



**Citation:** F. Perazzini (2021)  
The Gothic Contagion from Pop-  
ular Literature to Transmedial  
Memes. *Lea* 10: pp. 45-59. doi:  
<https://doi.org/10.13128/LEA-1824-484x-12795>.

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**Data Availability Statement:**  
All relevant data are within the  
paper and its Supporting Informa-  
tion files.

**Competing Interests:** The  
Author(s) declare(s) no conflict  
of interest.

# The Gothic Contagion from Popular Literature to Transmedial Memes

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## *Abstract*

The article examines the development of the Gothic mode across the centuries in terms of transmedial contagion. In particular, the analysis focuses on the survival of specific Gothic tropes and figures in the nineteenth-century street literature phenomenon of penny-blood. The lowbrow literary form will be considered in its inherent dynamics of adaptation and appropriation to highlight its role in transforming some of the most iconic characters into vehicles of cultural transmission: memes that have come to redefine the viewer's relationship to Victorian literature and culture.

*Keywords:* Adaptation, Gothic Genre, Memes, Penny-Blood, Street Literature

## *1. Introduction*

“Having taken up residence in its host, [it] replicates itself throughout our culture like a virus” (Mulvey-Roberts 1998, xvii). With this epidemiological simile, Marie Mulvey-Roberts summarises the mutations of the Gothic genre in its manifold afterlives. In fact, the association between gothic literature and the pathological comes almost natural in light of how Angela Carter describes the genre's moral function, namely the pervasive and disturbing ability “of provoking unease” (Carter 1996, 459). Indeed, from its early emergence in the second half of the eighteenth century to its apparent dissolution in-between the lines of Scott's Historical Novel, the Gothic genre has proven to be resistant to the antidote of realism, feeding off the incredulity of its readers while evolving in a cross-temporal mode of representation.

According to an increasing majority of scholars (Miles 1993; Kitson 2002; Potter 2005), after the 1820s the Gothic did not actually disappear from the official spectrum of genre fiction, but underwent a pulviscolar recrudescence. As Julian Wolfreys puts it, gothic tropes, popular conventions, and characterisations

would spring up anywhere in different sections of the Victorian novelistic market lighting up the dark side of contemporaneity (Wolfreys and Robbins 2000, xiv). Thus the gothic contagion began, spreading towards the lowbrow street literature of penny blood (1840-70) and the later penny dreadful series (1860-1900), reclaiming its novelistic form towards the end of the century with Oscar Wilde and Bram Stoker's acclaimed works. While literary scholarship has often dismissed the penny-series phenomena as derivative, but also degenerative examples of a genre drift, this article argues for their significant contribution in pushing further the Gothic contamination into the unprecedented frontier of memetics.

After a brief introduction about the relationship between adaptation and meme theories, in part two, I will illustrate the actual figures of the Gothic weight in the British novel market until the 1820s, while in part three, I will follow the gothic contagion in the underworld of Victorian street literature of penny blood and penny dreadfuls. The conclusions will focus on how the crystallisation of specific characters into our collective cultural imagery, can be interpreted as embodiments of gothic memes.

## 2. Contamination as Adaptation: Towards Gothic Memes

According to its earliest etymological acceptance, "contamination" derives from the Latin word *contaminatus* (to bring into contact) and refers to the process of corrupting or deteriorating by mingling. During the Middle Ages the term became increasingly associated to the imagery of infection and, with it, to one of impurity, adulteration, and immorality thus denoting the vulnerability of the body through the permeability of its boundaries.

While the medical field has generally intended such permeability as dangerous or, at least, degraded, for what concerns the literary field this must be read as literature's very condition of possibility. In fact, as Gérard Genette famously postulated in his *Palimpsests*, no such thing as literature in the first degree exists. Primary texts like the *Iliad* or *La Chanson de Roland* should be considered in their transtextual relationship with previous works, that is to say as hypertexts whose hypotexts are unknown (Genette 1997). In Genette's view, the whole literary system can be understood as a continuous flow of intertextual adaptations and appropriations where "every successive state of a written text functions like a hypertext in relation to the state that precedes it and like a hypotext in relation to the one that follows" (395). This was a turning point for the construction of the theoretical basis of adaptation studies as, in fact, Julie Sanders suggests:

An adaptation signals a relationship with an informing source text or original. [...] On the other hand, appropriation frequently effects a more decisive journey away from the informing text into a wholly new cultural product and domain. This may or may not involve a generic shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of (at least) one text against another. [...] But the appropriated text or texts are not always as clearly signaled or acknowledged as in the adaptive process. They may occur in a far less straightforward context than is evident in making a film version of a canonical play. (2016, 26)

Of the five modes of transtextuality that Genette identifies as typical of the "literature in the second degree",<sup>1</sup> hypertextuality "is perhaps the type most clearly relevant to adaptation"

<sup>1</sup> Genette classifies the modes of transtextuality in terms of intertextuality (marked by quotation and allusion); paratextuality (indicated by secondary signals like titles, prefaces, or epigraphs); metatextuality (referred to commentary and allusion); architextuality (implicit in paratextual generic markers); and hypertextuality (which refers to any relationship uniting a text B to an earlier text A grafted in a manner that is not that of commentary).

(Stam and Raengo 2005, 31), for it constitutes a specific framework of reference to better interpret, as well as problematise, the distinctive modes of textuality in light of their constant renegotiation through intermedial relationships.

In the case of gothic literature, intermediality and adaptativity appear as inherent traits of the genre's DNA as proven by the massive dissemination of parodies, pastiches, abridged, plagiarised, staged or screened versions of popular gothic source-texts that have invaded the sphere of cultural production in the past two centuries.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, one could argue that much of the debate regarding the tensions between "highbrow" and "lowbrow" fiction which characterised the institutionalisation of literature as an object of study was firstly generated by the publishing escalation of tales of terror since the 1790s. In this respect, the Gothic paradigm is quite far from being "boring and exhausted" as Fredric Jameson declared (Jameson 1991, 289), but alive in its capacity of giving shape to the anxieties of its audience in a cycle of imitation and regeneration throughout the ages and the different social generations (Kitson 2002, 165). The Gothic genre can thus be re-conceptualised borrowing and somewhat extending a key concept of evolutionary biology: namely the meme theory, as a set of units of cultural transmission that propagate among the members of a community via imitation and reconstruction.<sup>3</sup>

The intimate connection between adaptation and meme theories was recently postulated by Linda Hutcheon in her pivotal book *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006). In it, she analyses the field of cultural adaptation comparing the replication/mutation process of memes with the transmedial journey of certain stories that are subject to "continuous mutation, and also to blending" (Hutcheon 2013, 195) in order to adapt for survival:

Although Dawkins is thinking about ideas when he writes of memes, stories also are ideas and could be said to function in this same way. Some have great fitness through survival (persistence in a culture) or reproduction (number of adaptations). Adaptation, like evolution, is a transgenerational phenomenon. Some stories obviously have more "stability and penetrance in the cultural environment," as Dawkins would put it (193). Stories do get retold in different ways in new material and cultural environments; like genes, they adapt to those new environments *by virtue of* mutation — in their "offspring" or their adaptations. And the fittest do more than survive; they flourish. (Hutcheon 2013, 32)

But which, among the almost endless catalogue of gothic stories, preserve the necessary effectiveness to be absorbed by different socio-cultural systems? Which gothic stories can be considered as memes of modernity? The next two sections will answer these questions by analysing the process through which the Gothic genre migrated and adapted to lower forms of popular literature.

### 3. *Spreading Impure Literature: Inside the Gothic Market*

In his essay about the circulation of the literature of terror, Robert Miles summarises the development of the Gothic genre as follows:

Terror fiction breaks down into two, broad phases: from 1788 to 1793, when the Gothic bursts onto the literary scene after a long period of intermittent gestation; and a plateau of market dominance

<sup>2</sup> See chapters 8-12 of Hogle's *Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction* (2002).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Dawkins' 1976 classic *The Selfish Gene* introduced the idea that human culture is composed of units passed by imitation between members of a community in a manner analogous to the genes of biological forms. These fundamental units of cultural transmission were termed "memes".

from 1794 (the year in which *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *Caleb Williams* were published) to 1807, when the Gothic begins its decline. (2002, 42)

Miles' claims appear empirically supported by crosschecking Garside, Raven, and Schöw-erling's (2000) data regarding the publication of British novels with the numerical evidences of Gothic bibliographies.<sup>4</sup> The outcome of this complex operation locates the highest peak of the Gothic genre circulation between 1796 and 1807 with an average of 20 new gothic novels published per year which constitutes a representativeness of 27% within the British novelistic market. More specifically, the year 1800 undoubtedly marks the summit when the greatest number of gothic publications appeared with 27 new titles. The beginning of the genre dispersal is recorded between 1808 and 1820 with a drastic flection of the Gothic quota averaging 14% of the total number of original works published. Eventually, the movement towards extinction of the Gothic genre is ultimately confirmed between 1820 and 1829 with the unprecedented low peak of 5% of representativeness, with only 4 to 6 original titles published per year.

Meanwhile the British literary market became increasingly dominated by different forms and subgenres of supposedly higher merits. Already in 1816, the Scottish publisher Robert Cadwell provides interesting insights on the situation of the book trade in those years:

Mr Constable writes me that Trade in the South is generally speaking very dull — and of course the Book Trade is affected by the stagnation. Books of first-rate merit however, sell better now, than at any former period — those of a middle walk in Literature do not sell at all — & almost all periodical Works of talent increase in circulation. (Killick 2008, 36)

Cadwell's observations highlight a substantial inversion in the marketing criteria of the early nineteenth century book trade, pointing to the novel's quality and artistic merit as the sole guarantee of its success. This new trend in the novelistic market clearly confirms the decline of the Gothic as a structured genre contributing to turn it into a repository of tropes and devices that infected the rising, more respectable, genre of historical fiction represented by Sir Walter Scott. A contagion, this between the gothic and historical genre, that further coincides with the so-called Great Gender Shift: the passage of the sceptre of market hegemony from a feminine to a masculine authorship as well as readership.<sup>5</sup> At the same time, the Gothic contagion further spread across other channels and less official recesses of the sphere of cultural production such as dramatic tableaux and street literature. Indeed, in the late eighteenth century a whole secondary market of short tales of terror began to emerge as a response to the variegated demand of horror and sensational literature in the British public. The typical three-volume novel system was thus complemented by the popular format of gothic chapbooks ranging from 36 to 72 pages. These short tales of terror and horror were cheap to make and buy and often consisted of excerpts or simplified reproductions of entire subplots of well-known gothic novels. As Potter remarks:

<sup>4</sup> As regards the reconstruction of a gothic bibliography, there is no study that can alone be considered as definitive or acceptable. The best way to obtain a comprehensive, as well as reliable, bibliographic list of gothic novels is to compare the different sources available such as Summers 1940; Lévy 1968; Frank 1987. The result of such comparison led to the compilation of an improved bibliography of 519 titles included in the appendix of my book *La Nascita del Romanzo Gotico* (Perazzini 2013).

<sup>5</sup> In her article "*Love in Excess*. Eliza Heywood, 1719-1720" (2006), April Alliston coins the formula "The Great Gender Shift" to identify the particular phenomenon characterized by the transition from a female-dominated literary market, both in terms of authorship and reading public, to one predominantly marked by male authorial voices. This coincides with the first apparition of Walter Scott's cycle of Waverley historical novels.

Chapbooks marked the vulgarization of the pastiche-ridden Gothic mode, the simplification of its intricate and convoluted plots and the distillation of its verbose sublime descriptions into simple tales of terror. They were enjoyed by readers in their thousands, readers who were eager to obtain tales of terror in their simplest and crudest of forms. Exceedingly popular, these texts were sold on street corners and found in circulating libraries throughout Britain and North America. *The Horrible Revenge* (1828), for example, was extracted from Eliza Parsons's *The Mysterious Warning* (1796) and *Raymond & Agnes; Or, The Bleeding Nun of the Castle of Lindenberg* (n.d.) was extracted from Matthew Lewis's *The Monk* (1796) verbatim. (Potter 2014, 269)

The cultural matrix of such new forms of Gothic discourse has been identified in the encounter of the oral folklore of popular ballads and urban legends with the cheap formats of street literature (James 1974). These publications appear as mainly characterized by an “emphasis on destiny, chance, fortune and levelling forces such as death, express[ing] the centuries-old experience of common people [...] with little or no control over the conditions of their lives” (Kelly 2003, x). In addition to the specific narrative progression that Kelly defines as “lottery mentality”,<sup>6</sup> what further contributed to delimit the target audience of the gothic chapbooks to the lower classes was the stylised use of episodic plots stuffed with portentous incidents described by a repetitive prose lacking any deep description of characters' subjectivity or emotions (Kelly 2003, xv). In this perspective, as Michael Gamer claims, for nineteenth-century writers the Gothic genre became “a way not only of targeting a particular audience but also of [...] negotiating *between* audiences, as writers demarcate their texts with multiple genres in order to propose pacts with multiple audiences” (Gamer 2000, 47).

Quite soon the economic potential of these short tales of terror was acknowledged by sensible publishers and by 1825 the number of magazines and periodicals which enlivened their pages with sensational fiction was higher than ever. In particular, the *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* (1817-32) gained a certain notoriety for its tales, the best of which were also collected and published separately. For the affordable cost of one shilling, these stories evolved in a calculated mixture of dread and suspense that thrilled the emerging Victorian audience satisfying their fictional thirst for violence, horror, and crime. They were initially known as shilling shockers, and then as penny blood or penny dreadful and their influence reached many major Victorian authors, including Dickens, the Brontë sisters, or Robert Louis Stevenson.

These booklets were issued weekly with each issue extending from 8 to occasionally 16 pages. The actual text featured a double column layout which abruptly broke off at the bottom of the final page, even in the middle of a sentence, with a black-and-white illustration on the top half of the front page.<sup>7</sup> The illustrations were an essential element of street fiction so that, as David Stuart Davis points out: “You sees an engraving of a man hung up, burning over a fire, and some ... go mad if they couldn't learn what he'd been doing, who he was, and all about him” (2020). The advertising potential of such eye-catching illustrations was therefore fully exploited by the different publishers whose main instructions to their illustrators was “more blood – much more blood!” (*ibidem*). Indeed, between 1830 and 1850, up to one hundred publishers of penny-fiction embraced the genre (Potter 2019).

<sup>6</sup> Kelly juxtaposes the lottery mentality to the “investment mentality” that characterized the Protestant ideologies of self-improvement, self-advancement, modernization and self-discipline, thus exemplifying “the middle-class discourse of merit” typical of the emerging middle-class chapbooks (2003, x, xxiii).

<sup>7</sup> Their authors, who might keep ten of these stories spinning simultaneously, were paid at the rate of a penny a line. This had a relevant impact in the construction of the text as skilled practitioners knew that staccato sentences were the most profitable. They soon learned to oblige the compositor to leave one or two words hanging at the end of a paragraph so that the typographic layout of the genre was as full of widows and orphans as its plots.

However, there is no single or agreed definition of what the Victorian penny dreadful genre is and gothic scholarship seems to converge only on a diachronic perspective. Indeed, Jarlath Killeen defines the penny blood as those “serials sold primarily to an audience locked out of the novel” (Killeen 2012, 46) that appeared in the market in the 1830s and 1840s, only to be replaced by penny dreadful in the later half of the century. Apart from the period in question, commentators diverge on what content basis distinguishes a penny dreadful from a penny blood. Killeen states that penny dreadfuls “emerged out of the Bloods, but were aimed specifically at a juvenile audience and were mostly published in the second half of the century” (*ibidem*). Similarly, Michael Anglo phrases the distinction in these terms: “[They] came to be known as ‘penny dreadfuls’, a term that would embrace cheap papers of all descriptions for the next seventy years” (1977, 12); while Judith Flanders simply claims that “penny-bloods was the original name for what, in the 1860s, were renamed penny-dreadfuls” (Flanders 2013, 58). More to the point, Robert Mack proposes a thematic as well as an audience-oriented division where “a great many critics still confuse the bloods with the distinctly different literary type that followed them, the penny dreadful, which were mostly associated with adventure — rather than gore — and were also addressed to a more juvenile audience” (2007, 139).

To sum up, while the middle classes remained the main target audience for the official circuit of the Victorian novelistic market, the parallel mushrooming trade of penny blood and penny dreadful addressed a new segment of Victorian readership. In fact, during the 1830s, the large scale spread of literacy among the whole social ladder along with the technological improvements in the printing press industry resulted in a boom of cheap street fiction aimed to conquer the up-to-then neglected slices of the Victorian society, as well as reading public, constituted by the working classes and semiliterate adolescents.

#### 4. *Highwaymen, Barbers, and Vampyres: Myths of Lowbrow Gothic*

The first ever penny-blood was published by Edward Lloyd in 1836 with the title of *Lives of the Most Notorious Highwaymen, Footpads, &c.*: a collection of biographical articles about the careers of Britain’s most famous criminals past and present. In 60 issues, and over the time span of four years, *Lives of the Highwaymen* was produced serially on cheap paper with 8-16 page instalments sold for a penny each. The immediate success of the publication, along with the violent content of the single booklets, led to development of a whole offspring of penny bloods’ highwaymen such as *Gentleman Jack* (1852) by the prolific genius of James Malcolm Rymer, or the adventures of the street bandit Dick Turpin in *Black Bess* (1866), credited to Edward Viles. In particular, *Black Bess* was named after the legendary horse on which Turpin supposedly road the 200 miles between York and London in a single night: a clearly fictional reference to William Harrison Ainsworth’s gothic novel *Rookwood* (1834). The penny blood saga of the audience’s favourite Dick Turpin appeared in 254 short volumes over the course of five years in a total of 2,228 pages of redundant incidents, with the first murder occurring oddly late on page 1,757, and Turpin’s execution near the end, on page 2,207.

After highwaymen and evil aristocrats fell out of fashion, the new most successful penny-blood formula was coined by G.W.M. Reynolds in his *Mysteries of London* (1844). Contrasting the dreadful world of the slums with the decadent life of the careless rich, *Mysteries of London* spanned for 12 years, 624 issues, and nearly 4.5 million words. With a selling peak of 250,000 copies a week at the heights of its popularity in the late 1840s, Reynolds’s *Mysteries* was almost certainly the most lucrative serial publication in history till then. It also marked a

great shift in the thematic repertoire of street literature as the model of Eugene Sue's French novel *Les Mystères de Paris* (1842-43) was adapted to the London setting bringing together members of high and low society through the means of a sensational mystery plot in which the city played a defining role.

After Reynolds' *Mysteries of London*, "true" urban crimes, especially murders, became the narrative gold mine of penny-bloods and, if there were no good enough real-life crimes, then authors had to invent them. This is the case of the story of Sweeney Todd, the "Demon Barber of Fleet Street", firstly introduced to the world by the serial publication of *The String of Pearls* in the pages of Edward Lloyd's *The People's Periodical* (1846). Lloyd published the dark tale of the murderous barber attributed to Thomas Peckett-Prest and, more recently, James Malcolm Rymer, in 18 parts from 1846 to 1847. Even before it had reached its conclusion, the hack playwright George Dibdin Pitt purloined Rymer's story and immediately adapted it for the stage with the new title: *The String of Pearls: The Fiend of Fleet Street*. Pitt further exploited the public enormous appetite for gruesome crimes advertising his production as "Founded on Fact" while setting the play during the reign of George II. The theatrical adaptation of *The Fiend of Fleet Street* debuted on 1 March 1847, at the Hoxton Theatre – a London bloodbath playhouse specialised in sensational melodramas, leading the Demon Barber to world fame. The raging speculation whether the story of the fellow who murders his customers and hands over their bodies to his partner-in-crime, Mrs Lovett – who, in turn, would bake them into pies and sell them to her pie shop's customer – was a true fact or just fiction further contributed to spread the myth.

Although no public records has ever substantiated the existence of a London barber named Todd located on Fleet Street, there were certainly enough bits of real-life horror reported in "The Old Bailey" section of the *London Times*, as well as other newspapers. In fact, there are several well-documented contemporaneous crimes that share similar traits with the legend of Sweeney Todd. For example, in December 1784 *The Annual Register* reported of a barber near Fleet Street who, in a jealous rage, cut his victims' throat to soon disappear into the night. Similarly, the *Newgate Calendar* recounted the gruesome story of the notorious cannibal mass-murderer Sawney Bean, also known as the "Man-Eater of Scotland" (Mayhew 2008).

However, the most striking similarities with the case of the Demon Barber seem to emerge from the *Archives* of the French Police regarding a peculiar series of murders committed in 1800 when a Parisian barber was in league with a neighbouring pastry cook who made pies out of the victims and sold them for human consumption. Such story was later intercepted and republished in 1824 by the London *Tell Tale* magazine under the headline "A Terrific Story of the Rue de Le Harpe, Paris".

Last but not least, Rymer and Prest might have delineated the character of Todd out of a libel suit of 1818 against the scandalmonger James Catnatch. The case revolved around James Catnatch, a regular publisher of rumours and false stories, who outrageously produced a ballad claiming that the butchers of Drury Lane were selling sausages made from human flesh. When one of his banners declared: "A Number of Human Bodies Found in the Shop of a Pork Butcher", Mr Pizzey of Blackmore Street, one of the butchers named in the publication, was lynched by angry customers. As all the ballads of the period carried a note of the printer's name and address in their bottom corner, Pizzey could retrieve the necessary information to sue Catnatch for malicious libel. This latter was found guilty, and served a six month term in Clerkenwell Gaol. John Pitts, Catnatch's main rival at the time, used his own print shop to produce a ballad mocking Catnatch's condition with the lines:

Poor Pizzey was in an awful mess,  
 And looked the colour of cinders,  
 A crowd assembled from far and near,  
 And they smashed in all his windows.  
 “Now Jemmy Catnach’s gone to prison,  
 And what’s he gone to prison for?”  
 For printing a libel against Mr. Pizzey,  
 Which was sung from door to door.  
 (Hindley 2020, 62)

In conclusion, even if Sweeney Todd’s origins may not be true crime at all, its appropriation of urban legends as well as Victorian era news reports make him one of the most popular monsters whose legacy resulted in a rich, transmedial dissemination of reprints, imitations, and stage adaptations, including musicals. More specifically, the overlapping themes of industrialization and cannibalism continue to resonate in public imagination so that Rymer and Prest, but also Reynolds, redirected their profitable exploration of the lurid frontiers of metropolitan abjections calling into question other traditional monsters of popular literature. Rymer and Prest’s *Varney the Vampyre* (1845-47), Reynolds’s *Wagner the Wehr-Wolf* (1846-47), as well as the Wandering Jew’s penny blood incarnation of Prest’s *The Flying Dutchman and the Demon Ship* (1839) are but a few examples of the modelling process that street literature performed on some of the most enduring characters of the Gothic paradigm.

In terms of narrative structures, the most recurring pattern in the characterisation of the penny-blood abject is probably the curse: the depiction of a wandering immortal either undead or endowed with eternal life contracted through a pact. His aspect is immutable, though capable of shape-shifting, his suffering as perpetual as his atonement. In this view, the vampire is the quintessential embodiment of what Tyler R. Tichelaar called “the gothic wanderer” (2012).

Since Coleridge’s “Christabel” (1816), Byron’s poetic anti-heroines, and Polidori’s *The Vampyre* (1819), the only predecessor to Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1871) and Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897) was *Varney the Vampire* (1845-47).<sup>8</sup> For more than a hundred years its authorship was wrapped in mystery as it was published anonymously in over 109 instalments, 200 chapters and 660,000 words during the mid-1840s. It finally appeared as a whole assembled novel of epic length between 1846-1847 after the cheap, mass-market series of *The Romanticist and Novelist’s library* had reprinted Polidori’s *The Vampyre*. The incredible popularity of Polidori’s excerpt reminded Edward Lloyd, now established as the leading producer of penny dreadfuls, of the remunerative potential of vampire stories. Indeed, the materiality of the undead who drains the life blood of the living was probably the ultimate figure of supernatural that the modern era could embrace and see as a genuine, as well as thrilling, threat.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>8</sup> The tangled story of *Varney’s* authorship is recounted in Christopher Frayling’s book *Vampyres: Lord Byron to Count Dracula* (1991). At the beginning it was credited to “the author of *Grace Rivers; or, The Merchant’s Daughter*”, then, towards the earlier half of the twentieth century, the eccentric scholar Montague Summers argued in *The Gothic Quest* (2020) that the series’ author was Thomas Peckett Prest. Since Prest had written the most famous penny dreadful of all, *The String of Pearls*, it was perhaps logical to suspect he had also written *Varney*, the second most famous penny dreadful. It was only in 1963 that James Malcolm Rymer was established as the actual author or, at least, the primary author of *Varney the Vampire* thanks to Louis James’s analysis of Rymer’s own scrapbooks (James 1974).

<sup>9</sup> The demystification of apparently ghostly and supernatural figures was common in Victorian penny fiction. The modern reading public, even the minimally educated one, was more inclined to reject the superstitions embodied in the earlier gothic cliché. An example of this new tendency can be traced in the Springheeled Jack series: an 1863 penny dreadful that depicted the titular bogeyman not as a supernatural being, but as a costumed figure



As many other penny dreadfuls, *Varney's* plot is complex and lacking of consistency. It revolves around the adventures of Sir Francis Varney, a pseudonym for the late Sir Runnagate Bannerworth, who had risen from the dead as a vampire after committing suicide a century earlier. Plot holes regard some of the backstories, with name changes and several incongruities about Varney's status as a supernatural entity. For example, for a long section of the novel, the protagonist is claimed to be a highwayman previously hanged and then resurrected by a medical student through galvanism – an idea that was clearly inspired by Giovanni Aldini's experiments on the body of George Forster and possibly influenced by the variety of adaptations of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Later in the text, the whole galvanism subplot is abandoned, with Varney turning out to have been a real vampire all along. The final version of the events reveals that Varney had lived during the English Civil War and was cursed with vampirism after accidentally killing his own son in a fit of anger.<sup>10</sup>

Unlike the irresistible and yet wicked byronic charm of Polidori's Lord Ruthven, Varney is a sympathetic vampire of hideous ugliness who has to rely on his skills as mesmerist or hypnotist to entrap his preys. A tormented-anti-hero characterised by a bitter sense of self-loathing who continually tries to destroy himself, only to have nature continually thwart him. For example, after jumping into Vesuvio to end his life, the volcano spits him back out; the sea he tries to drown in casts him ashore so that he experiences the terrible agony of drowning without really dying.

While it is generally agreed that Bram Stoker was influenced by Le Fanu when he wrote *Dracula*, the definitive vampire story, there is no sufficient evidence that he was familiar with *Varney the Vampire*, who was soon consigned to the oblivion of literary history. The only episode Stoker would later reprise, is Rymer's consideration that a vampire's victim could become herself undead: "it is dreadful to think there may be a possibility that she [...] should become one of that dreadful tribe of beings who cling to existence by feeding, in the most dreadful manner, upon the life blood of others — oh, it is too dreadful to contemplate!" (Rymer 2007, 62). Here, the echoes of the Stoker's Bloofer Lady subplot, thus the conversion of Lucy Westenra into a child-hunter vampire predator, is pretty clear.<sup>11</sup>

in special boots. Springheeled Jack would reportedly leap into the paths of young servant girls to physically assault them or run coaches off the roads.

<sup>10</sup> In his book *Fiction for the Working Man*, Louis James, argues that this engagement with history reflects a change in public tastes. "These writers [of penny dreadfuls] of course ingurgitated any material to hand, but the historical, with its claims of authenticity which appealed to the cosmopolitan, knowledge-seeking reader, was increasingly ousting the Gothic traditions" (1974, 72). At the same time, Rymer continued to express a deeply condescending attitude towards writing for a popular audience and a paradoxical contempt for the popularity of macabre fiction: "How then are we to account for the taste which maintained for so long for works of terror and blood? Most easily. It is the privilege of the ignorant and the weak to love superstition. The only strong mental sensation they are capable of is *fear* ... There are millions of minds that have no resource between vapid sentimentality, and the ridiculous spectra of the nursery" (Rymer in Guiley 2005, 247).

<sup>11</sup> Stoker may have employed the phrase after Dickens's "boofer" for beautiful in his *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-65), adding the "l" to the word as a possible relation to bloody. One of the main features of this new vampire is her maternal luring of children. The image of Lucy as the "bloofer lady" holding a child in her arms to feed on it leads to unpleasant conclusions. Stoker insists on reminding us of Lucy's depravity when the vampire hunters gather to kill her and she tries to seduce Arthur: "The sweetness was turned to adamant, heartless cruelty, and the purity to voluptuous wantonness. [...] With a careless motion, she flung to the ground, callous as a devil, the child that up to now she had clutched strenuously to her breast. [...] when she advanced to [Arthur] with outstretched arms and a wanton smile he fell back and hid his face in his hands. She still advanced, however, and with a languorous, voluptuous grace, said, 'Come to me Arthur. Leave these others and come to me. My arms are hungry for you. Come, and we can rest together. Come, my husband, come!'" (Stoker 2011, 196-97).

Besides his ability of penetrating human flesh with his phallic teeth – “there was the faded ancient apparel—the lustrous metallic-looking eyes—its half-opened mouth, exhibiting the tusk-like teeth!” (6) – for the rest, Stoker’s Dracula is quite different from Varney as a vampire. He can be attracted by men as much as women, such as the case of Jonathan Harker and Mina Murray (Stoker 2011, 31); can be western and eastern simultaneously in his whiter-than-white visage linked to “aquiline” stereotypes of the Jew in the 1890s (23-24); and can be extremely aristocratic and roaming among homeless gypsies (45), thus threatening the stability of class boundaries. Most importantly, Stoker’s Dracula is the ultimate re-writing of Charles Maturin’s prototype of the gothic wanderer Melmoth, surviving across centuries into various human guises from different eras and cultures. Of course, Dracula is also a shape-shifter capable of turning himself into an animal – a wolf or bat – as easily as he can be nearly all things “on the continuum between a very earthy being bound by time and the unearthly demon” (Hogle 2002, 12).

In a larger perspective, more than the vampire, the shape-shifter creature archetype is perhaps most influentially interpreted by another penny dreadful monster: the werewolf. Although the Victorian literature on werewolf is anything comparably popular near the craze for vampirism, nineteenth-century werewolf short stories, such as Richard Thomson’s “The Wehr-Wolf” (1828) or Leitch Ritchie’s “The Man Wolf” (1831) paved the way for longer, yet forgotten, characterisations like Reynolds’s series *Wagner, the Wehr-Wolf* (1846-47).

Reynolds’s melodrama is certainly very derivative of the early tradition of gothic novels with particular references to Eleanor Sleath’s *The Orphan on the Rhine* (1798), but also imitative of the complex style and coincidental narratives of both *Varney the Vampire* and Eugene Sue’s *The Wandering Jew* (1844). The novel opens with a prologue featuring a ninety-five-year-old Wagner who is visited by a mysterious stranger who offers him the gift of eternal youth in exchange for becoming a werewolf for twenty-four hours once a month. The stranger will later turn out to be Faust, the alchemist, and Wagner seals the pact with him by drinking from a vial that will make the transformation occur. The vial of potion constitutes a unique detail as most werewolf stories associate the lycanthropic metamorphoses to the vampirish one thus occurring through the bite of another werewolf. After Faust’s death, Satan himself will arrive to tempt Wagner again and seal another pact with him. Just like Varney the Vampire despises his own nature as a blood predator, Wagner is tormented by his beastly condition and longs to be freed from it. Thus, Satan proposes he must sell his soul to him in exchange for freedom, wealth, and immortality, but Wagner refuses to do it eventually managing to send off Satan with a crucifix.

As one of the most ancient characters transited from folklore to Gothic horror, the werewolf exemplifies humanity’s fear of “the beast within”; a metaphor for what Jacques-Lefèvre describes as the “social ills, the loss of values, the individual and collective deprecation and degeneration” (2018, 122). Traditionally ascribed to the realm of demonological transformations, during the early modern period, lycanthropy began to be reassessed by the new medical sciences as a mental illness, a disorder of the melancholic humour. However, the popular fascination with the supernatural origin of werewolves perdured in the representations of the curse, whether self-inflicted or externally imposed, that generated their first metamorphoses. In Reynolds’s *Wagner, the Wehr-wolf* (1857) the curse is the price paid to the devil for Wagner’s immortality and riches; whereas in other works such as Kipling’s *The Mark of the Beast* (1890), the curse can also be involuntary placed on the bearer because of his transgression (in the case of Kipling’s tale the desecration of an Indian temple).

In the last decades of the century, the Victorian imperial imagery further contributed to import a variety of exotic locales and foreign creatures into the British literary market thus pairing the werewolf myth the public was familiar with to more mysterious settings and intriguing

narrative possibilities. One of this is certainly the appearance of the female werewolf. While female shape shifters/wolves were quite a rarity in literature, they hold a prominent place in myth and folklore. For sure, penny dreadful authors such as Frederick Marryat (*The White Wolf of the Hartz Mountain*, 1839) and most notably Clemence Housman (*The Were-Wolf*, 1890) exploited the character of female shape-shifter wolf as a trademark for several novellas fueled by the growing paranoia surrounding the new woman question and the suffragette movement.<sup>12</sup>

On a conclusive note to this section, a special mention among the most adapted texts, and creatures, in the history of literature certainly goes to Frankenstein; an immediate literary sensation upon publication, adapted into more than fifteen stage productions until 1851, with five different shows in 1823 alone. In particular, Richard Brinsley Peake's adaptation titled *Presumption; or, the Fate of Frankenstein* (1823) featured two radical alterations destined to influence most of the twentieth century iconography of the monster, namely the deprivation of the creature's capacity of speech – thus making him mute – and the introduction of the side-character of Igor, the doctor's assistant. Notwithstanding the immense notoriety of Mary Shelley's novel, Victorian penny dreadful authors would surprisingly leave the figure of the monstrous lab freak almost untouched, turning to a limited number of epitomised episodes and characters, such as body-snatchers or unethical resurrecting practices, to exploit.

Other gothic wanderers would later regain centre-stage in the decadent imagery of late Victorian novelistic market in the form of vicious doppelgängers like Dorian Gray or Mr Hyde, as well as bloodthirsty daemons such as Dracula roaming the streets of London to satisfy their unlimited appetite.<sup>13</sup> These are the new faces of nineteenth-century metropolitan "otherness" that public spectacle, popular culture and genre fiction would size and incorporate in the later film franchises that continue to proliferate today in a variety of forms (see Nelson 2012).

Next, and final, paragraph of this article will therefore give an account of the evolution of Gothic narrative contagion through the resonance of the monstrous myths described above in their afterlife as adaptable, transmedial memes.

## 5. Conclusion

Although the Gothic has mainly figured as a novelistic genre, its cultural and literary manifestations extended into the poetic, dramatic and operatic fields with more than 1,000

<sup>12</sup> Besides the authors already cited in the body of the article, below is a chronological list of the most famous series on werewolves during the second half of the nineteenth century: *A Story of a Weir-Wolf* (1846) by Catherine Crowe, *Lycanthropy in London; or, The Wehr-Wolf of Wilton-Crescent* (1855) by Dudley Costello, *The Gray-Wolf* (1871) by George MacDonald, *The Were-wolf of the Grendelwold* (1882) by F. Scarlett Potter, *The White Wolf of Kostopchin* (1889) by Gilbert Campbell, *A Pastoral Horror* (1890) by Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Mark of the Beast* (1890) by Rudyard Kipling, *The Were-Wolf* (1890) by Clemence Housman, *Dracula's Guest* (ca. 1892) by Bram Stoker, *The Other Side: A Breton Legend* (1893) by Eric Stenbock, *Morraha* (1894) by Joseph Jacobs, and *Where There is Nothing, There is God* (1896) by William Butler Yeats.

<sup>13</sup> As Alexandra Warwick states, "The post-Darwinian monster is subtler than the show freak, and more threatening too. [...] By this time, the monster that is most feared is the invisible one, the man whose apparently normal exterior hides psychological deformity. By the 1860s, for the first time in history, more people lived in urban than rural areas, and as the known community of rural life gave way to the alienation of city life, the Victorians came to be more fearful and suspicious of those unknown 'Others' among them. The hysterical high point of this is perhaps the Whitechapel murders of 1888, where the terrible killings of several prostitutes produced a sensational outpouring of speculation about the perpetrator, dubbed Jack the Ripper by the press and variously thought to be a Jew, a mad butcher, a 'savage' performer from Buffalo Bill's Wild West show, a local gang, a degenerate medical student, an upper-class sex-tourist, or even the actor playing Jekyll and Hyde on stage in the West End" (2014, 369-70).

gothic novels and chapbooks published in England between 1764 and 1830 (Potter 2021). Gothic scholarship has commonly paid little attention to the phenomenon of chapbooks, shilling-shockers and Victorian penny-bloods, partly because of their plebeian root along with their lack of depth and artistic significance (Frank 1987).

However, as this article has attempted to demonstrate, the persistency of the Gothic mode across the centuries, its constant recrudescence in a series of conventions and patterns of characterisation that transcended the original literary medium, has resulted in a multitude of adaptations of previous original hypotexts, whose values and interpretations reside in the eyes of their receptors, either readers or viewers. In this perspective, it may be argued that some of the stories here described as myths of popular Gothic – the serial murderer barber and his cannibalistic outcome, the vampire, the werewolf, or the creature – can newly be defined as memes. Indeed, as memes appear as the predominant and logical form of myth in our augmented, multi-medial society, these units of cultural anxieties have lost any authorship bond with their original creator thus entering a wider, less subjective dimension of storytelling. Not only do other authors, but also – and most importantly – other forms and discursive practices continue to appropriate them in a cycle of memetic leaps from one medium to another.

Besides the number of authors who attempted to provide prequels, sequels or parallels to famous Victorian works, or those who disclosed the untold stories behind novels' background plots and characters, the ultimate and most exemplary product of Gothic memetic contagion is the Neo-victorian metafictional cross-over. A "literary connect-the-dots-puzzle", as Alan Moore defined it (qtd in Lee and King 2015), where the integrity of the different fictional worlds is breached in favour of a hybrid, playful, pastiche-like narrative project requiring an intrusive re-writing of situations and characters. In particular, Alan Moore and Kevin O'Neill's graphic novel series *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen* (1999-2007) represent a fast-paced, incident-packed, post-modern reinterpretation of some of the most memorable characters created by Victorian Gothic such as Mina Harker, Doc. Jekyll, Dorian Gray, or Allan Quatermain. Imported from the comic books industry, the basic laws of crossover establish that characters who were so far supposed to inhabit their own self-contained fictional world were to be seen as part of a larger narrative universe and could therefore interact with one another. The price of such contamination is a substantial reshaping of characters' identity through a formal reversal of their inherent values.

The same principle of neo-victorian metafictional cross-over can also be found in the most recent Showtime/Sky Atlantic's television series *Penny Dreadful* (2014-16). As Alison Lee and Frederick D. King analyse, John Logan's production represents a shift in the paradigm of modern adaptations thanks to his model of "contamination in which one mode of discourse [...] leaks into or infects another, so that we experience both at the same time" (Lee and King 2015). In particular, *Penny Dreadful* tv series responds to the collective logic of meta-fictional uchronia (Bellavita 2020), which describes an alternative development of the single diegetic lines of certain hypotexts in light of the convergence of their main characters, who deviate from their original narrative pattern (always accepted as a parallel, or at least prior to the plot in question) to complete a new narrative project.

Undermining the very idea of authorship and priority on the final hypertext, the tv series cannot be described as a canonic adaptation of neither *Dracula*, or *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, nor of *Frankenstein* or the *Wolf-Man*, as it is never clear which is the 'host' work into which characters from other texts have been imported, or from which might be deviating. *Penny Dreadful* tv series therefore rejects the notion of an original ur-text being, by its own name, derivative and second-hand in its crystallisation of two hundred years of transmedial adaptations in the most enduring gothic memes of all time.

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