"Sensationalism and the City": An exploration of the ways in which locality is defined and represented through sensationalist techniques in the gothic novels The Beetle and Dracula.

Adam Paulden

> *'You must forgive me if I seem to stumble in the telling… My case is*
> *so unique, and so out of the common run of our every-day experience,*
> *that the plainest possible statement must smack of the sensational'*
> --Paul Lessingham, The Beetle, I.XXXIII.241

Paul Lessingham's words of appeal to Augustus Champnell, in the final book of Marsh's *The Beetle*, appear to encapsulate much of what concerns the "sensation" novelists of the 1860s.[1] In a meta-textual manner Marsh tells the reader, through Lessingham's narrative, that his story deals with a juxtaposition of supernatural circumstances within everyday settings. He also indicates that, as a result, the nature of his telling may be somewhat exaggerated. In considering Marsh and Stoker as two successors of the 1860s sensation novelists, the likes of which include the pioneering Wilkie Collins and Mary Elizabeth Braddon, it is evident that Marsh and Stoker, two supposedly "Gothic" authors, employ an array of sensationalist techniques in their novels *The Beetle* and *Dracula*.[2] These techniques are manifested in both the formal, narrative methods used to depict certain localities as well as through the wider, thematic concerns which these localities serve to represent. The following exploration, therefore, will first look at the ways in which Marsh and Stoker define their novels' localities through sensationalist techniques in creating a form of 'everyday gothic'.[3] The discussion will then centre on how the authors use further sensational methods in establishing these localities as representations of two major English anxieties at the *fin de siècle* period: an anxiety about the degeneration of society and a fear of foreign "otherness".

The four narrators of Marsh's *The Beetle* are presented as ultimately "ordinary" members of society in that they have mainstream professions and appear to have an unsuspecting manner about them. However, when paired with the extraordinary circumstances which face them their manner of delivery is deemed an unusual juxtaposition of mundane description with inflated exaggeration. This is evident in the fact that the narrators deliver objective and accurate descriptions of certain localities, yet also have a tendency to melodramatise their localities in the same instance. Marjorie Lindon's description of the location where Robert Holt first meets The Beetle elucidates this further:

---

[1] Richard Marsh, The Beetle, ed. by Julian Wolfreys (London: Broadview, 2004)
[2] Bram Stoker, Dracula, ed. by Glennis Byron (London: Broadview, 1998).
[3] Winifred Hughes, The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), p.16

> *The road itself was unfinished. There was no pavement, and we had*
> *the bare uneven ground for sidewalk. It seemed… to loose itself in*
> *space, and to be swallowed up by the wilderness.*[4]

The narration begins with a precise detailing of the road and a lack of subjective opinion, which quickly becomes infused with metaphorical language of a highly subjective nature. It can be suggested that the element of accuracy within the narrative is born out of the detective-like strategy used by the sensation novel narrators, whereby they too retrace the precise details of their experiences in deciphering the mystery behind them. It is also plausible that this accuracy, which Terry fittingly terms a 'rigorous detailism', is due to a sense of accountability surrounding these narrators in that they are the sole witnesses of miraculous events and so have the responsibility of relaying them to those who disbelieve and need evidence.[5] This accountability complex is set down concisely at the beginning of Wilkie Collin's *The Woman in White*, for example, where Walter Hartright promises 'to present the truth always in its most direct and most intelligible aspect'.[6]

As Marjorie Lindon begins to speak in overtly metaphorical terms, however, the second narrative element is initiated by Marsh. In using this sensationalist hybrid form, it becomes clear that Marsh engages in a process of establishing an 'everyday gothic' style. Hughes provides this term in her explanation of the way in which sensation writers inject terror into everyday, familiar settings.[7] As Marsh implements the wider metaphor of the road being 'lost in space', he signals the potential for mystery and the unknown within the previously unsuspecting locality, and begins the process of bringing terror into the familiar. Therefore, through an innovative symbiosis of "realism", in the form of accurate detail, and "sensationalism", in the form of exaggerated description, Marsh conforms to the 'everyday gothic' style of the sensational novels. It can be proposed that this method of establishing terror is ultimately more potent than those used in traditionally gothic works, as the terror is brought disturbingly close to home rather than situated within a predominantly foreign setting. Therefore, in considering the extent to which Marsh strives for an 'everyday gothic', the first clear legacy from the sensation genre can be established in his work.

In Dracula, it appears that the process of constructing an 'everyday gothic' is present, but it is implemented only towards the end of the novel. David Seed puts forward the argument that at the beginning of the novel Jonathan Harker, one of Stoker's narrator-protagonists, 'constantly tries to normalize the strange into the discourse of the travelogue… [however this] becomes more and more difficult to maintain'.[8] Seed highlights, here, the way in which Stoker begins Harker's narrative with the element of accuracy, seen as one part of the sensationalist, hybrid narrative, but does not introduce the second element until Harker's composure breaks down towards the end of the novel. For example, in the first chapter of *Dracula* Harker details the extraordinary blue flame which he sees in the distant landscape of Transylvania, through a strictly scientific and empirical perspective: 'Once there appeared a strange optical effect… I took it that my eyes deceived me'.[9] In this instance the flame in the distance is justified in logical and empirical terms rather than through Harker's emotive response. However, the "realism-sensationalism" hybrid narrative does eventually manifest itself towards the end of the novel, when Harker's ability to suppress his emotions deteriorates.

---

[4] Marsh, Beetle, p. 217.
[5] Reginald Terry, Victorian Popular Fiction: 1860-80 (London: Macmillan, 1983), p. 55.
[6] Wilkie Collins, The Woman in White (London: Penguin, 1994), p. 1.
[7] Hughes, Maniac, p. 16.
[8] David Seed, 'The Narrative Method of Dracula', Nineteenth-Century Fiction, Vol. 40, No. 1 (June 1985), p.64
[9] Stoker, Dracula, p. 43.

246   "Sensationalism and the City": An exploration of the ways
          in which locality is defined and represented through sensationalist techniques
                    in the gothic novels The Beetle and Dracula.

As Harker accompanies Lord Goldaming in pursuit of Dracula, he details the locality as such:

> *we are rushing along through the darkness, with the cold from the river… with all the mysterious voices… it all comes home. We seem to be drifting into unknown places… a whole world of dark and dreadful things.*[10]

In this instance, Harker's narrative style has changed dramatically to include highly figurative language, which accesses the idea of the world as the great "unknown". It is in this instance that Stoker begins to engage in a process of bringing terror into the everyday, and the phrase 'it all comes home' reflects this concept, illustrating how the terror Harker is experiencing is being brought into extremely familiar territory. In this way, Stoker initiates a late process of the sensationalist 'everyday gothic', yet uses the accuracy element of sensationalist narration more abundantly than Marsh appears to do. This, in turn, highlights the way in which both authors adopt sensationalist techniques in different measures and manipulate them differently in their unique delineations of terror.

However, an additional sensationalist technique can be understood as prevalent within Stoker's novel, upon reexamining the way in which Harker defines the scene on the river. It is evident that Stoker uses what Jenny Taylor terms a 'subjective sense experience'.[11] This can be described as a process whereby the chosen locality is depicted as overwhelming the narrator's senses, to such an extent that the locality is objectified and turned into a terrifying entity in its own right. As Harker talks of the 'the cold… the darkness… [and] 'the voices', which surround him, Stoker depicts how the locality becomes animated and infiltrates Harker's body. In this way, the locality has a significant purpose within the novel as a source of terror rather than existing merely as an aesthetic device to aid the building of suspense and terror. The technique can be understood as having its origins in the school of sensibility and perception, a reaction to empiricist thought and a stark contrast to the rational perspective which defines Harker's initial narration. This technique is widespread in Elizabeth Mary Bladdon's work, for example; another founding author of the sensationalist genre. An excerpt from Bladdon's novel, *Lady Audley's Secret*, illustrates how the chosen locality is depicted as similarly infiltrating the narrator's body through a total sense experience:

> *To anyone who has been, during the summer months, pent up in London, there is in the first taste of rustic life a kind of sensuous rapture scarcely to be described.*[12]

The way in which the London holds the narrator in rapture reinforces the idea that the locality of sensation novels is a living entity, and a source of terror in its own right. Significantly, this technique also prefigures the practice of post-modern writers, such as Virginia Woolf, who also endeavor to portray a sensory experience in encapsulating the overall "atmosphere" at any one moment.[13]

---

[10] ibid., p. 398.
[11] Jenny Taylor, In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 6.
[12] Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Lady Audley's Secret, edn. 8 (London: F.M. Lupton, 1862), p. 106.
[13] Jane Goldman, The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism, and the Politics of the Visual (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 13.

Marsh also appears to be a prolific user of 'subjective sense experience' in *The Beetle*, as he implements the technique from the outset in Robert Holt's illustration of The Beetle's house:

> *I saw the open window... It was so near to me; so very near... My teeth were chattering. The damp was liquefying the very marrow in my bones.*[14]

Here, the image of the house advancing on Holt and the damp seeping into his body are delineated as literal acts; the locality physically surrounds and infiltrates his body. Significantly, this elucidates the way in which the 'everyday gothic' style is being furthered in Marsh's novel, as the terror of the locality is being infused into the overtly familiar territory of the narrator. Consequently, in employing the 'subjective sense experience' as a narrative technique, both Marsh and Stoker show a further legacy to the narrative methods of sensation fiction.

It can be suggested that by bringing terror into the everyday, through an 'everyday gothic', the sensation novelists aimed to draw the readers' attention to the potential for terror within their own society. As a result, this meta-textual technique aided the authors in accessing a multitude of genuine anxieties which were prevalent within 1860s English society. Deborah Wynne emphasises this, stating that sensation novelists aimed to 'unsettle readers by focusing on areas of middle-class anxiety'.[15] In considering Marsh and Stoker's use of the 'everyday gothic', it is evident that these two authors also make a conscious effort to draw the reader's attention to certain anxieties during the period in which they wrote, the *fin de siècle*. Significantly, the nature of these anxieties is similar to those which were prevalent during the 1860s and, in this sense, both Marsh and Stoker not only share the meta-textual technique of sensation novels, but similar thematic concerns also. It is crucial to note, however, that Marsh and Stoker innovatively use locality as their key source of representation for these thematic concerns, rather than representing them solely through character delineation or plotline, which appears to be the case in sensation novels.

Honing in on *The Beetle*, therefore, it is apparent that Marsh goes to great lengths in using the city of London as a representation of a major Victorian anxiety at the *fin de siècle* about the degeneration of society.[16] During Robert Holt's initial narrative, Marsh builds a sparse and desolate depiction of London in establishing the idea of a degenerative city. Upon entering Hammersmith, Holt describes the neighborhood as:

> *one in which I was a stranger... the locality I was entering seemed to be unfinished. I seemed to be leaving civilisation behind me.*[17]

In this instance Marsh sets up Harker as a stranger within his own land. He is a man who is accustomed to the developed landscape of the city, and not used to the 'unfinished' character of the locality he sees before him. This sense of hostility can be deemed a plausible observation, considering that Hammersmith is not Holt's usual place of abode. However, as his narration ensues the reader is confronted with a much more ominous delineation of the surroundings:

---

[14] Marsh, Beetle, p. 47.
[15] Deborah Wynne, The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), p. 38.
[16] Susan Navarette, The shape of fear: horror and the fin de siècle culture of decadence (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1998), p. 5.
[17] Marsh, The Beetle, p. 45.

248   "Sensationalism and the City": An exploration of the ways
in which locality is defined and represented through sensationalist techniques
in the gothic novels The Beetle and Dracula.

> *Houses were few and far between. Those which I did encounter,*
> *seemed, in the imperfect light… to be cottages which were crumbling*
> *to decay.*[18]

In this instance, Holt depicts a locality which is not only sparse but rapidly deteriorating. The present tense 'crumbling', here, emphasises the urgency of this deterioration; it is occurring as Holt speaks. Through this, Marsh accesses the Late Victorian anxiety of a degenerating society through a literal translation of it; the buildings are physically degenerating into nothingness. The depiction of the houses 'crumbling away' hints that the anxiety involves a fear of poverty striking England, which was thought to be a possible element of the degeneration anxiety.[19] This is evident in the fact that the houses are 'crumbling' because there is not enough wealth in the country to restore them. However the concept of the houses being concealed within an 'imperfect light' feeds into the premise that the anxiety itself is like the houses: not wholly definable. It can be argued that people in Late Victorian society could not predict the exact nature of the degeneration which they believed would occur at the turn of the century, but instead they felt a general anticipation that something would, indeed, happen at any given point. This concept feeds into the general thematic trope of the "unknown", which in itself is can be deemed a traditional concern of "Gothic" fiction.[20] In this sense Marsh does not ignore the major concerns of Gothic fiction, but uses them to aid his illustration of the city as a synecdoche for societal anxieties, which is predominantly a sensationalist technique.

Willey has noted how Wilkie Collin's, in *The Moonstone*, draws the readers' attention to a specific Victorian anxiety of the 1860s period: an 'intensified sense of racial hatred… that pervaded the British popular imagination in the aftermath of the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857'.[21] The Sepoy Rebellion was thought to have caused a great threat to British imperial power and, as a result, in the aftermath of the rebellion a general fear of the foreign "other" started to pervade Victorian society. It is this anxiety which Wilkie Collins chooses to play out in his novel and Stoker can be seen toying with a similar anxiety which continued to exist at the *fin de siècle* period. This is evident in the way that Stoker represents the infiltration of a foreign "other" into England, through his depiction of the English landscape changing as Dracula advances upon it. As Dracula journeys to England, a storm occurs and is described within a local newspaper clipping in the novel: 'without warning the tempest broke… the whole aspect of nature at once became convulsed.[22]

In addition to this threatening description of the change in locality, which represents the English fear of the infiltrating foreign "other", Stoker also embeds within the text a line from Coleridge's *The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner*.[23] It can be argued that this meta-fictive device, evident in the fact that Stoker reminds the reader of a genuine text outside of the fictional world of the novel, furthers the establishment of a sensationalist 'everyday gothic' style. Similar to the way in which the sensation novelists use meta-textuality to remind the reader of the anxieties occurring within their own society, Stoker reminds his readership of a

---

[18] ibid..
[19] Harold James Perkin, The rise of professional society: England since 1880 (London: Taylor & Francis, 1989), p. 53.
[20] Robert Mighall, A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 43.
[21] Vicki Corkran Willey, 'Wilkie Collins's "Secret Dictate": The Moonstone as a Response to Imperialist Panic', in Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre, ed. by Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2006), p. 225.
[22] Stoker, Dracula, p. 110.
[23] Samuel Taylor Coleridge, The Rhyme of the Ancient Mariner, II: 17-18, in Stoker, Dracula, p. 110.

popular poem in the literary canon and, in doing so, mixes the fictional terror of the advancing foreigner with an element of the familiar; bringing terror into the everyday.

Of further significance is the way in which Stoker intensifies this anxiety of foreign infiltration, as Dracula advances further inland. Mina Harker accounts in her journal that:

> *We came back to town quietly... there were very few people there, and it was sad-looking and desolate to see so many empty chairs.*[24]

In this instance, Harker illustrates the profound affect that Dracula's entrance into London has had on the whole of society; the streets are deserted and 'sad'. Crucially, it can be argued that the depiction of a 'sad' London, here, is informed by literary sources which precede the sensation novels of the 1860s. For example, a clear link can be established with Blake's depiction of the locality in his poem 'London'.[25] Blake details the 'Marks of weakness, marks of woe', which the narrator figure perceives as he walks through the city streets. Here, both Blake and Stoker depict a capital which has become saddened; in Blake's poem through the oppression of societal institutions and in Stokers by the infiltration of a foreign "other". Crucially, therefore, it is apparent that Stoker, like Marsh in his employment of the "Gothic" "unknown", borrows the tropes of other literary sources in enhancing the overarching concerns which he acquires from the sensation genre.

It is also apparent that both Marsh and Dracula show innovation through not limiting their representations of a foreign "otherness" to an English locality, as is often the case with sensation novels.[26] Marsh, in particular, represents a foreign "otherness" through taking his narrative to an Egyptian locality. It can be argued that the nature of Marsh's "otherness" is more specific than the "otherness" defined in *Dracula*, therefore, as it deals specifically with the Egyptian people and, in doing so, accesses the specific Late Victorian anxieties surrounding Orientalism. This, in Said's terms, is a general fear of Eastern culture.[27] The British occupation in Egypt during the 1880s caused for a mass uprising by certain extremist groups in Egypt, and it is noted that this raised particular English anxieties about the Egyptian people. It can be noted that, as a result, not only was there a fear of Egyptian public and political power, but also of the nature of the Egyptian people on a more personal level. Showalter talks of 'syphilophobia' as one particular facet of the English anxiety about Egyptians, suggesting that the English believed the Egyptians to be carriers of sexual diseases.[28] In *The Beetle* Marsh confronts his Late Victorian readership with these widespread anxieties, through his representation of the Egyptian locality. Paul Lessingham describes a locale within Egypt as such:

> *it was a narrow street, and, of course, a dirty one, ill-lit and, apparently, at the moment of my appearance, deserted.*[29]

Lessingham's suggestion of 'dirty streets', here, plays on the anxiety of "syphilophobia" in suggesting that the streets of Egypt are filthy and, therefore, a breeding ground for disease.

---

[24] ibid., p. 208.

[25] William Blake, 'London': The Songs Experience, in Romanticism: An Anthology, 3rd edn, ed. by Duncan Wu (London: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 200-201.

[26] Patrick Brantlinger, 'What Is "Sensational" About the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 37 No. 1 (June 1982), p. 11. <http://www.jstor.org/ stable/3044667.http> [accessed 25 April 2009]

[27] Edward Said, Orientalism, edn. 25 (London: Vintage, 1979), p. 31.

[28] Elaine Showalter, 'Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Fiction of the Fin de Siècle', in Sex, Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: Selected Papers from the English Institute, 1983-84, ed. by Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986), pp. 88-115. Quoted in Wolfrey's introduction to Marsh, Beetle, p. 13.

[29] ibid., p. 238.

250   "Sensationalism and the City": An exploration of the ways
             in which locality is defined and represented through sensationalist techniques
                      in the gothic novels The Beetle and Dracula.

That fact that Lessingham expects Champnell to know about this problem, through his use of 'of course', further illustrates how common a prejudice it was within English society. Prejudices such as these can be described through the umbrella term of Orientalism. As Lessingham's description of the locality continues Marsh further plays on this Orientalism by introducing the idea of Mesmerism, through Lessingham's description of how he was hypnotised whilst in by Egypt. Lessingham states: 'I found myself looking into what seemed to be a sort of café,- one of those places which are found all over the Continent.[30] The use of the phrase 'found myself', here, illustrates the way in which Lessingham appears not to be in control of his own actions, but rather taken in by the mesmeric locality which surrounds him. This serves to reinforce the reader's fearful prejudice of the oriental "other", creating terror through illustrating that the Egyptian people, and the land of Egypt as a personified entity, have powers of seduction beyond what can be deemed rational and controllable. In this way, Marsh confronts the reader with their ultimate terror in portraying how the white man is trapped within a foreign locality. This can be viewed in terms of Arata's understanding of 'the colonizer [who] finds himself in the position of the colonized'.[31]

In conclusion, a clear legacy from the sensation genre can be established in the work of Marsh and Stoker due to the array of sensationalist narrative and thematic techniques present in their novels. However, the two authors also choose to manipulate and extend these techniques, as well as borrowing from the traditional tropes of "Gothic" literature, and from older literary sources, in their establishment of the sensationalist 'everyday gothic' style. Where the major source of innovation lies, however, is in the way in which both authors use locality as the key source of representation for these sensationalist concerns. It is through this, that Marsh and Stoker partake in a process of forming a new sub-category of the sensation genre.

---

[30] Marsh, *Beetle*, p. 238.

[31] Stephen Arata, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Identity and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996), p. 108.

Bibliography

Arata, Stephen, *Fictions of Loss in the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Identity and Empire* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1996)

Blake, William, 'London': *The Songs Experience*, in *Romanticism: An Anthology,* 3rd edn, ed. by Duncan Wu (London: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 200-201.

Braddon, Mary Elizabeth, *Lady Audley's Secret*, edn. 8 (London: F.M. Lupton, 1862)

Brantlinger, Patrick, 'What Is "Sensational" About the "Sensation Novel"?', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, 37.1 (June 1982) <http://www.jstor.org/ stable/ 3044667.http> [accessed 25 April 2009]

Collins, Wilkie, *The Woman in White* (London: Penguin, 1994)

Goldman, Jane, *The Feminist Aesthetics of Virginia Woolf: Modernism, Post-Impressionism, and the Politics of the Visual* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001)

Hughes, Winifred, *The Maniac in the Cellar: Sensation Novels of the 1860s* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980)

Marsh, Richard, *The Beetle*, ed. by Julian Wolfreys (London: Broadview, 2004)

Mighall, Robert, *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999)

Navarette, Susan, *The shape of fear: horror and the fin de siècle culture of decadence* (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1998)

Perkin, Harold James, *The rise of professional society: England since 1880* (London: Taylor & Francis, 1989)

Said, Edward, *Orientalism*, edn. 25 (London: Vintage, 1979)

Seed, David, 'The Narrative Method of Dracula', *Nineteenth-Century Fiction*, Vol. 40, No. 1 (June 1985)

Showalter, Elaine, 'Syphilis, Sexuality, and the Fiction of the Fin de Siècle', in *Sex*, *Politics, and Science in the Nineteenth-Century Novel: Selected Papers from the English Institute*, 1983-84, ed. by Ruth Bernard Yeazell (Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press, 1986)

Stoker, Bram, *Dracula*, ed. by Glennis Byron (London: Broadview, 1998)

Taylor, Jenny, *In the Secret Theatre of Home: Wilkie Collins, Sensation Narrative, and Nineteenth-Century Psychology* (London: Routledge, 1988)

Terry, Reginald, *Victorian Popular Fiction: 1860-80* (London: Macmillan, 1983)

252   "Sensationalism and the City": An exploration of the ways
in which locality is defined and represented through sensationalist techniques
in the gothic novels The Beetle and Dracula.

Willey, Vicki Corkran, 'Wilkie Collins's "Secret Dictate": *The Moonstone* as a Response to Imperialist Panic', in *Victorian Sensations: Essays on a Scandalous Genre*, ed. by Kimberly Harrison and Richard Fantina (Ohio: Ohio State University Press, 2006)

Wynne, Deborah, *The Sensation Novel and the Victorian Family Magazine* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001)