret's upper-middle class home and Millbank prison, though ostensibly having little in common, "reveal on closer scrutiny several similarities...both attempt to exert control by operating a system of surveillance" (Palmer 126). Foucault points out in *Discipline and Punish* that one of the panopticon's unintended consequences was its tendency to serve as a forum wherein the convict's body could become an object of sympathy and admiration for the viewer. This complicated master-and-servant dynamic is echoed in the relationship between Margaret and Selena. As Foucault argues in the first volume of his *History of Sexuality*, "[t]he pleasure that

comes from exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out...and on the other hand, the pleasure that kindles at having to evade this power, flee from it...assert[s] itself in the pleasure of showing off, scandalizing, and resisting" (Foucault 45).

At first, Selena symbolizes the promise of intellectual liberation for Margaret, who dreads and deeply resents her quotidian male-dominated domestic world. Selena lures Margaret by promising spiritual (and eventually physical) union. Selena arranges to have her old partner in crime posted among Margaret's household staff. This way, Margaret is under constant surveillance by Selena, who receives detailed reports of Margaret's behavior and life at home. For the Victorians, the idea of Margaret's middle-class home as a site constantly under surveillance would have been disturbing. According to Judith Flanders, the Victorians perceived home life as "a microcosm of the ideal society [emphasizing] love and charity" (6). But Margaret's home is far removed from this ideal, and here Waters suggests that the Victorian ideal of domesticity concealed a reality that was deeply oppressive for women.

Armed with information from her informant and partner in crime, Selena is able to play the part of the all-seeing Spiritualist, setting a trap for Margaret. In this sense, the power dynamic between the two

characters shifts as the narrative unfolds. Initially, it appears that Margaret has the upper hand; she constantly subjects Selena to the scrutiny of her predatory gaze. Like Mrs. Aldwynn in *The Dead Man's Message*, we witness a reversal of the male gaze (see Chapter Two). Selena, who plays *femme* to Margaret's *butch*, reverses dynamic of the male gaze by objectifying the masculine Margaret.

Selena claims to be able to negotiate the boundary between the worlds of the living and the dead; it is this uncanny ability that makes her irresistibly fascinating to Margaret. Selena thus uses Spiritualism to liberate herself from the literal prison of Millbank and the prison of her narrowly proscribed Victorian gender role. In *Affinity*, Waters equates compulsory heterosexuality with repressive, regressive, outdated social mores. Before she is imprisoned, Selena used her fame as a practicing Spiritualist to rise above the poverty she had been born into and ingratiate herself into household of a wealthy patron. Such situations were not unknown in the nineteenth century, but Waters goes one step further by bringing distinctly contemporary analytical prowess to bear on the situation. Spiritualism has not merely enabled Selena to liberate herself from poverty—it has also enabled her to liberate herself from the strictures of compulsory heterosexuality that dominated Victorian sexual discourse. This is a

new twist on the theme of “liberation through Spiritualism” explored in Chapter Two of this dissertation; it continues the critique initiated by Phelps and Marryat and carries it in a more radical direction: not only is marriage criticized, but heterosexuality itself is called is condemned as compulsory and limiting. The affinity between Spiritualists—medium and subject—promises freedom and sexual fulfillment. Waters thus recalls the earliest notions of the affinity between Spiritualism and Women’s Rights espoused by the Seneca Falls Conventioneers in 1848, the year of Spiritualism’s birth: Spiritualism persuades believers with its promises of liberation and release.

The operative word here is “affinity.” The lives led by these two women are very different, yet, according to Selena, they nevertheless share an affinity. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, the word “affinity” was part of the Spiritualist argot and carried a very specific meaning. Here it suggests not only a spiritual, but also a sexual, link between Margaret and Selena. Margaret imagines that she has established a psychic connection with Selena, and can feel Selena’s prison torments remotely, at home. Simultaneously, Margaret imagines herself to be one of Selena’s séance attendees, conflating prison punishment with the erotic encounter inside the cabinet Selena used to carry out her séances and seduce her victims:

Then I knew where I was. I was with *her*, and close to her, so close...I felt the cell about me, the [straight] jacket upon me. And yet I seemed to feel my eyes bound, too, with bands of silk. And at my throat there was a velvet collar. (257)

Margaret's encounter with the Society for Psychical Research is a crucial turning point in the novel, as it initiates her into the Spiritualist demimonde. However, Waters's representation of the Society is not the rational, scientific group of respectably eminent Victorians who sought to clarify Spiritualism's claims with scientific experimentation. Rather, Margaret's encounter with the Society heightens the novel's Gothic sense of the uncanny. The Society's headquarters is littered with grotesque Spiritualist artifacts. Even the building itself seems shapeless, possibly imaginary. As Margaret enters the Society's headquarters to reconnoiter, she observes the name plate on the building and reflects:

That name-plate was never there...two years ago; or perhaps I only never saw it then, when Spiritualism was nothing to me. Seeing it now I stopped, then went a little nearer to it. I couldn't help but think, of course, of

*Selena...She* might have come here, when she was free;  
she might have passed me on this very street. (127)

The Society's headquarters is filled with bizarre Spiritualist artifacts, bits and pieces from various séances that seem half familiar to Margaret. For example, the Society houses a number of display cases filled with wax casts of spirit limbs materialized during séances. But what strikes Margaret as particularly uncanny, simultaneously familiar and alien, is the portrait of Peter Quick, the spirit Selena ostensibly materialized in her dark circles. Margaret notes that the eyes of the portrait "seemed particularly familiar...as if I might have gazed at them already□ perhaps, in my own dreams" (154). The reason these eyes are familiar is because they belong to Selena's accomplice, who has infiltrated Margaret's household and established herself as Margaret's personal maid.

Margaret ultimately realizes that the abject represents a doorway to the intellectual freedom she has sought all her life. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explains that the "abject" refers to the human reaction to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of distinction between self and other. Thus, when Margaret finally achieves total freedom, the complete removal from all ties that bind her to normative social behavior costs her her life. Alone, an outcast,

she commits suicide. Selena manages to escape Millbank, but only by traveling in disguise as a lady's maid. By the end of *Affinity*, Selena and Margaret have exchanged roles. Margaret loses her physical freedom by consigning herself to death, but has a profound realization, a final moment of total clarity, before she dies. Selena has escaped Millbank, only to find herself a virtual prisoner of her accomplice. It's clear who wields the "marital rod" in the new relationship. Selena's menacing partner Ruth darkly advises her to "remember... whose girl you are" (Waters 352). Thus, Waters suggests, Selena has escaped one form of oppression only to find herself in bondage once again. The freedom Selena anticipates by escaping Millbank is like the freedom Margaret seeks by immersing herself in Spiritualism—it is all an illusion.

## **Conclusion**

Neo-Victorian images of Spiritualism like those in Sarah Waters's *Affinity* look to end-of-century models like Stoker and James. In the 2012 filmic adaptation of Susan Hill's Neo-Victorian Gothic thriller *The Woman in Black* (1983), the screenwriters adjust Hill's ghost story to include a subplot involving Spiritualism. The young solicitor at the heart of the plot, Arthur Kipps, has lost his wife in childbirth. He is

dispatched by his law firm (rather like Jonathan Harker in *Dracula*) to a remote and desolate location to attend to some obscure legal matters. In Kipps's case, the location is Eel Marsh House, situated in a remote and isolated village in East Anglia. The house is haunted by the vengeful ghost of Jennet Humfrye, whose child was forcibly taken away from her by her sister. The child later drowned in the marshlands surround Eel Marsh House, and the wrathful ghost of Jennet Humfrye lingers on, killing children who reside in the local village.

This subplot involving Spiritualism reflects a recurrent motif in Spiritualist fiction. Spiritualism is sought as a form of solace from grief. Kipps, who is emotionally incapable of recovering from the loss of wife, has recourse to Spiritualist mediums in the hope of being able to contact her and thus assuage his despair. Like Jennet Humfrye, Kipps is unable to move on from his personal loss, and becomes a spectral presence unable to meaningfully interact with the world of the living, even neglecting his young son. For both Kipps and Jennet, memories become more important than real people—both characters become caught up in their grief and perpetual mourning. This severe kind of grief surpasses normal mourning in its intensity, leading to a state of prolonged or perhaps permanent melancholia. In his 1917 essay

"Mourning and Melancholia," Freud defines melancholia as an indifference to life outside of one's self (Gay 117). Further, Freud asserts that melancholia and narcissism are closely connected (Norton 145). The Freudian concept of melancholia offers a useful tool for understanding the metaphorical significance of Spiritualism in *The Woman in Black*. Kipps's obsession with Spiritualism functions as a counterpoint to the homicidal wrath of Jennet Hemfrye's ghost; like Kipps, Jennet is also frozen in a state of perpetual mourning and unable to recover from her loss. The broader commentary of the *The Woman in Black* is the danger of retreating completely into grief, and the vital necessity of moving on from personal loss, which is an inevitable part of human experience. Those who retreat entirely into their own grief become ghosts in their own haunted houses, specters who are doomed to repeat trauma neurotically in an attempt to rewrite it with a positive outcome.

The representation of Spiritualism in *The Woman in Black* reminds us that throughout all of Spiritualist literature's many manifestations—from the positive progressive proselytizing of Phelps and Marryat to the dark Gothic depictions of Stoker, James, Waters and Hill—Spiritualism is consistently connected with the fact of loss, of deficit. For convinced Spiritualists like Phelps and Marryat,

Spiritualism offered a viable alternative to conventional forms of grief and mourning; it was empowering and liberating. For later writers who used Spiritualism as a Gothic accoutrement, Spiritualism functioned as a metaphor for social malaise and the psychological inability to recover from trauma. Hence, the genre of Spiritualist fiction begun by midcentury Victorian reformers finds its eventual resting place in the Neo-Victorian resurrection of the late Victorian Gothic style. In concluding my examination of Spiritualism in literature, it seems appropriate to characterize the genre in its Neo-Victorian mode as a metaphorical “dark circle,” a perpetual séance in which contemporary writers commune with Gothic ghosts of the Victorian fin-de-siècle. The séance, begun in 1848, draws writers to the turning table even today.

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