

English 4360G

Weird Science: Representations of the Supernatural in Late-Victorian Fiction



Department of English & Writing Studies
Western University
Winter 2017
STVH 3166, Wednesdays 12:30-3:30

Instructor

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Office Hours: Tuesday 10:30-11:30 and Thursday 1:30-2:30 (or by app't)

Course Description

The late-nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic revival of interest in the supernatural in Great Britain. In an age caught between, in Arnold's words, "two worlds, one dead, / The other powerless to be born," many Victorians took an avid interest in automatic writing, astral projection, telekinesis, telepathy, faerie photography, and a host of other phenomena that suggested the possibility of a realm beyond the material, a realm that science seemed on the verge of disclosing much as it had the remote regions of space and the interior organization of

the microbe. Nor was this interest restricted to the readers of obscure journals and penny dreadfuls. Major writers such as Charles Dickens, Arthur Conan Doyle, Robert Louis Stevenson and Vernon Lee, scientists such as Alfred Russel Wallace, and philosophers such as Henri Bergson and William James all dedicated considerable energy to such investigations. But perhaps it is Freud who best summed up the vibrant sense of promise that characterized this period of interest in the occult. "If I had my life to live over again," he wrote in a letter in 1921, "I should devote myself to psychical research rather than to psychoanalysis."

This course focuses on the ways in which late-Victorian fiction imagined the encounter between the scientific and the fantastic, those phenomena which challenged the limits of rational enquiry, such as telepathy, mesmerism, mind-control, shape-shifting, automatic writing, and, of course, ghosts, faeries, and vampires. The fantastic, we will argue, was not only of considerable literary interest in its own right, but was the cultural site through which such vexed categories as gender, class, race, and national identity were both contested and consolidated in the popular journalism, short stories, and novels of the period.

Required Texts

(Available at the Book Store)

Haggard, H. Rider. *She* (Broadview)

Marsh, Richard. *The Beetle* (Broadview)

Stevenson, Robert Louis. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Broadview)

Lee, Vernon, *Haunting and Other Fantastic Tales* (Broadview)

(Available as a course pack distributed in class)

Dickens, Charles. "No. 1 Branch Line: The Signalman." *The Supernatural Short Stories of Charles Dickens*. Ed. Michael Hayes. London: Calder, 1978. 144-59.

Doyle, Arthur Conan. *The Parasite: A Story*. New York: Harper and Brothers, 1895.

Machen, Arthur, "The Great God Pan." *The Great God Pan and the Inmost Light*. London: John Lane, 1895.1-109.

Sidgwick, Henry. "President's Address." *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1 (1882-83): 7-12.

---. "Objects of the Society." *Proceedings of the Society for Psychical Research* 1 (1882-83): 3-6.

Assignments and Grade Distributions

Participation: 10%

Three Response Papers (500 words each): 10% each

Seminar Presentation and Write Up: 25%

Research Essay (10-12 pages): 35%

Participation

English 4360G is conceived as a seminar course, a learning space in which the students share with the instructor the responsibility for the production of knowledge, that is to say, for how we will approach the assigned texts and the nature of the conclusions that we will draw from them. Participation is a vital part of the course; each student should feel enfranchised to make his or her views known, while, at the same time, respecting the importance of the views and opinions of the other members of the seminar. Participation will count for ten percent of your final grade. In order to achieve a “B” grade for participation, students must attend class regularly, arrive in class having read the assigned material, and make occasional contributions to the discussion. To achieve an “A” grade, students must attend class regularly, arrive in class having not only read the assigned material, but having clearly thought carefully about it, and contribute comments and questions that demonstrate a superior grasp of the texts and critical issues of the course.

Response Papers

A response paper is a one-two page reflection on one of the assigned texts or thematic issues developed in the course. It is your opportunity to reflect in an *analytical* manner on the themes, issues, or concerns that arise from the readings, lectures, discussions or other students’ seminar presentations. That is to say, response papers should do more than record one’s subjective impressions of a text, lecture, or presentation, or whether or not one liked or disliked its content. It should critically engage with the text, lecture, or presentation in an argumentative manner, elucidating or further developing key points and challenging others as appropriate. What you choose to write about in your response papers is up to you, but I am particularly interested in those papers which engage with other students’ presentations. Each response paper is worth ten percent of your final grade; three of these response papers are to be submitted over the course the term. Please see the Lecture and Reading Schedule for due dates; early submissions are both welcomed and encouraged.

Seminar Presentation and Write Up

The seminar presentation is a fifteen to twenty minute oral presentation conducted in class. Each presentation should provide a general introduction to a major figure, organisation, or event related to psychical research in the late-nineteenth century. Who were these people, what was this organisation, when did these events occur? But more than presenting the basic historical facts related to the topic, the presentation should strive to suggest what was important or distinctive about this figure, organisation, or event, both to an understanding of the scientific investigation of paranormal phenomena, and, more broadly, to our understanding of British culture at the *fin de siècle*. What does this topic tell us about Victorian attitudes toward ideas about gender, race, or sexuality; what does it suggest about how the Victorians conceived the idea of the mind, personality, and identity? Such questions, of course, are meant to be suggestive rather than prescriptive—you and your partner are free to develop your seminar as you like, so long as it provides us with both a well-researched overview of the main facts related to the topic and an opportunity consider how this topic might serve to deepen or further our understanding of the period. Please feel free to use handouts (a working bibliography of the books and articles you found most useful can be especially helpful), overheads, video, dry ice, laser lights, or whatever

other audio-visual means you feel would complement the presentation.

Following your oral presentation, you and your partner will be required to submit a write up of the presentation. This can consist of a written text, in essay style, or simply the “talking points,” in point form.

The seminar presentation is worth twenty-five percent of your final grade. Due to the pressures of scheduling, seminars must be presented on the assigned date; failure to appear on that date, or to send a surrogate presenter, will result in a grade of zero for the assignment.

If you are concerned about the topic of your discussion facilitation, the relevant primary works and secondary criticism, or how best to present it, you are encouraged to see me as soon as possible. I will be happy to help you develop your ideas and organize your materials in an effective manner for oral presentation.

Research Essay

The research essay is your opportunity to provide a sustained reading of one or more of the literary texts from the syllabus (or, with permission, a text or texts from outside the syllabus) in the context of the historical and cultural issues related to the scientific study of paranormal phenomena in the late-nineteenth century. One might, for example, choose to read Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde* in the context of late-Victorian concepts of the unconscious, or Haggard’s *She* in light of the spiritualist fascination with the esoteric wisdom of the orient. Whatever text or texts you choose to study, you are strongly encouraged to discuss your essay ideas and topics with me early in your research process, a process which, needless to say, cannot begin too early.

You will be expected to use at least three secondary sources, but the essay is not to be a review of such secondary literature. Rather, you should carefully distinguish your argument from that of other critics with an aim to contributing something original to our understanding of this writer’s relationship to the issue that you have chosen to study. Please consider using an electronic search tool, such as the MLA Bibliography, to find journal articles. Journal articles have the advantages of being generally more up-to-date, easier to read, and, because journals don’t circulate, more readily available than books. Search engines are also a wonderful means to refine the scope of your research topic. Don’t forget to examine the bibliographies of the articles and books you find: they will likely point you in the direction of other useful material. A useful place to begin such research is with the list of major monographs on the topic of occult and spiritualist studies in the Appendix to this syllabus, and held in the Reserve Section of D.B. Weldon library. This list is by no means exhaustive, and it does not include the primary works you may want to explore (such as the journal of the Society of Psychical Research, or Freud’s essays on telepathy), but the texts listed there should offer you a good sense of the range of issues related to the study of the paranormal at the *fin de siècle*.

All assignments will be written according to standard essay style: paper size will be set to 8.5” x 11” and margins will be 1.” Please double-space and use a 12-point font. A title-page is not necessary, but the first page must include the title of the essay, your name, the course number,

the professor's name, teaching assistant's name, and the date.

Originality of argument, the ability to support the argument with reference to the primary text, rhetorical persuasiveness, syntax, grammar, spelling, and accurate bibliographic citation will *all* be factors in the grading of the essay.

All bibliographic notation will employ the MLA method of parenthetical notation and a works cited page. Please consult a standard style guide such as the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, which is available in the reference shelves of the D.B. Weldon Library. A good online guide to the MLA method can be found [here](#).

Assignments will be submitted electronically through the owl site, and are due by 4:30 on the due date. Only one version of a paper maybe be submitted; be sure the one you upload to owl is the one you wish to be graded. Papers handed in late without prior permission will be deducted 2 per cent per day late, including weekends. Papers handed in after the assignment is returned will not normally be accepted.

Please keep at least one copy of each of your papers. Save each file on a usb key, drop box, external drive, or other form of back up media. Retain all returned, marked assignments until you receive your final grade for the course.

Academic Accommodation Policy

Students seeking academic accommodation for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments must apply to the Academic Counseling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department. Documentation shall be submitted, as soon as possible, to the Office of the Dean of the student's Faculty of registration, together with a request for relief specifying the nature of the accommodation being requested. The Student Medical Certificate (SMC) can be found [here](#).

The full policy is set out [here](#).

Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to [MentalHealth@Western](#) for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

Plagiarism

Students must write their essays and assignments in their own words. Whenever students take an idea or a passage from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. Plagiarism is a major academic offence (see Scholastic Offense Policy in the Western Academic Calendar).

Plagiarism Checking: All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the

detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between Western University and Turnitin.com (<http://www.turnitin.com>).

All instances of plagiarism will be reported to the Chair of Undergraduate Studies. Proven cases of plagiarism will result in a grade of zero for the assignment. Subsequent offences will result in failure for the course.

Email

Questions and concerns about the course may be communicated to the instructor by email. I will try to respond within one business day; email over the weekend will be returned the following Monday. Please note, however, that email is not the most ideal medium for the discussion of difficult conceptual material, such as is often the focus of queries regarding an English course. If you miss a class and would like to catch up, or are having difficulties with an assignment, please do consider seeing me during my office hours, or, if those times are not convenient, making an appointment to meet at some alternative time.

Lecture and Reading Schedule

TBA