

English 4351F
Weird Science: Psychical Research and the
Late-Victorian Gothic Novel

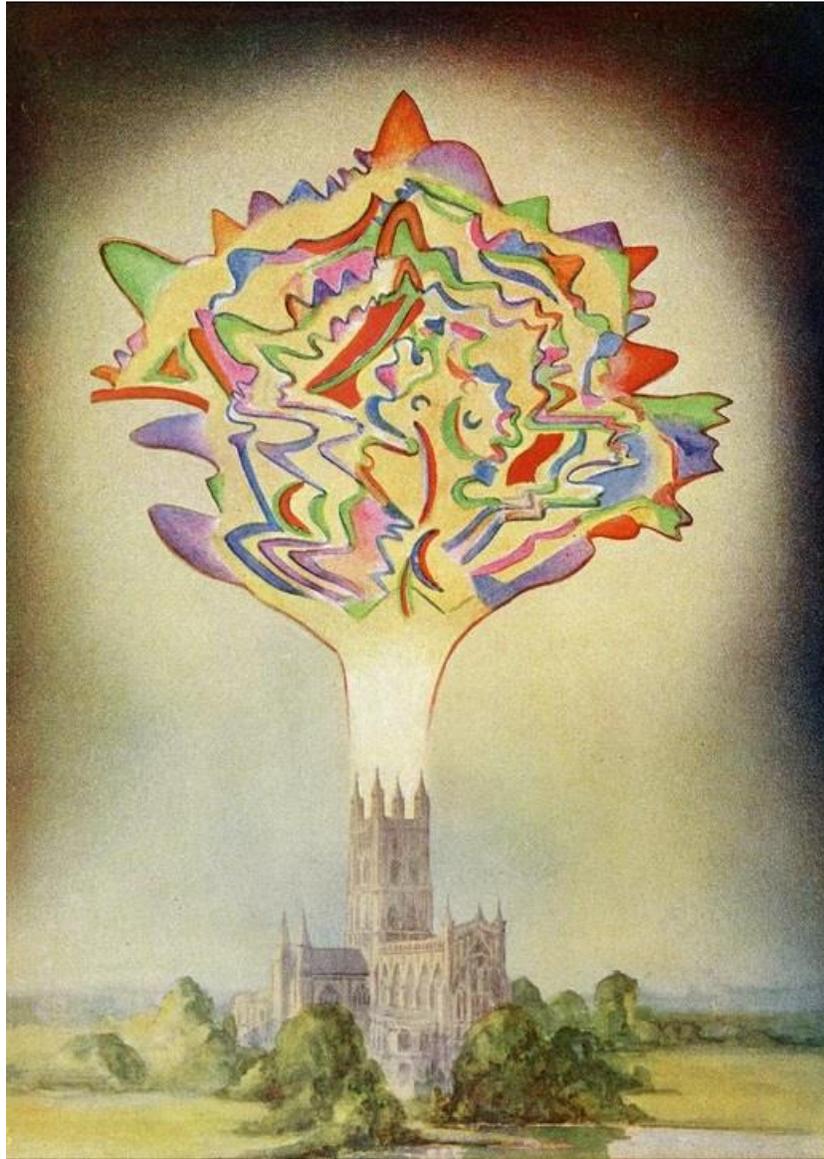


Illustration from Annie Besant and C.W. Leadbeater,
Thought Forms: A Record of Clairvoyant Investigation (1905).

Department of English & Writing Studies
Western University
Fall 2022
UC-4401, Wednesdays 9:30-12:30

Instructor

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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday 2:30-3:30 (or by app't), UC 2417

Course Description

The late-nineteenth century witnessed a dramatic revival of interest in the supernatural in Great Britain. Science, it seemed, had not abolished the belief in immaterial essences and miraculous occurrences, so much as it had provided new grounds for studying their empirical nature and puzzling phenomenology. The age of the telegraph and the steamship was also that of the spiritualist medium and astral voyaging. Indeed, the two realms, that of the natural and the supernatural, appeared interdependent; the same ideas and terminology used to describe electrical communications with the far-flung outposts of empire were also those used to describe communication with the dead. "Psychical research," the name given to the scientific study of the supernatural, was one the marvels of the age. Respected writers such as Alfred, Lord Tennyson and Arthur Conan Doyle, scientists such as Alfred Russel Wallace (the co-discoverer of the theory of evolution), Sir William Crookes (the inventor of the radiometer), and Sir Oliver Lodge (a pioneer in wireless telegraphy), 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 paranormal. "If I had my life to live over again," he wrote 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 occult, those phenomena which challenged the limits of rational enquiry, such as telepathy, telekinesis, clairvoyance, automatic writing, spirit photography, and ectoplasmic extrusions. The occult, 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

Doyle, Arthur Conan. *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (Broadview)

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

James, Henry. *The Turn of The Screw* (Broadview)

Lee, Vernon. *Hauntings* (Broadview)

Machen, Arthur. *The Great God Pan* (House of Pomegranates)

Available through the "Resources" section of the course Owl site

- Fisher, Mark. "The Weird and the Eerie (Beyond the Unheimlich)." Introduction. *The Weird and the Eerie*, Repeater, 2106, pp. 8-13.
- . "The Out of Place and the Out of Time: Lovecraft and the Weird." *The Weird and the Eerie*, Repeater, 2106, pp. 15-25.
- Freud, Sigmund. *The Uncanny*. Translated by David McLintock, Penguin, 2003.
- Hodgson, William Hope. "The Gateway of the Monster." *Supernatural Sherlocks: Stories from the Golden Age of the Occult Detective*, edited by Nick Rennison, No Exit, 2017, pp. 137-59.
- James, Henry. "The Friends of Friends." *The Altar of the Dead*, Scribner's, 1909, pp. 323-64.
- Levy, Amy. "The Recent Telepathic Occurrence at the British Library." *Woman's World*, vol. 1, 1888, pp. 31-32.

Assignments and Grade Distributions

- Participation: 15%
- Three Response Papers (500 words each): 5% each
- Seminar Presentation and Report: 30%
- Research Essay (10-12 pages): 40%

Participation

English 4351F is 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; students should feel enfranchised to make their 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 fifteen 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 500-word (or two-three page, double-spaced) 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 that engage with other students' presentations. Each response paper is worth five percent of your final grade. As the response papers are intended to ensure that you keep up with the reading over the term, the first will be due on September 30, the second on October 28, and the third on November 30. Response papers should be submitted through the Assignments section of

the Owl no later than 4:30 on the date they are due—early submissions are welcome!

Seminar Presentation and Report

The seminar presentation is a twenty to thirty 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, body, 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 report of the presentation. This can consist of a written text, in essay style, or simply the “talking points,” in point form. The report should be submitted no later than forty-eight hours after the in-class presentation, and can be uploaded through the Assignments section of the Owl site.

The seminar presentation and report are worth thirty 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 Haggard's *She* in light of the Theosophy's embrace of the “esoteric” wisdom of South East Asia, or James's *Turn of the Screw* in relation to the Society for Psychical Research's scientific investigations of haunted houses. You may elect to study a topic introduced by one of the other student's seminars, but not your own. 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. 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. 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, 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 (9th ed.), 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](#).

Essays should be submitted through the Assignments section of the Owl no later than 4:30 on the date they are due—early submissions are welcome!

Lecture and Reading Schedule

September	14	Introduction: The Darwin Séance
	21	Freud, “The Uncanny”; Fisher, “The Weird and The Eerie” and “The Out of Place and the Out of Time”
	28	Doyle, <i>Hound of the Baskervilles</i>
October	5	Hodgson, “The Gateway of the Monster” Seminar: Florence Cook and Trance Speaking
	12	James, “The Friends of Friends”; Levy, “Recent Telepathic Occurrence” Seminar: William Mumler and Spirit Photography

	19	Haggard, <i>She</i> Seminar: Madame Blavatsky and Theosophy
	26	Haggard, <i>She</i> Seminar: Hélène Smith and Clairvoyance
November	2	Reading Week
	9	Lee, "Oak of Oakhurst" Seminar: Miss X and Haunted Houses
	16	James, <i>Turn of the Screw</i> Seminar: W.T. Stead and the <i>Borderland</i>
	23	James, <i>Turn of the Screw</i> Seminar: Eva C. and Ectoplasm
	30	Machen, <i>The Great God Pan</i> Seminar: Arthur Conan Doyle and Cottingley Fairies
December	7	<i>Midsommar</i>

Appendix

Books On Psychical Research

- Alder, Emily. *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2020.
- Barrow, Logie. *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850-1910*. Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1986.
- Basham, Diana. *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society*. New York UP, 1992.
- Belsey, Catherine. *Tales of the Troubled Dead: Ghost Stories in Cultural History*. Edinburgh UP, 2019.
- Berger, Arthur S. *The Encyclopedia of Parapsychology and Psychical Research*. Paragon House, 1991.
- Blum, Deborah. *Ghost Hunters: William James and the Search for Scientific Proof of Life After Death*. Penguin, 2006.
- Brown, Nicola, et al., eds. *The Victorian Supernatural*. Cambridge UP, 2004.
- Cerullo, John J. *The Secularization of the Soul: Psychical Research in Modern Britain*. Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982.
- Cheroux, Clement, et al. *The Perfect Medium: Photography And The Occult*. Yale UP, 2005.
- Coverley, Merlin. *Hauntology: Ghosts of Future Past*. Oldcastle, 2020.
- Cottom, Daniel. *Abyss of Reason: Cultural Movements, Revelations, Betrayals*. Oxford UP, 1991.
- Crabtree, Adam. *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing*. Yale UP, 1993.
- Ferguson, Christine and Andrew Radford, eds. *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875-1947*. Routledge, 2018.
- Galvan, Jill. *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, The Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919*. Cornell UP, 2010.
- Gardner, Murphy and Robert O. Ballou, eds. *William James on Psychical Research*. Chatto and Windus, 1962.
- Gauld, Alan. *The Founders of Psychical Research*. Schocken, 1968.
- Jolly, Martyn. *Faces of the Living Dead: The Belief in Spirit Photography*. Mark Batty, 2006.
- Karapenko, Lara and Shalyn Claggett, eds. *Strange Science: Investigating the Limits of Knowledge in the Victorian Age*. U of Michigan P, 2017.
- Knapp, Krister Dylan. *William James: Psychical Research and the Challenge of Modernity*. U of North Carolina P, 2017.
- Kontou, Tatiana and Sarah Wilburn, eds. *The Ashgate Companion to Nineteenth-century Spiritualism and the Occult*. Ashgate, 2012.
- Kripal, Jeffrey J. *Authors of the Impossible: The Paranormal of the Sacred*. U of Chicago P, 2010.
- Luckhurst, Roger. *The Invention of Telepathy 1870-1901*. Oxford UP, 2002.
- . *Gothic: An Illustrated History*. Princeton UP, 2021.

- Machin, James. *Weird Fiction in Britain 1880-1939*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.
- Massicotte, Claudie. *Trance Speakers: Femininity and Authorship in Spiritual Séances, 1850-1930*. McGill-Queen's UP, 2017.
- McCorristine, Shane. *Spectres of the Self: Thinking about Ghosts and Ghost-Seeing in England, 1750-1920*. Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Morton, Lisa. *Calling The Spirits: A History of Seances*. Reaktion, 2020.
- Noakes, Richard. *Physics and Psychics: The Occult and the Sciences in Modern Britain*, Cambridge UP, 2019.
- Oppenheim, Janet. *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England 1850-1914*. Cambridge UP, 1985.
- Owen, Alex. *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Nineteenth-Century England*. Virago, 1989.
- . *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*. Chicago UP, 2004.
- Raia, Courtney. *The New Prometheus: Faith, Science, and the Supernatural Mind in the Victorian Fin de Siècle*. U of Chicago P, 2019.
- Reid, Julia. *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and The Fin de Siècle*. Palgarve , MacMillan, 2009.
- Richardson, Elsa. *Second-Sight in the Nineteenth Century: Prophecy, Imagination, and Nationhood*. Palgrave, MacMillan, 2017.
- Robertson, Beth A. *Science of the Séance: Transnational Networks and Gendered Bodies in the Study of Psychic Phenomena, 1918-40*. UBC P, 2016.
- Robbins, Ruth and Julian Wolfreys. *Victorian Gothic: Literary and Cultural Manifestations in the Nineteenth Century*. Palgrave, 2000.
- Sconce, Jeffrey. *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Duke UP, 2000.
- Smajic, Srdjan. *Ghost-Seers, Detectives and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science*. Cambridge UP, 2010.
- Tromp, Marlene. *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism*. SUNY P, 2006.
- Thurschwell, Pamela. *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880-1920*. Cambridge UP, 2001.
- Turner, Frank M. *Between Science and Religion: The Reaction to Scientific Naturalism in Late-Victorian England*. Yale UP, 1974.
- Willburn, Sarah. *Possessed Victorians: Extra Spheres in Nineteenth-Century Mystical Writings*. Ashgate, 2006.
- Winter, Alison. *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind In Victorian Britain*. Chicago UP, 1998.
- Wolfreys, Julian. *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature*. Palgrave, 2002.

Electronic Database available through Western Libraries

[Victorian Popular Culture](#). Adam Matthew Digital, 2018.

Online Sources

[Psi Encyclopedia](#)

[Internet Archive's Open Library](#)

[The Media of Mediumship](#)