

Crimes of Literacy in the Gothic Imagination: Dracula and the Secretary

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Scholarly interest in Gothic fiction has surged in recent decades, leading to a flood of publications on the genre. Critics routinely account for the nineteenth-century Gothic tale in connection with the shocks of modernity, invoking a staggering range of Victorian social misgivings regarding the inadequacy of the bourgeois family, the menace of the market economy, the disappearance of the sacred in an era of secularization, the fear of Darwinian models of evolution, as well as shifting conceptions of criminality and sexual deviance. In parallel, a multitude of critical traditions have been deployed to theorize the Gothic, from Freudian interpretations of the genre's divided selves, to Marxist readings, to queer theory and gender analyses. This talk introduces a new focus to this rich body of scholarship, identifying the centrality of speech and reading itself to the Gothic plot and, by extension, exploring the frequent criminalization of literacy in the Victorian imagination. Crucial scenes of literary ambition and indoctrination abound in Gothic narratives of the Victorian period, so that the endeavor to obtain language, rhetorical power and the yearning for a literary education warrant new consideration as essential episodes in the Gothic's persistent concern with illicit acts of self-transformation, autodidacticism and social mobility. As Pip, the parvenu protagonist of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations*, avows: "I struggled through the alphabet as if it had been a bramble-bush. . . ." Pip's arduous achievement of literacy is prefigured by Frankenstein's creature's promethean conquest of language, a will-to-fluency mirrored by Jane Eyre's celebrated declaration of rebellious self-expression: "Speak I must.

Outlining the Gothic tropes of abjection, monstrosity, and criminality deployed in essays by Martineau, Stickney Ellis, Carlyle, Dickens, Mill, Arnold, Collins, and Gissing to describe the expansion of literacy to new groups, Rhoads also considers fictional depictions of felonious and transgressive readers from a series of nineteenth-century literary classics. Bram Stoker's *Dracula* culminates this discussion of the century-long Gothic fixation with literacy's criminal potentials. The obsessive insistence of *Dracula*'s bureaucratic heroes on communicating through written (or, better yet, typed) texts rather than speech can be explained by Stoker's turn to a qualified enthusiasm for literacy as an institutionalized, nationalized enterprise which could assimilate even the feminization of clerical workers taking place at the turn-of-century. Analysing a selection of Victorians' iconic literature and punditry, Rhoads argues that, despite the contemporary attention which the Gothic has attracted, the genre remains under-examined in connection with the exhilarating and menacing power of literacy to create new desires and social identities and with the criminalized view of readers advanced inside and outside the pages of nineteenth-century fiction.