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Beasts in the Blood: Degeneration & Temporal Collapse in Fin-de-Siècle Gothic Fiction

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*“Unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own which
mere ‘modernity’ cannot kill” (Stoker 43)*

In Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894), and Arthur Conan Doyle's *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), degeneration operates as the primary mechanism through which primitive forces infiltrate and corrode 'modern' *fin-de-siècle* society. This essay will develop in two distinct movements. The first movement will define and establish degeneration as a pervasive Victorian anxiety, informed by Bénédict Morel's clinical *Treatise on Degeneration* (1857) and Max Nordau's subsequent *Degeneration* (1892), which radicalised the term into a fervent cultural crisis regarding societal atavism. An ensuing close textual analysis will demonstrate how precisely this general social dread surrounding devolution is expressed within Gothic fiction. The second movement will trace degeneration as it manifests within the corporeal dimension, informed by Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man* (1876) and Kelly Hurley's contemporary *The Gothic Body* (2004), which materialise devolution through physical criminal regression and finally monstrous transformation. Through subsequent analysis of each text, this essay will contend that the past's insidious intrusion upon the present is realised through the realms of the social, the physical, and finally the monstrous Gothic.

Degeneration first entered Victorian discourse as a theory of civilisational decline and regression, articulated in Bénédict Morel's *Treatise on Degeneration* (1857) as a hereditary condition of psychological instability and consequent moral degradation. Conversely, Max Nordau's seminal work *Degeneration* (1892) transposed Morel's theory from clinical hypothesis into cultural panic. Nordau contended that *fin-de-siècle* society, whilst appearing outwardly refined and sophisticated, was in fact internally perforated by primitive impulses. The Victorian population had become sensitized to the notion of devolution through popular pseudoscientific misreadings of Darwinian evolution circulating after *On the Origin of Species* (1859), and this literature instigated a widespread cultural hysteria. *Degeneration* exemplified this hysteria as Nordau laboured to prove that Victorian society, "far from being

modern and progressive, was actually atavistic and regressive” (Söder 475), shifting degeneration from Morel’s biological diagnosis into broader social ontology. Consequently, this essay will consider degeneration through Nordau’s hypothesis as constitutive of a regressive temporal collapse in which the binary between the sophisticated present and the archaic past is deeply unsettled. This essay will thus proceed with a textual analysis and explore how this cultural anxiety permeates *fin-de-siècle* Gothic fiction, converting Nordau’s discourse into dramatic representations of modernity insidiously besieged by the primitive.

In *Dracula*, the primitive invasion of the modern world is exemplified through the looming threat of reverse colonisation which pervades the narrative. Embodying the fear that “the ‘civilised’ world is on the point of being colonized by ‘primitive’ forces” (Arata 623), Stoker depicts social degeneration in *Dracula* as the ghost of Britain’s imperial past returning and seeking violent retribution in present-day London. Dracula himself embodies the ancient notion of the rise and fall of empire as he declares “here, in the whirlpool of European races... is it a wonder that we were a conquering race; that we were proud; that when the Magyar, the Lombard, the Avar, the Bulgar, or the Turk poured his thousands on our frontiers, we drove them back?” (36). The hydrodynamic metaphor of a “whirlpool” reflects the historically violent instability of racial conflict in Transylvania, within which Dracula emerges as the conqueror of innumerable ethnonymic conquerors. The Count’s imperial domination is cemented through his dual identity as both Szekely warrior and monstrous vampire, at once historical relic of conquest and Gothic revenant of an ancient feudal past. The ensuing threat which this past imposes upon the present is epitomized as Harker attests that “unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own which mere ‘modernity’ cannot kill” (43). The conditional clause “unless my senses deceive me” foregrounds the potential inadequacy of modern empiricism when affronted by primitive powers, whilst the temporal disturbance of “had, and have” destabilises linear chronology and

frames the past as actively resurgent rather than passively residual. The incapacity of contemporary society to combat this resurgence is cemented as Harker later beholds Dracula's monstrous disposition and laments "this was the being I was helping to transfer to London, where, perhaps, for centuries to come he might, amongst its teeming millions, satiate his lust for blood" (60). Within this supernatural being, emblematic of ancient and violent imperialism, "British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms" (Arata 623), superseding mere degeneration of society and instead precipitating its entire destruction. Thus, the narrative of reverse colonisation in *Dracula* literalises Victorian anxieties surrounding the primitive infiltrating the present, as the eponymous Count embodies the archaic forces of empire which imperil British modernity.

The human vivisection which begins *The Great God Pan* exemplifies Nordau's concept of social degeneration, as it mirrors the pagan pursuit of 'mysticism'. This pursuit constitutes an anachronistic search for profane knowledge which is capable of superseding the limitations of contemporary science, consequently disturbing the perceived sanctity of modern medical knowledge. Nordau defines mysticism as a "principal characteristic of degeneration... a state of mind in which the subject imagines that he perceives or divines un-known and inexplicable relations amongst phenomena... by which a dark power seeks to unveil or, at least, to indicate all sorts of marvels" (45). Through Dr. Raymond's intentional scientific pursuit of mysticism, employing Mary as his subject, the modern surgical theatre undergoes an atavistic transformation into a ritualistic site of pagan invocation for this "dark power", as he proclaims that "the ancients knew what lifting the veil means. They called it seeing the god Pan" (5). The consequent conflation between modern scientific operation and ancient supernatural summoning deeply disturbs the temporal sanctity of Victorian knowledge, as it echoes Harker's belief in *Dracula* that "the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own" which supersede those of contemporary society. This totalising

primitive power over modernity is cemented as the suicidal mania begins, and “journalists sought in vain in their scrapbooks for materials whereof to concoct reminiscent articles; and the morning paper was unfolded in many a house with a feeling of awe” (52). These repeated contemporary modes of epistemological assurance are thus rendered entirely impotent in the face of this supernatural scourge, which causes “a wide and deep sensation” (49) across the entire social body. Dr. Raymond’s initial act of degeneracy therefore transforms “the individual body into a porous site. These changes not only affect the body, but spread throughout the population” (Lovatt 27). Nordau similarly describes the spread of mysticism within the human brain as he claims that a stimulated nerve-cell “propagates in its turn the stimulus received to all the neighbouring cells with which it is connected” (47). Consequently, Machen’s Gothic depiction of a society decimated by inexplicable suicides in the aftermath of a pagan transgression serves as a macrocosmic reconfiguration of Nordau’s scientific hypothesis, in which atavism actively spreads amidst a wider body from an initial point of degeneracy. Thus, *The Great God Pan* literalises the Victorian fear of degeneration through its proposition that primitivity disrupts and destroys both individual and wider social bodies.

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the transposition of location from London to Dartmoor deeply disturbs the binary between the rational modern and the savage past, as the archaic rural setting serves as a stark contrast to the progressive industrial locus of the city. Doyle constructs an active hostility between the civilised and the primitive as he rhetorically arms each binary with weaponry upon their initial convergence. Holmes’ urging Watson to “keep your revolver near you night and day” (45) presupposes the danger which he will assuredly encounter in Dartmoor, which is realised as Watson declares “if you were to see a skin-clad, hairy man crawl out from the low door, fitting a flint-tipped arrow on to the string of his bow, you would feel that his presence there was more natural than your own” (65).

Watson's revolver, the contemporary weaponry born of societal industrialisation, is thus placed in direct odds with the bow and arrow, the violent apparatus of primitive man. This direct antagonism between the past and the present thus undermines the Victorian assurance that "modern, progressive English civilisation, with Holmes as its defender, is self-evident proof that evolution inevitably leads upwards" (Clausson 65), as the savagery of the archaic seemingly exists just a mere train journey away. This assurance is further eroded as Holmes, the modern detective, the epitome of logic and rationality, journeys from metropolis to "the barren waste, the chilling wind, and the darkling sky" (48) of archaic Dartmoor, and is himself subsequently Gothicised. His presence is distorted from "a practical man of affairs" (8) into "the very spirit of that terrible place" (84) within Watson's narrative, marking a stark devolution from assured rationality into Gothic horror which serves to "interrogate, blur, and even erase seemingly stable oppositions between the metropolis and the empire, the civilised and the primitive, progress and degeneration" (Clausson 64). Consequently, this propensity for degeneration, from which even the modern detective is apparently not shielded, constructs the notion of modernity as tenuously upheld within a social structure that fails to ever truly dispel the primitivity of the past.

Having established the fervent cultural anxiety surrounding degeneration, societal atavism, and its realisation in Gothic fiction, this essay will proceed into its second movement. Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man* (1876), undergoing five cumulative editions until 1897, radicalised the rhetoric of degeneration from the social into the corporeal realm. Drawing upon the principles of Darwinism, Lombroso proposed that criminal behaviour constituted not simply moral aberration, but a hereditary physiological remnant of an earlier and more primitive stage of evolution (Ellwood 1912). Claiming that "the most horrendous and inhuman crimes have a biological, atavistic origin in those animalistic instincts that, although smoothed over [by modernity]... resurface instantly under given circumstances"

(91), Lombroso's pseudoscience deeply disrupted the public perception of evolutionary temporal stability. Kelly Hurley's contemporary *The Gothic Body* (2004) equally theorises the nineteenth-century imagination as one "preoccupied with the prospect of the reversal of evolution" (10), within which she situates the figure of the "abhuman" (3). As a Gothicised distortion of the civilised human body, the abhuman serves as the radical terminus of devolution within Victorian fiction, degenerating to such a degree that humanity is transformed into a supernaturally bestial state. Through Lombroso's criminal anthropology and Hurley's Gothic morphology, degeneration thus emerges as a corporeal threat which supersedes the bounds of Nordau's cultural panic and begins to physically infiltrate the present with the monstrous primitivity of the past.

Having staged the threat of reverse colonisation as the past's assault upon the modern social body, Stoker intensifies this assault in *Dracula* through both the anthropological and monstrous primitivity of the titular Count. In a moment of explicit intertextuality, Mina categorises Dracula as "a criminal, and of criminal type. Nordau and Lombroso would so classify him, and *qua* criminal he is of imperfectly formed mind" (363). Consequently, the vampire's body becomes the physical vessel of the past's resurgence, both as supernatural revenant and through his exemplification of criminal atavism. Lombroso belabours this atavism as he outlines the physical stigmata "among habitual criminals as among savages" manifesting in the form of "thick skulls... overdeveloped jaws and cheekbones... [and] thick and curly hair" (91). These primitive attributes are explicitly applied to Dracula himself as Harker notes his "very marked physiognomy", consisting of a "lofty domed forehead... bushy hair that seemed to curl in its own profusion... [and a] chin [which] was broad and strong" (24). The Count thus embodies a physical resurgence of the past through his criminal stigmata which align definitively with those outlined by Lombroso. This human primitivism is subsequently Gothicised as Hurley attests that "Darwinism opened up a space wherein

hitherto unthinkable morphic structures could emerge; the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic occupied that space and pried it open further” (7). This emergence is realised in *Dracula* as the Count is hideously portrayed as an abhuman “awful creature... simply gorged with blood; [laying] like a filthy leech” (60) within his coffin. The simile likening him to a “leech” denotes both parasitism and predation, exhibiting degeneration through a descent of societal aristocracy into primitive and bestial voracity. This grotesque distortion of Darwinian principles cements the Victorian terror that humans were “both hurtling forward to disintegration and retreating into primitivism” (Pedlar 135), as the vampire embodies both Lombrosian criminal atavism and abhuman Gothic monstrosity. Consequently, Stoker radicalises Victorian fears of degeneration into the corporeal realm, as *Dracula* incarnates temporal rupture through a fearsome regression of the nobility into the criminal, and finally the devolution of the criminal into the abhuman.

In *The Great God Pan*, Machen similarly escalates the crisis of degeneration from a fervent social anxiety into a corporeal crisis, rendering the body of Helen Vaughan the site upon which primitivity violently resurfaces. Whereas the novel’s opening human vivisection constitutes an epistemological disruption between contemporary science and pagan ritual, its conclusion transposes this disruption into nightmarish somatic collapse. Dr Matheson’s manuscript describes Helen Vaughan’s metamorphosis in visceral detail, as “the skin, and the flesh, and the muscles, and the bones, and the firm structure of the human that I had thought to be unchangeable, and permanent as adamant, began to melt and dissolve” (69). The polysyndeton of bodily components performs a linguistic dissection, deeply disturbing the notion of the human body’s anatomical stability, whilst the hyperbolic antithesis between imagined indestructibility and witnessed disintegration collapses contemporary scientific certainty. Her transformation reaches its monstrous zenith as Matheson beholds “the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the

depths, even to the abyss of all being”, culminating in a metamorphosis into “nothing but a substance like jelly” (70). The simile “like jelly” reduces the human form into a quasi-organic amorphous entity, evoking pre-embryonic imagery and constituting a monstrous devolution into the primordial. This devolution epitomizes Hurley’s contention that the Gothic genre “mapped out alternate trajectories of evolution than the one set forth by Darwin, imagining monstrous modifications of species, or the emergence of horrific new ones” (10) through its creation of the abhuman. Her abhuman dissolution therefore collapses the temporal distinction between Darwinian evolutionary progress and primitive resurgence, as Helen’s body becomes a hybrid liminal site in which these binaries are entirely ruptured. Worth attests that this concept of hybridity, also evoked earlier in the novella through the Meyrick’s sketches of amalgamative “Fauns and Satyrs and Ægipans” (47) “certainly participate, particularly after Darwin, in the evocation of atavistic fears of retrogression” (224). Thus, Helen’s corporeal dissolution and monstrous oscillation between human and abhuman forms serves as the radicalised terminus of this retrogression. Through this devolution, Machen undermines the impregnable stability of humanity as mankind is exposed as a fragile and permeable organism, fatally susceptible to degeneration into both primordial and monstrous corporeality.

In *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the social preoccupation with potential for physical degeneration is initially foregrounded through reference to phrenology. Dr. Mortimer comments on Holmes’ skull upon their first meeting, proclaiming “I had hardly expected so dolichocephalic a skull or such well-marked supra-orbital development” (7), affirming the era’s perceived scientific validity of utilising physical disposition to determine mental characteristics. Upon the transposition of location from London to Dartmoor, this scientific method is readily applied to the villainous Stapleton. Lombroso attests in *Criminal Man* that “all it takes is the survival of one family descended from a wicked progenitor, and the whole

place will be corrupted” (90), a formulation which encapsulates his belief that criminality is a biological taint, capable of infecting a wider social body through its inevitable hereditary endurance. This “wicked progenitor” is thus epitomized through the character of Hugo, a “most wild, profane, and godless man” (10), through an escalating triad of degeneracy which cements his primitive disposition and which consequently infiltrates the present through his descendant Stapleton. Defined by Holmes as “an interesting instance of a throwback, which appears to be both physical and spiritual” (119), the resemblance between Hugo’s portrait and Stapleton thus establishes the tangible physical manifestation of the wicked primitive within the modern. This temporal disturbance is cemented further as Holmes declares “the picture has supplied us with one of our most obvious missing links” (119) in their investigation – a humorous allusion to Hugo being the ‘missing link’ between modern humanity and its ancient ancestors within the pre-Darwinian Great Chain of Being. This primitivism is finally Gothicised through Stapleton’s linguistic conflation with the (seemingly) monstrous supernatural: as “the face of Stapleton had *sprung out* of the canvas” (119), the dreadful Hound similarly “had *sprung out* upon us from the shadows of the fog” (128). The parallel syntax of having “sprung out” aligns Stapleton’s character with the same predatory force attributed to the Hound, becoming semiotically indistinguishable from the bestial and configuring Hurley’s notion of the abhuman. Thus, through the figure of Stapleton, Doyle enacts a violent temporal rupture in which Lombrosian criminal atavism infiltrates the modern subject, and subsequently collapses the distinction between man and beast, exposing the capacity of the primitive to physically infiltrate and terrorise the present.

In essence, across *Dracula*, *The Great God Pan*, and *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, the past asserts itself upon the present as a violently resurgent force. This resurgence consequently ruptures both the social and corporeal stability of perceived *fin-de-siècle* modernity. Through Nordau’s established cultural panic of degeneration and its elaboration

into Lombroso's criminal anthropology and Hurley's abhuman transformation, these Gothic texts realise the Victorian fear that human evolutionary progress is neither secure nor linear, but deeply vulnerable to regression. Ultimately, the *fin-de-siècle* Gothic constructs the past as a malevolent force which relentlessly imperils the stability of the present through the dimensions of the social, the physical, and finally the monstrous.

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