Title of Paper: **In Sickness and In Health: Physical Fascination and its Marriage to the Gothic Body at the Fin De Siècle**  
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Abstract:

By the Victorian fin de siècle, the era’s body fascination moved away from the healthy ideal and instead identified with sickness, deformity and the loss of physical boundaries as represented by the literary Gothic body. This paper aims to offer consideration of that unique form as featured within popular Gothic texts alongside an overview of influential socio-cultural occurrences relating to the body. These occurrences helped to shape the creation of the literary form in question and resulted in the departure from the fascination with health to a tendency towards distorted and disrupted physicality. The paper will make reference to the contemporaneous case of Arthur Munby and his obsession with the masculine and disfigured female form, using a framework of body theory from Gothic critic Kelly Hurley.

Keywords: Health, physical deformity, Gothic body, Victorian literature, degeneration, fin de siècle.

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The Victorian

During the Victorian age of enlightenment, in a time of medical advancement and scientific discovery, there developed a particular vision of the human body and a zeal for its perfection and optimum condition, for: “The Victorians were, of course, notably interested in describing themselves, and like so much else, this trend became all the more excessive at the end of the century.” (Hill 2) It can be noted that in a climate of Victorian scientific and cultural optimism and with the growth of the British Empire, the obsession with the superiority of white European physicality and its flawlessness reigned supreme. In his book *The Healthy Body and Victorian Culture*, Bruce Haley argues that “No topic more occupied the Victorian mind than health” (3), which was “sought as a kind of Holy Grail.” (13) Health, and the resulting bodily perfection, were perceived as signs of physical and mental well-being and viewed as the optimum human state. Haley explains: “Most importantly Victorians used physical health as the model for a higher human excellence, a way of envisioning it.” (253)

By the fin de siècle such corporeal idolatry fell victim to the end of the century malaise and resulted in the creation of a very specific and excessive representation of the body – that of the fin de siècle literary Gothic form. Thus the era’s fascination with the body moved away from the prized healthy ideal and instead married with the more pessimistic views of the period to identify instead with (and to fear) sickness, deformity and the loss of any kind of static positioning in terms of physical boundaries. This paper aims to offer consideration of that unique form as featured within popular Gothic texts written at the end of the nineteenth century. In so doing it will also consider the location of its real life physical counterpart, the human body. Alongside this it will offer an overview of influential socio-cultural occurrences relating to the body which helped to shape the creation of the literary form in question and which resulted in the departure from the fascination with health and the normal body to a tendency towards the distorted and disrupted physicality. It will do this with reference to the contemporaneous case of Arthur Munby and his obsession with the masculine and disfigured female form, using a framework of body theory from Gothic critic Kelly Hurley.

In the approach to the end of the century, the optimism surrounding the infallibility of science, the Victorian individual, Imperialism and the associated way of life was dwindling and was replaced with angst and decadence. The unavoidable sense of change was all-encompassing. The gap was widening between “the period’s self-projection as confident, accomplished and ‘proper’, and its untidy reality, marked by insecurity and doubt arising from vast social and intellectual change” (Moran 2) and with this increasing culture of national pessimism came a resurgence of the darker side of literature.

The century’s preoccupation with spirituality turned towards Gothic literature with its portrayals of the distorted body and a move towards the end of the century from “psychological Gothic to the body horrors of the physiological Gothic.” (Luckhurst xxii) This malformed or monstrous physicality is uniquely marked by its tendency towards transformation. The term “abhuman” has been coined by critic Kelly Hurley...
to define this transition, which she explains as a Gothic body in human form in metamorphosis. (190) Thus the popular appeal of supernatural literature and its ghosts was replaced with the unnatural spectre of new wave Gothic with such titles as Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886) and its chemically induced bodily transformations, H.G. Wells’ *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896) with its mutant beast men and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) and its shape-shifting vampire negating the boundaries between life and death. These creatures in particular, and the denizens of the fin de siècle literary Gothic world in general, have several key elements in common: they have vampiric designs on the deterioration of the physical/spiritual being, they blur inter-species barriers, and pose a threat to the stability of the human race. A hastening towards this vein of literary specialism can easily be attributed to a combination of key societal factors, which in turn are fundamental to the creation and insertion of the abhuman in these texts.

Two important issues: the growth of the industrial landscape, and the uncertainty about man’s position in the world after the publication of Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution in *On the Origin of Species* (1859), offer differing routes for the transition the human body could undergo to become abhuman, through either devolution or degeneration. The revelation of Darwin’s theory brought with it the introduction of the human animal, its newly endowed susceptibility to attack and its plausible future as an inter-species hybrid or an evolved/devolved fusion figure and the resultant imputation of the devolution of the body into a lower form. It also plays on the fundamental fear of the extinction of the human being Victorian culture had come to idolise, because as Darwin states: “if any one species does not become modified with its competitors, it will soon be exterminated”. (147) The pre-Darwinian human form had in real terms been replaced with the Darwinian human/animal creation or what can be called the humanimal. ¹

The status of the newly vulnerable human body, as a reflection of the overwhelming feelings of excess and dejection at the end of the century, is further ostracised from the traditional view of humanity with the addition of Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892) and what he sees as the population’s infection by the cultural contagion that is the fin de siècle, with particular reference to the physical degeneration caused by the industrial landscape. He termed such physical weakness as the “stigmata of degenerates”. (Nordau 43) This reading of the abhuman adds the possibility of the degeneration of the physical into something deeply rooted in the socio-cultural realms of race, gender, sexuality and disease. It provides a host of conceivable threats to the body in relation to these issues and thus to the future of the physiognomic stability of mankind as a whole.

The fate of the fin de siècle humanoid is sealed with the legacy of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Published in 1818, it is filled with the discourse of scientific advancement gone wrong and the circumvention of the natural reproductive state. This archetypal tale of the man-made monster provides the embryonic suggestion for the creatures in fin de siècle Gothic literature and almost a century later their reappearance resonates with the existence of the fin de siècle abhuman. These Franken-
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likenesses, doubles and doppelgangers people Gothic fiction at the end of the nineteenth century and are revealed in the notional duplication of the human/abhuman form in monstrous fashion, transforming what was familiar, i.e. the healthy human body, to something unfamiliar, devolved and degenerated.

Nordau’s theories, coupled with Darwin’s faith-shattering ideas of evolution, lent an almost apocalyptic air to fin de siècle society. The notion that the human form would continue along its evolutionary route, but that there were no guarantees that this evolution would be one of advancement rather than retardation, appeared to be confirmed by Nordau’s pessimistic views of a degenerating society. Combining these salient areas of concern proffers a bleak view of mankind’s future and an even bleaker outcome for the humanoid form, as represented in Gothic literature.

The act of linking the traditional Victorian standards of hard work and an industrious mind with the savagery and unpredictability of beasts splintered the perception of the superiority of man. This newly revealed fragility of the very core of humanity and what it meant to be human resonated with the changing class and gender roles and the rapid, all-encroaching scientific advancements of the period. Thus Victorian man (and woman to a lesser degree) found himself standing on the precipice of a foreign terrain where every aspect of his being was in flux and his future survival uncertain.

It could be argued that Bill Haley’s notional concept of the Victorian obsession with health, strength and bodily perfection had by the end of the century, been superseded by the curious example of Arthur Munby’s physical ideal – which in its extremes covered sickness and deformity. The extremes of his interest and writings can be proposed as a real life representation of the metamorphosed Gothic body. Epitomising the altered view of the fin de siècle human body and its fall from perfection is Munby’s fascination with working-class women and his relationship with maidservant and wife Hannah Cullwick, whom he perceived as “the consummate combination of masculinity and femininity, she was both womanly and unwomanly.” (Atkinson 94)

The middle-class Munby became captivated by such women and their deviations from the physical norm, which blurred the gender divide and in the most extreme cases involved physical mutilation and deformity. Munby showed a particular interest in the masculinity and coarseness of their hands, as an indicator of their difference from “normal” middle-class women. A similar importance is placed on the appearance of hands in The Island of Doctor Moreau and in the Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde. Wells uses perfectly formed hands to differentiate between the “five-man” (60), or human, and his created Beast Men, none of whom have five fingers. Whilst Stevenson’s creature Hyde appears hands-first during his transformation from the body of Dr Jekyll. (51)

While Munby, who documented his obsession with these women during the late nineteenth century, and his views are an exception to the Victorian hegemonic beliefs about the body and would have been shunned by respectable members of society, it could indeed be argued that they represent the real versions of the abhumans whom each author creates and embody the real threats to middle-class Victorian society as
represented by the novels. The growing working classes and their perceived violence and primitivism are reflected in the sheer size and physical condition of Munby’s women, while their masculine physiques and strength, which speak of “gender hybridity” (Atkinson 95), represent the threat to traditional masculinity and the roles of men with the introduction of the New Woman. Such threats also appear in the form of the abhuman in period Gothic texts with Wells’ female beasts who exist on the precipice of reverting to their primitive animalised origins and with Stoker’s vampirised females who represent strength and overt sexuality.

Taken to extremes, the degenerative effect of disease, and sexually transmitted conditions in particular, are characterised by Munby’s “death’s head” (Atkinson 43) females, who have lost their faces to diseases such as syphilis and whom he subjects to ritualistic unmaskings to frighten members of the public. Such unmaskings occur in the metaphorical sense in period Gothic novels and are an oft used convention to build suspense. These unmaskings reveal humans as animalised degenerates, whether physically, mentally or emotionally.

Munby’s obsession with women who are outside the feminine, middle-class norm is repeatedly revealed as a dichotomy between these females and the proper representation of the feminine as represented by the middle-class lady. Through the industrialisation of cities and the increased workforce of females taking on male roles, Munby observes a beauty in their bodies, but is frequently preoccupied with their status or occupation-related deformities, and sees them as the result of “…the daily marring of feminine ideals through bodily exertion, dirt and deformity.” (Atkinson 9) Although he attempts to champion the beauty of such female forms, his constant comparisons to the traditional beauty of middle-class women actually achieves the opposite and Munby’s interest exploits and even intensifies any differences. Thus Haley’s contention that health is seen as an outward sign of morality means that the physical imperfection of Munby’s women imputes a lack of moral character. His faceless victims of syphilis show that “venereal disease could lead to the loss of the nose; thus facial features were a visual badge of dissolute behaviour and moral decay.” (Atkinson 57) Therefore it must follow that any abhuman is immoral and fundamentally evil due to their deviation from human form.

Dichotomy also features in Victorian society, which Maureen Moran believes: “simultaneously celebrated and disappointed itself, and that tension colours all aspects of Victorian culture” (1) and the individual. This occurs both in terms of the mind struggling to attain and perpetuate societal standards and in terms of the division between this duelling mind and its fleshly vessel. Such a Cartesian dualism and its vilification of the physical serves to demonise the body. This demonisation often occurs in the form of the castigation of the physical as an outward representation of the weakness or affliction of the mind – as seen in the Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde where Hyde’s outward ugliness is a reflection of his inner evil – or as the body’s inability to fend off physical danger as embodied by evolutionary/devolutionary transitions or degenerative pollutants, detailed in Dracula and The Island of Doctor Moreau.
With Munby’s representations of the female in mind, which exaggerate and warp their physicalities, physical and metaphorical representations of women in fin de siècle Gothic texts are recalled. As female characters are in the minority or excluded altogether, Peter Brooks’ theory that “Representation of the body in signs endeavours to make the body present, but always within the context of its absence, since use of linguistic sign implies the absence of the thing for which it stands” (7) is crucial in understanding the role of the female in these novels. As the female is marginalised or sometimes completely absent, she is not subject to the rules governing the linguistic sign, and therefore must be present by virtue of her absence. Thus the female sex is informed by its nonexistence and a simulacrum of femininity is constructed through the circumvention of the mother in creating abhumans, through the engineering of hysteria as female and through the association of the dangerous side of mother nature with women. Evelyn Keller Fox explains that:

…life has traditionally been the secret of women…With the further identification of women with nature, it is a short step from the secrets of women to the secrets of nature. Indeed, throughout most cultural traditions, the secrets of women, like the secrets of nature, are and have traditionally been seen by men as potentially either threatening – or alluring – simply by virtue of the fact that they articulate a boundary that excludes them. (178)

This sense of exclusion produced by female bodies is further emphasised with the existence of abhumans, which implies an elimination of the male, Caucasian norm. By virtue of their numbers, there is a real danger of what is abnormal, and thus abhuman, becoming the hegemonic norm. As a result the white, middle-class male becomes Other – a feared threat in society due to Darwinism and scientific discourses and a subliminal threat in the novels. This is converted into the fight between humanity and the monstrous abhuman in the texts.

The trepidation surrounding the abhuman can therefore be attributed to its relationship to the white, male, middle-class individual, and by extension to the imagined reader of these texts. The fluidity of the abhuman’s physiognomy and its ability to survive in a fusion or motile state combined with the clear indications of a human or humanoid foundation implies that an abhuman becoming is a possibility for any person – even the reader. Dani Cavallaro believes these composite bodies could hold a connection with the reader by virtue of at least part of a shared body. (172) This part or foundation of a human body is enough to offer the threat of an abhuman becoming to the reader, just as it offers a threat to the fully human characters in novels like the Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde, The Island of Doctor Moreau and Dracula where characters Dr Jekyll, Edward Prendrick, Lucy and Mina all face physical transformations. The danger to Jekyll’s physicality comes as a result of his misuse of science and the introduction of Mr Hyde into the same corporeal shell, Prendrick’s comes about due to his association with the mutated creations of Dr Moreau, and Lucy and Mina’s bodies are corrupted by the sexualised foreign danger that is Count Dracula and his vampirism. These threats are based on the notion of the
contamination of the body, whether this be through madness, vampiric transfer or heredity. The idea of contamination through heredity works to produce parent-less individuals as the mother is shunned in favour of the male self-creator, in the form of Dr Jekyll, Doctor Moreau and Dracula, and the father is then attacked in an attempt to crush the possibility of degradation through heredity. This again acts as a threat to the future of the human race as there can be no reproduction with the absence of both parents.

In continuation of Peter Brooks’ concept of literary absence, any attempt to represent the body in these texts as a sign fails because it involves the generation of a semblance of the body and a move away from the actual physical form. As it is impossible to include the body itself in the texts, a depiction or linguistic sign is the closest achievable outcome. As such this depiction can stray from the real human form as much as each author’s imagination will allow. This not only produces the abhumans at the heart of this paper, but according to Brooks’ concept would also produce a separation between the real human body and the engineered sign. As such, not even the “control” human figures in each text can be relied upon to provide a connection between the human characters and the reader, and as Brooks could argue, the human body is in fact completely missing from the novels due to its representation. Since the abhuman as created in the texts does not exist in real life, its inclusion in the novels does not infer its textual absence. So while the human body per se is missing, the abhuman is present and poses more of a threat in terms of its metaphorical representation of Victorian social ills.

It then falls to the representational, healthy human majority to denude the earth of such monstrous abhumans in order to restore the hegemonic status quo, to prevent the contamination of the species by the abhuman and to assure the reader of the safety and stability of the human race as a whole and of his or her dominant social position. This creates a situation where the fear of the human corpus in transformation is present and where the abhuman, and by inference any person not aligned with the hegemonic norm, is rejected. Hence the abhuman must be sacrificed to prevent its continuation. As Noel Carroll rightly asserts: “the horror genre is really only a matter of sacrificing monsters”. (14)

End Notes

1. From *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1977) film trailer: “This is the chillingly prophetic story of the genius who tore down the walls that separate man and beast. Burt Lancaster, Michael York, Richard Davenport, Barbara Carrera and the incredible humanimals that populate *The Island of Dr. Moreau.*”

2. In *The Secret Life of Arthur J. Munby*, Stawell Heard notes Munby’s interest in “facial disfigurements” and “freak shows”.
Works Cited


