



Article

“The Horror of It Made Me Mad”: Hysterical Narration in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897)

Ariel Fried

Department of English, College of Arts and Science, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211, USA; alfdhb@umsystem.edu

Abstract: This article analyzes the hysterical narration styles of two major characters in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897) to reveal the ways late-Victorian discourses attempted (and often failed) to distance particular social anxieties from their modern origins. Attending to previous literary criticism regarding socially Othered groups of this period—racialized foreigners, New Women, and the urban poor—as well as (pseudo)scientific studies from the 1870s–80s, this reading notes the ways that Victorian cultural biases surrounding race, gender, and class could be projected onto Gothicized, Orientalized figures in literary texts. Pairing a postcolonial examination of the novel’s spatial and temporal elements with a psychoanalytic reading of this text, I argue that the slowing pace in Robert Holt’s narrative and the compulsive repetition of Marjorie Lindon’s both reflect the novel’s disruption of space and time and structurally parallel the symptoms of a “hallucinatory hysterical attack,” as conceived by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud. Together, these hysterical narratives reveal the failure of particular cultural and scientific discourses to completely bury Victorian anxieties about modernity into different, explicitly Othered spaces and times by collapsing both space and time in the narration of psychic trauma.

Keywords: hysteria; psychoanalysis; Victorian literature; Gothic literature; temporality



Citation: Fried, Ariel. 2024. “The Horror of It Made Me Mad”: Hysterical Narration in Richard Marsh’s *The Beetle* (1897). *Humanities* 13: 92. <https://doi.org/10.3390/h13040092>

Received: 6 June 2024

Revised: 9 July 2024

Accepted: 11 July 2024

Published: 15 July 2024



Copyright: © 2024 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

During the Victorian era, the plights of hysterics, mad(women), and lunatics were well documented, with sensationalized accounts of insanity appearing in academic, medico-scientific, and fictional literature alike. Notably, however, the early Victorian period “redefined madness, not as a loss of reason, but as deviance from socially accepted behavior” (Showalter [1985] 2014, p. 29). Richard Marsh’s 1897 novel *The Beetle* delivers one such account of “madness,” while also engaging the social discourses that informed definitions of insanity during this period. The novel consists of four first-person narratives detailing the experiences of lower-, middle-, and upper-class Londoners as they contend with an ancient, metamorphosing foreign entity, known as “the beetle.” Encounters with this racialized coleopteran villain lead, nearly invariably, to madness. However, the text’s engagement with particularly modern Victorian anxieties surrounding eroding class divisions, shifting gender roles, and the sustainability of imperial power complicates this fairly straightforward horror narrative, as these discourses are constantly reinterpreted as Gothic tropes and/or as the results of an Orientalized threat in order to distance them from their true origins in fin de siècle Victorian society.

Victorian literary scholarship has already established a rather robust inquiry into the anxieties surrounding class and gender in this novel (Margree 2007; Allin 2015; Rebry 2016), as well as attending to considerations of form and genre (Bulfin 2011; Vuohelainen 2013). Contemporary criticism has also expanded its focus to include queer and postcolonial readings of this text (Harris and Vernooy 2016; Stuart 2018; Vuohelainen 2006). I seek to enrich this existing body of criticism by attending to the rhetorical acrobatics that become necessary to distance social anxieties and traumas from the Victorian practices that

produced them. I posit that instead of fully acknowledging these cultural insecurities, this text instead associates them with Gothic characteristics, Orientalizes them as an external threat, and then projects them onto a supernatural creature, where they can be villainized and, ultimately, defeated without doing harm to the ideological norms of the period. This reading also allows me to attend to the resulting spatial and temporal dynamics that serve, I argue, as both the cause and consequence of hysterical narration styles within this novel. In short, I contend that attempts to ignore or efface the social anxieties and biases that permeated the Victorian period led to an instability that could *only* be expressed as madness, so as not to undermine the logic of Victorian progress and supremacy that dominated this period. Examining *The Beetle* in this way not only provides a novel psychoanalytic reading of this late-Victorian text but also a more nuanced sense of how Victorian discourses of race, class, and gender could be engaged alongside emergent ideas surrounding madness—and, more specifically, hysteria—to bolster the ideals of exceptionalism and progress that fueled imperial and social projects alike during this period.

Indeed, some medical doctors of the mid- to late-Victorian period were rather emphatically arguing that evolutionary principles should be employed in ways that would ensure English supremacy. In 1869, Sir Francis Galton proposed that “the average standard of ability of the present time should be raised” by encouraging earlier marriages—by which he means socially condoned heterosexual reproduction—in the more “vigorous classes” of Victorian society, so that a greater percentage of the population would be suited to the demands of civilized society (Galton [1869] 1891, pp. 344, 352). For Max Nordau in 1895, the urgency of rooting out moral and mental impotence was particularly salient, as the degeneration that he perceived in the “*fin-de-siècle* disposition” of emergent literary, fashionable, and architectural trends were, to his mind, “a beast of the Apocalypse” and a harbinger of racial extinction (Nordau [1892] 1895, pp. 8, 22).¹ Anne McClintock has observed that the social power of such assertions of degeneration was twofold: they effectively reconstituted social groupings (class divisions, racializations, differential gender norms, etc.) as analogous to biological categories, and they legitimized a politics of state intervention to eradicate such deviances (McClintock 1995, p. 48). Thus, Victorian anxieties such as those about the impoverished and under-educated lower classes, changing gender norms and the New Woman, and technological and civilizational advancements, took on apocalyptic significance; “madness” was often the label given to those who did not live up to the ideals of Victorian ascendancy.

Marsh’s text engages with both the imperial and urban modes of Gothic fiction alongside depictions of the “madness” brought on by his titular villain. Specifically, the novel posits personal and existential threats to its characters that invoke anxieties about the urban metropole they navigate, and, importantly, these dangers primarily result from the *proper* functioning of the metropole itself. From homelessness and weapons tests gone awry to concerns about class mobility and the New Woman’s confusion of public and private gender roles, many of the plot elements of *The Beetle* are specific to late nineteenth-century Victorian England. In Robert Mighall’s historical study on the Victorian Gothic, he emphasizes that urban Gothic novels are “not just a Gothic in the city,” but “a Gothic *of* the city,” in which “terrors derive from situations particular to, and firmly located within, the urban experience.” (Mighall 1999, p. 30, original emphasis). In this vein, the terrors that the narrating characters Robert Holt and Marjorie Lindon face, in particular, evoke concerns specific to urban, *fin de siècle* London, even as they are reinterpreted as resulting from the machinations of a supernatural foe.

Through an examination of the urban spaces traversed by the narrating characters, I argue that these particularly modern urban anxieties are immediately reinterpreted as “Oriental” when these urban spaces are filled with Egyptian “things”—both material objects, such as rugs and clothing, and the beetle itself, as an identifiably foreign living thing. This Orientalization then successfully distances the traumas that characters encounter in these urban spaces from the endeavors of European modernity by translating the horror of these traumas into the imperial Gothic mode. In this mode, the vindictive Egyptian beetle

of Marsh's text poses a threat not only to individual characters but to "the power and glory of the British Empire...express[ing] anxieties about decline and fall" (Brantlinger 2012, p. 203). Importantly, this threat to empire is brought about by an Othered, external threat, rather than an internal one. Minna Vuohelainen, among other critics, has rightly identified the ways in which the decay encountered in urban Gothic settings like those of *The Beetle* is both identified with the burgeoning London city and, simultaneously, distanced from it. While "terrors derive from situations particular to, and firmly located within, the urban experience" (Mighall 1999, p. 30), "the urban decay of the slums was seen to strip the inhabitants of their British characteristics, turning them into an alien race with animalistic, violent and criminal tendencies" (Vuohelainen 2006, p. 119). The instability created by English progress and imperialism is thus rapidly effaced by the threats posed by a foreign entity. While the urban Gothic and the imperial Gothic are, of course, not antithetical modes, my argument here is that the rhetorical emphasis on the foreignness of the beetle and their belongings redirects anxieties about danger and decline outward, causing characters to struggle against an ancient Orient rather than against Western modernity. This misdirection also locates traumatic individual experiences in an imagined Oriental space rather than in the familiar urban metropole.

In reading for "spaces of time," wherein particularly modern English anxieties are subdued through their reinterpretation as "Gothic" or "Oriental" threats, I lay the foundations for a reinterpretation of what, exactly, drives the characters within this text "mad." My reading locates the origin of psychological trauma in *The Beetle* in the discursive failure to distance the self-lauded civilizational progress of fin de siècle England from traumas that were its direct result. As Marsh adopts rhetorical strategies common to other Victorian discourses—reproducing the imperative to achieve this kind of rhetorical distance between progress and decline by projecting Gothic and Oriental characteristics into the fin de siècle context of his novel—he produces the novelistic conditions that ultimately drive his characters mad. And, similarly, it is under these conditions that narrations of trauma in this novel become "hysterical" in both form and content.

I argue that the temporal collapses that occur in discursive and psychic space within this novel take on the characteristics of a "hallucinatory hysterical attack," as conceived in Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud's 1895 publication *Studien über Hysterie* (*Studies in Hysteria*) (Breuer and Freud [1895] 2004). As conceived by Breuer and Freud, precipitating traumatic events could bring on "hysterical attacks," wherein they would be re-lived by the affected individual in the present. "Any experience which gives rise to the distressing affects of fright, anxiety, shame or physical pain" could therefore result in the "[repeated hallucination of] the same event which gave rise to the first attack" (Breuer and Freud [1895] 2004, pp. 7, 9). In accordance with this construction, I read the process of narrating trauma in *The Beetle* as itself constituting a hysterical attack, formally achieving the kind of "hallucinatory" re-experiencing of trauma that Breuer and Freud identify upon each read. As such, the hysterical symptoms of paralysis and "hallucination" (i.e., the reliving of a precipitating trauma) are structurally reflected in the slowing pace of Robert Holt's narrative and the compulsive repetition of Marjorie Lindon's, respectively.² Thus, I argue that past and present are collapsed both spatially and narratively when this novel attempts to bury the traumas and anxieties of late-Victorian culture within illusory constructions of the past (memory), which, invariably, continue their threatening returns into the narrative present.

Reading the narration of *The Beetle* as "hysterical" in form and style, I reveal the ways in which the social, spatial, and temporal instability of the ideal/Other relationship are paralleled in the mental instability of the novel's narrators, and therefore, in the novel's structure itself. The traumatic collapses of time and space that produce/result from this rhetorical madness thus reveal the hysterical relationship between English ideals of progress around the turn of the twentieth century and the anxiety-inducing social Others—foreigners, New Women, and the urban poor—who consistently disrupted simplistic narratives of white, European superiority. While Marsh seems less invested in critiquing or dismantling these narratives than in employing them to scandalize and frighten nineteenth-century

readers, his reimagining of the invasion of foreign threats in *The Goddess: A Demon* (1900) and *The Joss: A Reversion* (1901) suggests his awareness of the rhetorical effectiveness of evoking and then sensationalizing such discourses. The complex relationship between the navigation of social anxieties, the projection of them onto social Others, and the madness that ensues within this novel ultimately exemplifies the rhetorical acrobatics that were required to maintain Victorian cultural biases in fin de siècle England.

2. English Anxieties and Foreign Threats

The urban landscape represented in *The Beetle* is littered with threats both to personal security and to fin de siècle Victorian ideals. In the opening scene of this novel, the newly impoverished clerk Robert Holt finds himself unhoused, with the first line of the novel declaring the casual wards “Full up!” (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 41). Such houses of relief for “vagrants” and “tramps,” as Holt describes himself (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 41), were established by the Poor Law Amendment of 1844, which attempted to provide food and shelter beyond the scope of already extant workhouses in England (Robinson 2021).³ Being denied entry for the night, Holt walks an unpaved road in search of shelter and notes that the houses he passes “amid the general desolation, [seemed] to be cottages which were crumbling to decay” (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 45). Here, we might return to Minna Vuohelainen’s assertion above that such decay distances this neighborhood from its actual location in urban England by invoking associations with foreignness and animality (Vuohelainen 2006, p. 119). Thus, even as Holt’s surroundings are explicitly located within the modern, urban setting of Hammersmith, they are simultaneously disassociated from Victorian ideals of modernity—of which slums like those that Holt observes were the direct result—and instead translated into a Gothicized (and later Orientalized) space, one that might be filled with much less-ordinary horrors than economic exploitation and poverty.

Along with these anxieties about class mobility and financial insecurity, *The Beetle* also engages Victorian discourses about the New Woman and the social demarcation of gender norms. In her discussion of gender and modernity in this text, Victoria Margree reads these anxieties surrounding class and gender as intertwined, analyzing the parallels between Holt as an emasculated man and Marjorie as a masculinized woman as “an attempt to safeguard a version of virile British masculinity against what are perceived to be the joint threats of gender and class instability” (Margree 2007, p. 64). While other critics have contested the extent to which Marjorie can truly be read as a “masculinized” New Woman,⁴ the New Woman figure of the 1890s was characterized by her questioning of gendered roles, particularly women’s education, ability to work, and the mandate to marry.⁵ Therefore, Marjorie’s insistence on marrying the man of her own choosing rather than her father’s, her attendance at public events, and her refusal to stay behind when Atherton and Holt attempt to investigate the beetle’s house all establish her as at least a provisional New Woman figure, emphasizing her engagement in public life instead of relegating her to the domestic sphere that women were traditionally seen to occupy. In addition to Marjorie’s “masculinized” behavior in *The Beetle*, the prevalence of passing comments about “the age of feminine advancement” (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 129), descriptions of Marjorie as “in general, the least hysterical of young women[,] little wont to become the prey of mere delusions” (p. 166), and her own assertion that when she “venture[s] to call [her] soul [her] own. . . such a tempest invariably follows that [she] become[s] discreet again as soon as [she] possibly can” (p. 193) certainly suggest a textual awareness of fin de siècle discourses about shifting gender roles—and the social backlash they received.

Indeed, the absolute panic exhibited by male characters when Marjorie is forced into men’s clothing suggests a more than cursory engagement with anxieties surrounding the Victorian New Woman and her “masculinized” notions. Leslie Allin interprets the cross-dressing episode within this novel as a threat to masculine political and social control, as “maleness becomes uprooted from essential ontological categorization,” and is instead assumed just as easily as a change of clothes (Allin 2015, p. 130). *The Beetle* thus sensationalizes the fear that masculinity is not, in fact, a (visible, verifiable) biological reality,

but can instead be adopted—or at least convincingly mimicked—through the adoption of specific characteristics. For Margree, the importance of beginning the novel with these anxieties about unstable class and gender designations serves to establish “that the threat to civilisation comes not solely from the archaic and foreign but already exists in the centre of modernity itself” (Margree 2007, p. 65). While this is certainly true from a critical perspective, I want to further nuance this statement by exploring how the Gothicizing (and, later, the Orientalizing) of these urban settings actually undermines readers’ awareness of the threats that Victorian modernity had made for itself.

Returning to the opening scenes of this novel, Holt does find shelter in one of the seemingly abandoned Hammersmith houses, and their Gothicized decay is quickly translated into an Orientalized peculiarity. This quick redirect distracts readers of the novel from Holt’s very immediate (and quintessentially modern) plight of homelessness within the British metropole. Once sheltered from the storm outside, Holt has the ability to observe the space he has encountered; however, the first thing he describes in his narration is not the room itself but the speaker inhabiting it. Although he cannot decisively determine the gender of the speaker (a failure of description that continues throughout the novel), Holt “had no doubt it was a foreigner” (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 52). The stranger’s foreignness is emphasized, if not specified or localized, throughout a lengthy description. Holt describes them as having “saffron yellow” skin, a skull “so small as to be disagreeably suggestive of something animal,” and a nose “abnormally large” and “resembl[ing] the beak of some bird of prey” (p. 53). The beetle’s description thus slides across multiple identificatory categories through the invocation of various disciplinary understandings. The basic failure to identify the gender of the beetle seems to present an extreme version of the future forecast by those anxious about the New Woman’s confusion of gender roles and expression. Further, the depiction of the beetle’s skin as “saffron”-colored implicitly associates them with the foreign spice imports from colonized India, with the mention of their skull size and the repeated association with animality slip-sliding into language borrowed from racialized Victorian pseudo-sciences, such as phrenology and physiognomy.⁶ In these ways, Marsh accumulates social, cultural, and scientific discursive codes surrounding gender, race, deformity, animality, monstrosity, and psychological abnormality to construct a materially confirmed, exceedingly visible sense of the beetle’s categorical Otherness. The rhetorical effect of this amalgamation is the successful displacement of fear, which is no longer associated with Holt’s plight with homelessness.

Because the description above largely obscures the cross-disciplinary discourses on which it relies, I want to take a moment here to tease out a couple of the scientific disciplines from which this text’s depiction of the beetle appears to pull heavily: those of phrenology and evolutionary development. Alfred Russel Wallace’s 1871 study provides a representative sample of such discourses, through his attempt to outline the limits of Darwin’s theory of natural selection.⁷ Wallace’s treatise employs early nineteenth-century phrenological conclusions about brain and skull size and anthropological conclusions about cultural development to perform extended comparisons of the moral and intellectual capacities of “modern savages,” “pre-historic man,” “the average Englishman,” and “higher” and “lower” animals. In his comparison of European and non-European peoples, Wallace acknowledges that “all the moral and intellectual faculties [found in Europeans] do occasionally manifest themselves [in ‘savage’ races],” but concludes that “they are always latent, and that the large brain of the savage man is much beyond his actual requirements in the savage state” (Wallace 1871, p. 341). Further, Wallace contends that many non-European populations “pass their lives so as to require the exercise of few faculties not possessed in an equal degree by many animals” (p. 342). Through a series of rhetorical leaps, he thus diminishes the similarities between Europeans and (often racialized) Others—namely, skull or brain sizes supposed to indicate intellectual and moral capacity—and instead emphasizes the similarities between the practices of certain groups of “primitive” humans and those of “higher” or more evolutionarily advanced animals. In this way, Wallace’s (pseudo)scientific study essentially charts an evolutionary progression from animals to (racialized, often

colonized) “savage” populations to white, European man. Importantly, however, many of his subjects were not in fact evolutionary ancestors, but contemporary populations, living at the same time as their supposed evolutionary endpoint but rhetorically equated with prehistoric humanoids of the past.

A similar rhetorical move is made in *The Beetle*, as the urban setting and relative safety of the house in Hammersmith are forgotten when the strangeness and foreignness of the beetle is described. In this way, the description of the beetle stands in for a description of this already-Gothicized household space and overdetermines it as foreign and “Oriental.” This rhetorical emphasis immediately effaces the space’s associations with contemporary urban London and the financial struggles brought on by modern capitalism and imperial venture. This shift causes readers’ focus to settle on the racialized image of the foreign beetle, implicitly related to Britain’s evolutionary past, rather than retaining awareness of the space’s actual location in British suburbia. Indeed, it is worth noting that the only other description we receive of the house at this time is to register the presence of food and clothing; and, rather than simply presenting these as the primary and appropriate concern of a modern victim of poverty, the text emphasizes the strangeness of the “garments which might have formed the stock-in-trade of a costumier whose speciality was providing costumes for masquerades” (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 55). The description of the beetle and their belongings thus stands in for a description of this Gothicized (now Orientalized) household space, ultimately locating the cause of Holt’s discomfort and fear in an externalized threat and thereby obscuring the initially pressing concerns brought on by his impoverishment in fin de siècle London.

The same rhetorical shift is achieved, although to a lesser extent, in Marjorie Lindon’s narration of her first encounter with the beetle, which happens within her London home. Just as Holt’s traumatic experience happens in an explicitly urban, though impoverished, space associated with anxieties about his financial insecurity, so Marjorie’s happens in the most intimate of domestic spaces, associated with her unstable relationship with feminine gendered roles. This event is punctuated by disruptions of middle-class femininity, from Marjorie’s early dismissal of her maid to the “veritable holocaust of dainty garments” she executes on her clothes in her attempt to find the source of the terrifying buzzing sound that has invaded her quiet London home (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 206). This shredding of fashionable women’s clothing, in particular, might quite easily be read as a rejection of Victorian feminine norms, cohering with arguments about Marjorie’s New Woman status. However, the threat of the Orientalized beetle seems to justify Marjorie’s terror and, therefore, her “unfeminine” action.

Indeed, since Marjorie’s shredding of her garments is motivated purely by fear of a foreign entity, so far from being an act of social rebellion, it actually employs Victorian gendered codes to emphasize the Oriental threat: our good lady is so afraid that she does not even care about preserving feminine niceties, as would be “natural” to her sex. Similar to Holt’s traumatic experience earlier in the novel, Marjorie’s experience with the beetle clearly projects Gothic and Oriental threats into the Victorian domestic sphere. It is important to dwell here on the fact that, in these instances of “madness” and psychological trauma, any anxieties surrounding financial insecurity or gender roles that were specific to urban London are overshadowed by the foreign, supernatural terror that causes them. Holt will not be killed by exposure and hunger due to homelessness—although he will die of both while unhoused—but instead, the text insists, due to the mistreatment he suffers at the hands of the beetle. Similarly, Marjorie’s “New Woman” proclivities like shredding dresses and running around London disguised as a man cannot be interpreted as an actual rejection of gender roles when they are performed under the duress of terror and trauma. Therefore, rather than constituting a critique of such rhetorical techniques, Marsh’s text presents sensationalized narratives wherein the regular, everyday horrors of late-Victorian England are re-coded as the mad effects of a racialized foreigner.

3. Collapsing Victorian Time and Space

Further, the Gothicizing and Orientalizing of these physical spaces not only constitutes them as spatially dislocated from the modern metropole but also displaces them into a distant or ancient past, just as Wallace's pseudoscientific study does with cultural groups. In discussing the decay and decline associated with the Gothic mode, Mighall has noted its association with an ancient past. He asserts that "the Gothic dwells in the historical past, or identifies 'pastness' in the present, to reinforce a distance between the enlightened now and the repressive or misguided then" (Mighall 1999, p. xviii). Therefore, even the initial Gothicizing of the streets of urban London begins the work of temporally distancing these characters' struggles from their particularly modern context. As Vuohelainen concludes in her discussion of the Gothic and late nineteenth-century slum writings, "Marsh turns poverty, a natural but unpleasant and unavoidable social problem, into a Gothic monstrosity, outside society and its rules" (Vuohelainen 2006, p. 126). I would add that this rhetorical move places the threats of the novel outside of modern Victorian experiences of temporality. These simultaneous spatial and temporal displacements thus create "spaces of time" that invoke the supposed pastness of racialized places and peoples within but also instead of those of the modern metropole, ultimately serving to justify the experiences of trauma that occur within them.

Moreover, the temporal distance established through the Gothicizing of urban London at the beginning of the novel is exacerbated by the association of anxiety- and trauma-inducing modern spaces with an imagined ancient Orient, which in itself posits another temporal displacement. As has been thoroughly established by Edward Said's seminal study on Orientalism, the Orient was constructed as firmly outside the bounds of modern Britain and its "civilized" present. Said's articulation of "the Orient" as both "a European invention" and as "its contrasting image," defining Europe through the construction of what it purports not to be (Said 1979, pp. 1–2), is integral to my understanding of the binary divisions drawn between urban London and this constructed Orientalized space, and between emerging modernity and an ancient past. As Vuohelainen puts it, "in the wake of evolutionary biology, the new 'Science of Man' placed peoples and cultures on an evolutionary ladder which appeared to indicate a teleological progression from 'primitive' culture towards white European civilization" (Vuohelainen 2013, p. 320). This evolutionary hierarchy imposed on contemporary cultures implicitly constituted "primitive" cultures as existing in modern Britain's past, or at least its past state, and evolving or progressing toward a future state more equal to Britain's present.

In fact, Wallace's claims of racial differences above are posited through an even more explicitly temporal explanation when he argues that, in "savages," "the [brain has] been prepared in anticipation of the *future* progress of man" (Wallace 1871, p. 350, emphasis added). Though explicitly comparing similar organs from coeval cultures, Wallace posits the supposed superiority of modern Western intelligence and civilization as a future state toward which Othered peoples must progress or evolve. And Holt, too, asserts that he "seem[s] to be leaving civilization behind" as he walks through the desolate streets of Hammersmith (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 45), ultimately registering his own movement not only through a modern, urban space but a distantly removed, Othered space and, therefore, also signaling his travel backward in time.⁸ Simultaneously existing in the urban London "present" and the ancient "past" represented by the Orientalized beetle, the novel unwittingly collapses both time and space along this evolutionary line. This collapse of past and present ultimately provides the foundation for my reading of the hysterical narration styles of this novel in the next section.

Interestingly, though, the temporal experience of the modern British present was being thoroughly disrupted and confused at the same time that it was being posited as a superior evolutionary endpoint. While discussions about evolution and natural selection were both expanding and nuancing ideas about global history, racial and imperial relations, and deep time, the temporal experience of Victorian Londoners was being consciously standardized and streamlined. In her investigation of Victorian temporalities, Trish Ferguson character-

izes the mid- to late-Victorian period as one of “temporal uncertainty,” with the railroad inaugurating a standardized public time (London time) in 1840 and the Prime Meridian Conference determining that Greenwich, England would mark zero degrees longitude, and therefore the beginning of the universal day, in 1884 (Ferguson 2013, pp. 2–8). Although the latter, in particular, situates Britain as a temporal standard against which the rest of the world would orient itself over the course of the next forty years, it also, paradoxically, posits the British not as a temporal endpoint but as a starting point. Rather than a future to be attained, Britain is temporally located behind half of the world; Victorian Britain’s present was experienced while many of the very countries conceived as evolutionarily placed in Britain’s past were, in contrast, actually experiencing hourly, day-to-day time in its future. Thus, posited as both endpoint and start point, we see a similar temporal collapse to that discussed above, but this time within the metropole and without an Orientalized coleopteran villain to blame. Again, the very processes of modernization that justified Britain’s constitution of itself as a present or future temporal ultimate—the expansion of the railroad, the standardization of public time and the urban workday, the establishment of Greenwich Mean Time, etc.—simultaneously exposed the difficulties with, and deep ambivalences over, the modern Victorian experience with time.

Thus, the developments of modernity happening within the British metropole presented different relationships not only with urban space but with experiences of temporality as well. Thomas M. Stuart has read the temporal anxieties apparent in *The Beetle* as a “queer denial” of “eugenic futurity” that is predicated on the fluidity of morphic bodies (Stuart 2018, p. 224). While I find this reading both convincing and compelling, my reading of this text locates temporal disruption in less sexual and corporeal terms, focusing instead on the discursive and spatial landscapes of the text as they coincide with scientific and technological discourses of the Victorian period. Although *The Beetle* posits a recognition of the anxieties permeating the modern city, such as the instability of traditional class divisions and gender roles, I argue that these anxieties are promptly reinterpreted as Gothic and “Oriental” to safeguard the status of English modernity. This creates a spatial and temporal framework wherein the occurrence of particularly terrifying experiences is essentially justified by their projection into an imagined—and therefore more manageable—Oriental space. This rhetorical move also distances these traumas from modernity itself by positing these spaces as existing in the distant past.

The temporal collapses and failures of narrative within *The Beetle* also reveal the difficulty of retaining the kind of rhetorical distance required to posit English progress as a superior evolutionary endpoint, however. Even as spatial and temporal awareness of the modern present is effectively interrupted by the Gothicizing and Orientalizing of these spaces, the very process by which these “spaces of time” are defined as Other (and therefore differentiated from Western modernity) simultaneously constitutes the insistent presence of these characteristics within the text’s modern setting. In other words, this rhetorical attempt to distance Otherness simply constitutes the Victorian metropole as being ideally modern, anxiously disrupted by contemporary class and gender divisions, and invaded by atavistic colonial threats all at the same time. This simultaneity primes this novel for psychological and narrative collapses that parallel this temporal instability.

4. Breuer, Freud, and Hysterical Narration in *The Beetle*

Although the temporal dislocation of Gothicized and Orientalized spaces within this novel fails to completely distance fin de siècle anxieties from their modern present, it is precisely this spatiotemporal simultaneity that ultimately constitutes Holt’s and Marjorie’s narratives as hysterical re-livings (or retellings) of traumatic experiences. This is true because it places these experiences in a past that has collided with the present. In fact, I argue that the spatial collapse of an imagined Oriental past with modern urban and domestic spaces results in a narrative structure similar to that of a “hysterical attack,” as described by Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud in their *Studies on Hysteria* (Breuer and Freud [1895] 2004).⁹ Breuer and Freud conceive this kind of attack as instances wherein traumatic

memory collides with present experience in the form of a hallucination of the remembered event. I argue that the spatial and temporal stratifications I have identified above therefore both enable and are reflected in the hysterical narratives of trauma in *The Beetle*.

In *Studies on Hysteria*, Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud identify “traumatic hysteria” as a form of hysterical response in which a specific experience can be identified as the precipitating cause for a patient’s “hysterical attacks” (Breuer and Freud [1895] 2004, p. 7). The precipitating causes of these attacks produce states of heightened emotion, which are then re-lived as hallucinations of the original trauma (pp. 7, 9). More poetically, according to Breuer and Freud, “hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences,” as they re-experience past events as though they were happening in the present moment (p. 11). Therefore, in this construction “psychical trauma, or more precisely, the *memory* of it, operates like a *foreign body* which must still be regarded as a *present* and effective agent long after it has penetrated” (p. 10, emphasis added). In my reading of *The Beetle*, urban and domestic spaces are characterized by the foreign body of the beetle itself and thus come to represent a “pastness” (memory) being brought into the modern Victorian present through experiences of trauma.

Rather than being subject to “the normal erosion” that occurs with other memories, these pathogenic experiences force past memories into present experiences, in the form of hysterical attacks (Breuer and Freud [1895] 2004, p. 14). Thus, attempts to bury modern anxieties in the narrative constructions within *The Beetle* fail through the very attempt to distance them; past and present are collapsed when the trauma that is seemingly made possible by the Orientalizing of urban spaces is experienced not in some imagined past but in the narrative present. The temporal dislocation of these spaces and the collision of an imagined past with an anxious modernity thus leads to hysterical narration styles when the traumas that happen within these spaces are recounted. And, importantly, these narratives become hysterical as the direct result of the correct functioning of Victorian ideological mechanisms that sought to distance madness and decline from imperial and social progress.

Both Holt’s and Marjorie’s narratives can be interpreted as hallucinatory reenactments of past traumas. Moreover, the formal elements of these narratives mimic characteristics of hallucinatory hysterical attacks, as they are described by Breuer and Freud.¹⁰ When Holt first becomes aware of the presence of the beetle in the seemingly abandoned house, he states that “it was as though something in my mental organization had been stricken by a sudden paralysis”—an immobility he associates with “a sensation of panic fear” (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 49). While Holt’s immobility and submission to the beetle has been interpreted by existing scholarship as an instance of mesmeric or hypnotic control, in this moment his paralysis can also be read as a fear response to a traumatic experience.¹¹ The intense fear that Holt experiences even before he is physically assaulted aligns with Breuer and Freud’s discussion of precipitating causes, which they characterize as producing “distressing affects” such as fright (Breuer and Freud [1895] 2004, p. 7). More specifically, bodily paralysis and “cataleptic rigidity” are both identified as physical symptoms of hysterical attack (Breuer and Freud [1895] 2004, p. 8, 17), and, although Holt “would have much rather have died than stood there still” at the moment of attack, “[he] could not control a limb” (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 50).

This interpretation of Holt’s paralysis as a hysterical response is particularly useful when considered in relation to the near paralysis of his narrative pacing, because it posits the form of this “hysterical attack” (Holt’s narrative reliving of the event) as a reflection of the “precipitating cause” (his initial, paralyzing trauma). Indeed, Holt’s physical paralysis is paralleled by a relative inability to move through narrative time. In this instance, Holt’s temporal experience of his own trauma only progresses as quickly or as slowly as the beetle does—and the beetle moves up his body unbearably slowly, “a quarter of an inch at a time” (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 52). It is worth dwelling on this phrasing, since it posits the passage of time in relation to spatial awareness: inches pass over the course of unspecified spans of

time, and, likewise, Holt's experience of time passes in fractions of inches. Here, individual psychological experience is explicitly determined by spatiotemporal relationships.

Further, Holt's narrative recounts around 24 h (one night to the next) in the span of 47 pages. In contrast, Sydney Atherton's narrative covers the same period of time in about half that number of pages and Marjorie's does so in only ten. This narrative pacing affects readers' sense of temporality. Holt's narrative presents a relative temporal paralysis that reflects both his physical and psychical experiences of trauma. It is also revealed much later in the novel that Holt's introductory first-person narrative was "compiled from the statements which Holt made to Atherton, and to Miss Lindon," and not recorded by Holt himself, due to his death after the fact (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 321). Thus, in addition to its formal paralysis, Holt's entire narrative remains perpetually located in the "past" for the surviving characters of the novel, who must utter it on his behalf in order to "present" it to readers. However, the very process of reading, always situated in the narrative present, constantly pulls this paralytic past into the present, participating in the same kind of temporal collapsing as I have argued for above. Holt's narrative style and its accompanying formal features thus both reflect and participate in the kind of discursive instability I have characterized as inherent to Victorian constructions of space and time.

In contrast to the kind of temporal paralysis and relegation to memory that thus characterizes Holt's narration, Marjorie Lindon's hysterical narrative is marked by its repetition. Like Breuer and Freud's patients reproducing "with hallucinatory vividness everything that had excited [them]" during a precipitating trauma (Breuer and Freud [1895] 2004, p. 12), Marjorie's narration emphasizes the repeated irruption of past events into the narrative present. To start, Marjorie's narrative consists almost entirely of events already related by Atherton earlier in the novel—his proposal, Paul Lessingham's speech, and her own attack all having already been recounted in Atherton's version of the narrative. And Marjorie's assault itself is a repetition of the attack suffered by Holt: Holt feels "the presence with [him] in the room [of] something strange, something evil" (Marsh [1897] 2004, p. 49) and, similarly, Marjorie becomes convinced "that there actually [is] something with [her] in that room, some invisible horror" (p. 204). Both become immobilized, as Holt "ha[s] not a muscle at [his] command" (p. 51) and Marjorie "[is] incapable of movement" (p. 206), and both remark on the weight of the beetle upon them (pp. 51, 206). The spatial and temporal awareness of both narratives are also determined by the movements of the beetle. Although Marjorie first frantically swats around, chasing the flight of the bug, she ultimately becomes immobilized like Holt and the beetle determines the progression of the narrative as it moves closer—"a quarter of an inch at a time" (p. 52), "inch by inch" (p. 207). Therefore, although Marjorie provides a different narrative perspective from Holt and Atherton, she is most often relating events with which readers are already familiar or repeating details that have already been encountered in previous scenes. Her narrative thus returns, time and time again, to spaces and experiences already in the narrative past.

This repetition is also accomplished on the syntactical level of Marjorie's narrative. This is perhaps most noticeable in her description of the beetle's movements toward her. She states, "it came nearer and nearer; it grew clearer and clearer" (p. 206). Both diction and syntax become repetitive in this recapitulation of the beetle's assault, with the words "nearer" and "clearer," the rhyme, and the structure of the two clauses all repeating themselves within the span of a single sentence. Likewise, as the beetle comes upon her, Marjorie again feels it getting "nearer and nearer, inch by inch" (p. 207), which both reiterates her own assertion the page before and mimics Holt's earlier experience as the beetle moved upon him, "a quarter of an inch at a time" (p. 52). Lastly, her very utterance of the narrative tends toward repetition in the form of a stammer when she speaks to her maid: "I-I-I'm not feeling very well, nurse; I-I-I think I'll be better in bed" (p. 203). The repetition of events and details already recounted by other narratives in the text is thus punctuated by the repetitive diction and syntax within Marjorie's narrative style, mimicking the uncontrollable recurrence of hysterical symptoms and repeated re-living of past trauma described by Breuer and Freud.

Ultimately, this narrative style also reflects its purported composition, which, unlike Holt's, is recorded by Marjorie herself and explicitly characterized as hysterical.¹² After the major events of the novel, Marjorie is held "for something like three years under medical supervision as a lunatic" (p. 319), during which time she repeatedly writes down the traumatic events surrounding her experience with the beetle: "she told, and re-told, and re-told again, the story of her love, and of her tribulation," "invariably [beginning] and [ending] at the same point" (p. 322). Marjorie's composition of her narrative thus explicitly takes the form of a hysterical hallucination in which she relives her trauma over and over again while under intensive psychological care. Unlike Holt's paralytic history, perpetually buried (I might even say repressed) in the narrative past, Marjorie's account repeatedly insists upon its temporal presence, constantly excavating past memories and laying them bare in the present. Together, these narratives exhibit the major symptoms of a hallucinatory hysterical attack, making these sections of the novel themselves hysterical hallucinations. And indeed, the act of reading the novel forces these past events into the narrative present, again and again upon each read.

5. Conclusions

Reading these narratives thus, as the utterances of traumatic hysteria, allows us to interrogate the spatial and temporal hierarchy presented throughout *The Beetle* and, ultimately, the narrative failure to definitively differentiate between past and present, ideal and Other. I have argued that the Victorian anxieties about modernity that Marsh evokes in this novel are displaced through the Gothicizing and Orientalizing of urban spaces, which then allows for a temporal distancing of the "primitive," dangerous past from a "civilized" present. This kind of temporal dislocation within the world of the novel is a useful rhetorical strategy for the Victorian period because it disallows for the recognition of these traumas as the results of modernization, instead positing them as those of an imagined "Oriental" past. Distancing decay and decline by positing them as the effects of Gothic, supernatural threats made it possible to both sensationalize and ignore the instabilities brought on by fin de siècle ideals of progress and imperialism.

However, the collapse of narrative past and present within the hallucinatory utterances (narration) of hysterical attacks reveals the instability of such discursive obfuscation. Victorians were certainly not unaware that the rapid cultural changes and new demands of modern civilization were particularly conducive to instability. As Thomas Stretch Dowse put it in 1880, "Life at high-pressure is the prominent feature of the nineteenth century, and we cannot be surprised when we find that the so-called nervous diseases and exhaustions. . . are increasing beyond all proportion to the rapid increase of the population" (Dowse 1880, p. 40). But the narration within *The Beetle* also reveals the ways in which Victorian discourses attempted to displace these anxieties about modernity and psychological instability into different spaces and different times, in order to retain England's material and temporal centrality at a time when the British Empire was beginning to suspect its own precarity. The hysterical narration of this text thus reveals the difficulty—if not the impossibility—of escaping the past. *The Beetle* demonstrates the traumas, dislocations, and temporal collapses that invariably resulted from attempts to deny the instabilities and decay brought on by Victorian modernization.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author/s.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

Notes

- ¹ Elaine Showalter's discussion in *The Female Malady* emphasizes the ways in which these extinctive stakes were heavily gendered and used to threaten "new opportunities for self-cultivation and self-fulfillment in education and work [that] were offered to women," in order to prevent "sickness, sterility, and race suicide" (Showalter [1985] 2014, p. 121).

- 2 Breuer and Freud's use of the term "hallucination" might be confusing for modern readers. Rather than a projection of unreal delusions into one's current experience of reality, this term refers to the feeling of re-living events that have already passed. It is therefore more akin to the modern understanding of a post-traumatic flashback or "intrusion" in this context.
- 3 Casual wards and other temporary forms of support were re-established in the 1840s after the New Poor Law of 1834 restricted relief to those living in workhouses.
- 4 For example, see Harris and Vernooy, who read Marjorie and Dora as "the novel's potential New Woman candidates" who ultimately fail, in their estimation, "to substantively question or disturb male hegemony" (Harris and Vernooy 2012, p. 342).
- 5 See Ledger (1997) for a useful overview of "the New Woman" figure and New Woman fiction in fin de siècle England.
- 6 Phrenology and physiognomy were particularly materialist pseudosciences that gained prominence in the early nineteenth century. Based on the concept of localized brain centers, phrenology purported that skull measurements could reflect the size of specific "organs" inside, which were then related to particular mental and constitutional traits. Similarly, physiognomic studies attempted to establish a systematic correspondence between psychological characteristics and specific facial features. Although the conclusions of these pseudosciences were rather swiftly disproven in scientific communities, their social connotations lingered in the Victorian imagination much longer than did their scientific authority.
- 7 Wallace theorized a similar, though less internally coherent, construction of Darwin's theory of natural selection, but he himself credited Darwin with this discovery in the preface to *Contributions* (1871).
- 8 Mighall notes this spatial/temporal relation with regard to the Gothic as well, asserting that "when English tourists travelled to the continent, they moved through time as well as space" (Mighall 1999, p. 16).
- 9 The 1895 publication date of *Studien über Hysterie* makes it tempting to conjecture as to Marsh's awareness of the theory presented by Breuer and Freud when drafting *The Beetle*—particularly given Marsh's German heritage and, therefore, the potential that he might have been able to access the text prior to its translation into English in the early twentieth century. However, it is more likely that the similarities I posit between Breuer and Freud's construction of hysteria and Marsh's rhetorical choices are the result of overlapping discursive understandings of mental instability in Germany and England at the end of the nineteenth century, rather than being the result of a conscious adoption of this theory by Marsh.
- 10 Breuer and Freud explicitly link the treatment and cure of traumatic hysteria to a form of narration, claiming that "the psychical process that had originally taken place has to be repeated in as vivid a way as possible. . . and then given verbal utterance" (Breuer and Freud [1895] 2004, p. 10, emphasis added).
- 11 See, for example, Harris and Vernooy (2016); Rebry (2016); and Bhattacharjee (2020).
- 12 While I do not expand on it here, the gendered connotations of this difference in narrative expression are worth noting, as hysteria was constituted as a particularly feminine disorder during this period (see Showalter [1985] 2014). Although Holt is certainly struck with nervous fear, he is not coded as "hysterical" in the same way Marjorie is.

References

- Allin, Leslie. 2015. Leaky Bodies: Masculinity, Narrative, and Imperial Decay in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*. *Victorian Network* 6: 113–35.
- Bhattacharjee, Shuhita. 2020. "Not a muscle at my command": Mesmeric Trance, Consent, and #MeToo in Richard Marsh. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 16. Available online: <https://ncgsjournal.com/issue162/bhattacharjee.html> (accessed on 10 July 2024).
- Brantlinger, Patrick. 2012. Imperial Gothic. In *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*. Edited by Andrew Smith and William Hughes. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, pp. 202–16.
- Breuer, Josef, and Sigmund Freud. 2004. *Studies on Hysteria*. Translated by Nicola Luckhurst. London: Penguin Books. First published 1895.
- Bulfin, Ailise. 2011. The Fiction of Gothic Egypt and British Imperial Paranoia: The Curse of the Suez Canal. *English Literature in Transition, 1880–1920* 54: 411–43.
- Dowse, Thomas Stretch. 1880. *On Brain and Nerve Exhaustion: Neurasthenia, Its Nature and Curative Treatment*. London: Baillière, Tindall, and Cox.
- Ferguson, Trish, ed. 2013. *Victorian Time: Technologies, Standardizations, Catastrophes*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Galton, Francis. 1891. *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences*. Boston: D. Appleton & Co. First published 1869.
- Harris, W. C., and Dawn Vernooy. 2012. "Orgies of Nameless Horrors": Gender, Orientalism, and the Queering of Violence in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*. *Papers on Language and Literature* 48: 338–81.
- Harris, W. C., and Dawn Vernooy. 2016. Buy Curio(u)s: Homosocial Possession and Camp Recoding of the Orientalist Object in Richard Marsh. *Nineteenth-Century Gender Studies* 12. Available online: <https://www.ncgsjournal.com/issue121/harris.html> (accessed on 10 July 2024).
- Ledger, Sally. 1997. *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Margree, Victoria. 2007. "Both in Men's Clothing": Gender, Sovereignty and Insecurity in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*. *Critical Survey* 9: 63–81. [CrossRef]
- Marsh, Richard. 2004. *The Beetle*. Edited by Julian Wolfreys. Peterborough: Broadview Press. First published 1897.
- McClintock, Anne. 1995. *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. London: Routledge.
- Mighall, Robert. 1999. *A Geography of Victorian Gothic Fiction: Mapping History's Nightmares*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Nordau, Max. 1895. *Degeneration*, 5th ed. Book I. Boston: D. Appleton & Co. First published 1892.
- Rebry, Natasha. 2016. Playing the Man: Manliness and Mesmerism in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle*. *Gothic Studies* 18: 1–15. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Robinson, Alistair. 2021. *Vagrancy in the Victorian Age: Representing the Wandering Poor in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Said, Edward. 1979. *Orientalism*. New York: Random House.
- Showalter, Elaine. 2014. *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture 1830–1980*. London: Virago Press. First published 1985.
- Stuart, Thomas M. 2018. Out of Time: Queer Temporality and Eugenic Monstrosity. *Victorian Studies* 60: 218–27. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Vuohelainen, Minna. 2006. “Oh to Get Out of that Room!”: Outcast London and the Gothic Twist in the Popular Fiction of Richard Marsh. In *Victorian Space(s)*. Edited by Karen Sayer. Leeds: University of Leeds, pp. 115–26.
- Vuohelainen, Minna. 2013. “You Know Not of What You Speak”: Language, Identity and Xenophobia in Richard Marsh's *The Beetle: A Mystery* (1897). In *Fear, Loathing and Victorian Xenophobia*. Edited by Marlene Tromp, Maria K. Bachman and Heidi Kaufman. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, pp. 312–30.
- Wallace, Alfred Russel. 1871. The Limits of Natural Selection as Applied to Man. In *Contributions to the Theory of Natural Selection*, 2nd ed. London and New York: Macmillan and Co., pp. 332–71.

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.