

## Introduction

As I rapidly made the mesmeric passes, amid ejaculations of ‘dead! dead!’ absolutely *bursting* from the tongue and not from the lips of the sufferer, his whole frame at once – within the space of a single minute, or even less, shrunk – crumbled – absolutely *rotted* away beneath my hands. Upon the bed, before that whole company, there lay a nearly liquid mass of loathsome – of detestable putridity.<sup>1</sup>

Poe’s conclusion to ‘The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar’ (1845) captures the moment of Valdemar’s physical dissolution once he has been released from the coma-like state in which he had been mesmerically suspended for seven months. The later mesmeric passes are intended to awaken him, but with the disastrous consequences recorded above. This image of the rotting corpse might seem to be quintessentially Gothic, but the horror is augmented by the seemingly alive Valdemar who is trapped within this corpse, which had led him to plead with the mesmeric narrator, “‘quick! – quick! – put me to sleep – or, quick! – waken me! – quick! – *I say to you that I am dead!*’” (p. 359, italics in original). The mesmeric trance has left him neither asleep nor awake, as he becomes suspended between life and death. There is thus a tension between the repulsive physicality of the corpse and the liminal metaphysical space inhabited by Valdemar. This liminality indicates how death can be used to explore wider ideas than death per se. A clue to this is suggested in the seemingly minor change to the end of ‘The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar’ published in 1850, and Poe’s preferred version, which is quoted above.<sup>2</sup> The 1850 edition gives the final line as ‘of detestable putrescence’ rather than ‘of detestable putridity’, where the use of ‘putrescence’ can only refer to physical rotting, whereas ‘putridity’ also permits an interpretation of moral corruption. Poe’s preferred nuanced ending thus directs the reader towards looking beyond the corpse to also consider the ‘*bursting* ... tongue’ that speaks. The inner world of the subject is thus juxtaposed with the physicality of

the corpse as Poe indicates that it is the humanity of Valdemar that we should also contemplate. The dead can thus be used as a device to explore ideas about life. The superficial revulsion to the corpse in this instance might seem to be Gothic, but in reality, as this book will explore, the dead often fail to signify in any crudely Gothic way. Poe's preferred ending also implies that the Gothic is the space where metaphysical ideas can be explored. It is a highly self-conscious Gothic tradition that is explored here and it is argued that this capacity for self-reflection indicates the presence of a radical strand within the Gothic that is centred on ideas about death, art, creativity and modes of interpretation.

The focus in this book is on how the dead and dying were represented in Gothic texts between 1740 and 1914 – between Graveyard poetry and the mass death occasioned by the First World War. The corpse might seem to have an obvious place in the Gothic imaginary, but, as we shall see, the corpse often refuses to function as a formal Gothic prop, and in order to understand why this occurs we need to explore what the corpse figuratively represented in the Gothic during the long nineteenth century. Representations of death, as in the example of Poe above, often provide a vehicle for other contemplations than just death.

A central aim of this study is to explore how images of death and dying were closely linked to models of creativity, which argues for a new way of looking at aesthetics during the period. It is noteworthy, for example, that Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1742–45) celebrates our capacity to imaginatively perceive our place within a divine cosmos, where death constitutes the positive point of entry into a spiritual world. Young also maps a Gothic world characterised by a disordered and frightened imagination that conjures false fears about death as the end. For Young, the contemplative spiritual turn enables us to feel our place in a wider world, and Young promoted this positive attribute of the imagination in 'Conjectures on Original Composition' (1759) when claiming that the true imagination copies from nature, whereas the second-rate imagination copies from literature. For Young, the imagination that discerns our eternal life within death is the same imagination which is inspired by a divinely ordained nature. This implicit yoking of death and creativity would be revised later in the century by critics such as William Duff and Nathan Drake, who suggested that true literary originality was to be found within the Gothic, with Drake in 'On Gothic Superstition' (1798) going so far as to locate the inspirational presence of spectres within the natural world (spectres dismissed by Young as the product of a debased imagination in *Night Thoughts*). Death and the creative imagination were given a new

---

---

affiliation in *Frankenstein* (1818, revised 1831), where Frankenstein can be likened to the creative Romantic poet. Crucially, such Romantic texts reflect on the manufacturing of emotional states. Frankenstein's creature is a physical (anatomical) assembly and he is mentally constructed through a reading of texts (Milton, Volney, Goethe, Plutarch and Gibbon). This self-consciousness of the Romantic Gothic undermines Young's position on original, natural, composition.

How to write the Gothic becomes subsumed by the problem of how to write about death, and this is the central paradox of the Romantic Gothic mapped here. Drake would claim that the Gothic imagination (post-Young) has a privileged access to a world of spirits, which provides true inspiration. However, there is another cultural impulse at work that rhetorically conjures emotions around death and so effectively renders such feeling inauthentic. Poe develops this strain further in his 'The Philosophy of Composition' (1846) where he discusses the writing of 'The Raven' (1845), explaining how he manufactured its melancholy mood (in which the repetition in the rhyme scheme suggests that the narrator is trapped by a sense of loss). This emphasis on self-conscious literary production indicates how writing about grief forms an essential part of how death in the Gothic was represented. Poe's position can be compared with George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil' (1859), where Latimer's account of the events leading up to his death dwells upon his poetic ambitions, even whilst the narrative is about how to tell the story of his death. This emphasis on narrative construction shifts the focus away from writers towards readers, a move that is clear from the adult Heathcliff's complaint in *Wuthering Heights* (1847) that he is trapped by signs of Cathy's death because he sees traces of her everywhere. Death in the long nineteenth century, however, does not constitute a coherent narrative and the variety of contexts in which it can be discussed will be addressed in a chapter on Dickens, which explores his views on capital punishment and his claim that the presence of a death wish pushes the vulnerable to seek the centre-stage adoration of the scaffold. The move from writer to reader in accounts of death to some degree pivots on Dickens, whose *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) represents a blend of Gothic and detective fiction that emphasises the importance of reading as a form of detection. This shift from writers to readers will also be addressed in the two final chapters on the *fin de siècle* Gothic, which explore how romantic love was used by Rider Haggard and Bram Stoker as a way of keeping the dead alive, even whilst 'love' often obscured a reading of the seemingly dead love object. The final chapter examines how an emphasis on scientific method in religious and quasi-scientific texts can be

applied to *Dracula* (1897) and the writings of Arthur Machen. Such *fin de siècle* engagements with death appear in self-consciously constructed Gothic texts that turn death into a problem of knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

The Gothic tradition examined here is a largely canonical one as this illustrates how a popular Gothic discourse engaged with a model of death that would have been widely understood at the time. This also enables us to critically rethink that canon because the focus on death and dying produces a radically different way of reading this Gothic history.

That the corpse fails to signify as a coherent Gothic trope is bound up with the movement from sentimentality to science during the period. It is possible to overemphasise this, and whilst there is an argument to be made about the emergence of a secular culture, that is not the focus of this study. Indeed, we will see how *fin de siècle* texts repeatedly wrestle with the idea of faith and the afterlife, even when locating these terms within putatively scientific contexts. Such a focus has implications for how we relate the Freudian uncanny to the Gothic.

Freud's 'The Uncanny' (1919) addresses images of hauntology that centre on the dead and the authority they seem to exercise over us. Freud's conceptualisation of the double also appears to helpfully capture this idea of a fractured, but haunted, version of the self that is reflected in the Gothic discourse of the period discussed here.<sup>4</sup> However, because the corpse fails to signify as a clear Gothic trope, a Freudian approach also becomes problematised. It has been argued by Terry Castle that a Gothic uncanniness emerges during this period that anticipates Freud.<sup>5</sup> Diane Long Hoeveler, however, has noted that any such uncanniness is edged by an ambiguous secularity that never quite casts off vestigial religious ideas.<sup>6</sup> This present study is not about the uncanny, although it will entertain Freudian ideas where relevant (as in the discussion of love, for example). Whilst a discourse of the uncanny can be seen in the period, an important factor to note is that this uncanniness often seems to be devoid of any form of uncanny affect, as Freud would have understood it. Freud's account of uncanny obscurity, in which we struggle to account for feelings of unease, is belied by the uncanny's self-conscious rhetorical production in the Gothic of the long nineteenth century. Poe's 'The Philosophy of Composition' provides just one example of how a self-conscious manufacturing of a discourse of uncanniness seems to evacuate the uncanny of any genuine terrors. The roots of this are to be found in the earlier Romantic Gothic because its self-conscious artistic reflections provide an alternative model of key Gothic concepts, including the uncanny.

---

---

This book is also about how Gothic aesthetics challenge certain interpretative strategies that have typically been employed when critically reading the Gothic. This is not to deny the significance of psychoanalytical readings, but to emphasise that an historical consideration of how death is figured in the Gothic produces a narrative that is persistently resistant to such an approach – and that this resistance cannot be simply attributed to the adoption of an historicist reading. The corpse might be represented as a tragic figure, or as an object of knowledge, but it is one that either elicits empathy or invites forms of scientific understanding; it is not an object of terror and therefore fails to generate the type of damaging emotions that suggest the foreshadowing of a Freudian model of subjectivity. Even when this Gothic narrative historically coincides with Freud this resistance can still be observed. F. W. H. Myers's *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (1903, revised 1907), which is discussed in Chapter 6, makes reference to Freud's work on hysteria but asserts the presence of an integrative subconscious subliminal realm, rather than a Freudian fragmentary and trauma-ridden subconscious.<sup>7</sup> Myers's subject is not defined by trauma and any emotional upset is attributed to a purely temporary problem that the subliminal realm will correct. His theory emphasises the relationship between the self and creativity in which the imagination operates at a subliminal level that enables the subject to converse with other spirits as it is also the place where our inner ghost resides. This version of the subject appears in texts like *Dracula* and Machen's *The Three Impostors* (1895), which evidence an ambition to decode death that moves these texts beyond any conventional Freudian account and anticipates Myers's way of reading death. Importantly, it also means that Freud should not be seen as unproblematically generated out of this Gothic tradition, especially when the focus is on death.<sup>8</sup>

This study aims to complicate our understanding of the Gothic by focusing on how death is used to configure ideas about creativity, the imagination, aesthetics and forms of interpretation. The movement from writers to readers echoes the transition from a Romantic culture, which emphasised the importance of the imagination, to a Victorian culture shaped by quasi-scientific interpretations of the subject. This is not, however, a progressively unfolding historical narrative, because issues about the relationships between writers and readers can be found at most stages within this history, although ultimately we will witness a shift from seeing death as a source of inspiration to an epistemology of death that, at the end of the nineteenth century, largely centres on matters of methodology.

The first chapter explores transformations between the elegy and a poetic discourse of the elegiac in the mid eighteenth century. The notion that the dead elicit our sympathy can be found in Adam Smith and Edmund Burke, and this empathetic reaching out to death underpins the elegy of the time. By examining Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, Robert Blair's 'The Grave' (1743), James Hervey's 'Meditations among the Tombs' (1745–47), Thomas Warton's *The Pleasures of Melancholy* (1747) and Thomas Gray's 'Elegy Written in a Country Church-Yard' (1751), we can see how a discourse about death, dying and mourning was established. Repeated tensions between natural spirituality and processes of memorialisation appear across these quite diverse texts. How to produce an aesthetic that captures feelings of loss appears at different levels of self-consciousness in these writings, which all outline often competing artistic positions that the elegiac poet might occupy. Young would develop these ideas further in his account of original composition, and a debate emerges (in the writings of Duff and Drake referred to earlier) about whether the Gothic represents an illegitimate model of 'fancy', which is different from 'nature', or whether the fantastic indicates, in a positive way, the breadth of the imagination because of its capacity to engage with the dead.

This link between creativity and death is developed further in Chapter 2, which explores the Romantic Gothic and the construction of a culture of mourning. Ann Radcliffe's poem 'To Melancholy' in *The Mysteries of Udolpho* (1794) begins with an evocation to a Muse of melancholy. This emphasis on the literary construction of melancholy provides a starting point for a reconsideration of the inter-textual aspects of Charlotte Smith's *Elegiac Sonnets* (1784), which suggest that mourning should be seen as a textual production. Memory, as a form of mourning, and its links to creativity was addressed by Samuel Rogers in *The Pleasures of Memory* (1792). For Rogers, death becomes positive, because in imaginatively overcoming our anxieties about death we gain moral strength. For him the imagination is able to reason and so he comes to see 'fancy' in a positive light, even whilst he regards the imagination as acting upon the subject in a subconscious way, one that works to unite us with others (including the dead) through a magnetic affinity that implicates Franz Mesmer's idea of animal magnetism. Mesmer appears as a character in James Boaden's *The Man of Two Lives* (1828), which explores ideas about reincarnation. Boaden's novel will be read as a riposte to *Frankenstein*. The bleakness of Shelley's novel is reflected in the coarse physicality of the creature and in the battle between him and Frankenstein in the dead zone of the polar

---

---

ice cap. Boaden, however, wants to make death meaningful by suggesting that a contemplation of a past life enables us to reflect upon, and so rectify, the harm that we have done to others. The implicit doubling between Frankenstein and his creature is reworked by Boaden through reincarnation as the subject attempts to make amends for the conduct of an earlier self. Boaden's narrator is a would-be artist and the texts discussed here all centre on ideas about death and creativity. Feelings of mourning are aesthetically constructed in increasingly self-conscious ways in the Romantic Gothic that emphasise the role of the writer, or artist, as a creator, and this provides a way of looking at the significance of death and the imagination within the wider Romantic culture.

Ideas about mesmerism were reworked by Poe in 'Mesmeric Revelation' (1844), 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar' and 'A Tale of the Ragged Mountains' (1844), which are explored in Chapter 3. The near-dead subject becomes an object for quasi-scientific investigation in Poe, which can be related to his theory of the cosmos outlined in *Eureka* (1848), where he claims that God is now absent from the world, but will return at the end of time to guarantee that the universe has meaning. God is described as an author who has plotted the structure of the universe and Poe claims that literary plots represent an inadequate Neoplatonic echo of this creative power. Poe also suggests that at the end, at the moment of death, meaning will be produced, and this is a theme developed in the tales about mesmerism, and in others that centre on death and resurrection such as 'Morella' (1835) and 'Ligeia' (1838). The idea that meaning will appear at the end is also a theme in Poe's detective tales, and the account of Poe will emphasise how the problems of decoding are linked to interpretations of death and dying. An emphasis on readers can also be witnessed in *Wuthering Heights* and 'The Lifted Veil', which also centre on issues of interpretation that are bound up with models of writing and reading. The dead in the mid nineteenth century become objects of analysis, and how death might speak to us is explored further in the following chapter on Dickens.

Chapter 4 begins with a discussion of Dickens's views on capital punishment that were informed by his concern that popular media coverage of executions created a death wish in the most susceptible, who would relish the lead role provided by the drama of the scaffold. For Dickens, the presence of this death wish constituted an uncomfortable metaphysical truth. Dickens was also concerned that media interest in capital offences granted the condemned an undeserved post-mortem existence. These ideas were first explored in *Oliver Twist* (1837), which argues that the criminal dead should be forgotten (such as Sikes and Fagin), whereas the loving dead



(such as Agnes) should be remembered. Dickens's solution to illegitimate criminal resurrections was set out in letters sent to *The Times* in 1849 in which he advocated that executions should no longer be held in public, and argued that the media should not be permitted to publish stories about the condemned. That Dickens's views were informed by religious ideas about resurrection is also clear from the self-sacrificing Sydney Carton, who at the end of *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) recites the Order of the Dead from St John's Gospel, quoting, "I am the Resurrection and the Life, saith the Lord"<sup>9</sup>. The emotional disruption caused by the execution can be compared with how Dickens writes about graves as the site where the family reconvenes (is resurrected) after death, which introduces a cultural narrative about the significance of burial practices during the period. These images of death constitute a pattern in Dickens, which also includes references to writing, reading and dreaming. In his various accounts of dreams, for example, Dickens explores whether dreams might reveal hidden criminal propensities, or memories that we have seemingly forgotten, or indeed if they are the place where artistic inspiration is generated. These seemingly disparate contexts coalesce in *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*, which links dreams, death and reading in a complex way that invites reconsideration for why a self-incriminating conscience emerges in Dickens's later writings.

The shift from writers to readers implicates a number of strategies through which one might understand the dead, and the *fin de siècle* was a period in which various epistemic engagements with dying reveal how death was constituted as a problem of knowledge, interpretation and understanding. This was not confined to quasi-scientific investigations (as conducted by those exploring spiritualism, for example), but also drew upon discourses of empathy that had been available from the mid eighteenth century. Chapter 5 explores how love provided one way of knowing the dead in Rider Haggard's *She* (1887), *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905), Stoker's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* (1903, revised 1912) and *The Lady of the Shroud* (1909). A dialogue across these novels centres on loving the femme fatale, where love provides an ambivalent, and often partial, way of comprehending 'Otherness'. Such engagements should be seen as part of an Orientalist discourse concerning attitudes towards Egypt at the time due to tomb excavations and continuing British political interest in the area because of the Suez Canal. Understanding the dead 'Other' through love effectively resurrects ancient Egypt, but in troubled terms that reflect the political and theological instabilities that pertained in assessments of both modern and ancient Egypt. These heterosexual, although repeatedly



homosocial, models of love can be contrasted with Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (1891), which conceals same-sex love by displacing discussion about desire onto art. This helps to establish Wilde's text as a counterpoint to the masculine adventure story of Haggard and Stoker. The novel also introduces a discussion about science that appears in Lord Henry's explicit interest in social experiments and in Dorian's engagement with theories of evolution. Dorian also discusses atoms when searching for an explanation for the physical transformation occasioned by his Faustian pact. Science does not displace love, but provides a way of looking at how human relations are governed by forms of knowing that echo those found in love. Wilde's discussion of the soul, art, love and death also helps to establish how these terms appeared in a strand of the *fin de siècle* Gothic that explored science, which is discussed in the final chapter.

In Chapter 6, images of the dead and the dying are explored in quasi-scientific contexts in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894), *The Three Impostors* (1895) and Stoker's *Dracula*. Subjecting the dead and dying to scientific scrutiny is echoed within narratives that also emphasise the importance of generating evidence. Within these multi-vocal texts there is a clear emphasis on how readers produce forms of interpretation that need to be reconstituted as narrative. How to decode the dead also relies upon particular methodologies that shape how evidence generates epistemic certainty.

This book seeks to advance an understanding of the Gothic in the long nineteenth century by exploring how death and dying complicate our view of the Gothic during this period. Death might seem a self-evidently morbid topic but, as this study shows, ideas about death created new ways of looking at life, art and the imagination. Death is not quite the end in these narratives, but merely the prelude to a creative way of thinking about life.

### Notes

- 1 Edgar Allan Poe, 'The Facts in the Case of M. Valdemar', in *Edgar Allan Poe: Selected Writing*, ed. and Introd. David Galloway (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982), pp. 350–9, p. 359, italics in original. All subsequent references are to this edition and are given in the text.
- 2 Rufus Griswold edited this edition. The 1845 edition had 'putridity', but there were other reprints that retained 'putrescence', which Poe had seemingly editorially changed to 'putridity' in a proof of the 1845 text. I am grateful to Ben Fisher for correspondence on this matter.
- 3 An important study in this regard is Garrett Stewart's *Death Sentences: Styles of Dying in British Fiction* (London: Harvard University Press, 1984), which also

explores the relationship between death, creativity and reading in the period. My approach is different in degree due to the focus on the Gothic and the space that I give to Graveyard poetry. Unlike Stewart, my focus is also not on the specifics of death scenes, as I engage more widely with the contextual discourses of empathy, sympathy and science. I also explore a more complex vestigial religious discourse that runs throughout the period, which Stewart does not allow for. Stewart's methodology is shaped by New Critical and Deconstructive criticism that addresses the specificity of language use, whereas my approach is more historicist. Overall, I also give much more weight to the presence of death in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century prose than Stewart, but in the main that is due to my consideration of broad conceptions of death rather than a specific focus on the deathbed scene.

- 4 Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny', in *Art and Literature: Jensen's 'Gradiva', Leonardo da Vinci and Other Works*, The Penguin Freud Library, vol. XIV, ed. Albert Dickson (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990), pp. 335–76.
- 5 Terry Castle, 'The Spectralization of the Other in *The Mysteries of Udolpho*', in *The Female Thermometer: Eighteenth-Century Culture and the Invention of the Unconscious* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 120–39.
- 6 Diane Long Hoeveler, *Gothic Riffs: Secularizing the Uncanny in the European Imaginary, 1780–1820* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2010).
- 7 Frederic W. H. Myers, *Human Personality and Its Survival of Bodily Death* (London: Longmans, 1907).
- 8 In my *Gothic Radicalism: Literature, Philosophy and Psychoanalysis in the Nineteenth Century* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2000), I charted a trajectory from Burke to Freud that was reworked in the Gothic of the period. The focus there was on ideas of subjectivity rather than death and therefore identified a more coherent trajectory of implicit influence than that mapped here, although one that emphasised that the Gothic of the time critically reads this dominant tradition of Idealism.
- 9 Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities*, ed. George Woodcock (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1989), p. 403.