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Free in Body and Spirit:  
Spectral Liberation of Objectified Peoples in Victorian and Neo-Victorian Literature  

Frances Hardinge’s 2015 novel, The Lie Tree, revisits Victorian conversations about the natural sciences, religion, and gender roles. The story, set in the 1860s, follows a young woman, Faith, who obtains a plant – the titular lie tree – after the death of her father. She must then grapple with the power of this tree. In Faith’s father’s analysis, he finds that the tree feeds on lies, with a bigger and more widespread lie producing a healthier plant. Her father notes, “Choose a lie that others wish to believe. [...] They will cling to it, even if it is proven false before their faces.”¹ In her father’s case, he lies about discovering fossils that prove the stories of the Bible true. The eventual revelation that his findings are untrue causes distress to both scientific and religious communities and to his family, who are forced to move as a result. In a modern context, we may view this story as displaying a tension between father and daughter. A Victorian context, however, reminds us that Faith’s crisis is part of a broader crisis of faith, when various scientific discoveries forced Christians to accommodate their faith to these findings or reject them altogether.

A resurgence in Victorian aesthetics, like those in The Lie Tree, has been ongoing since the middle of the twentieth century. Victorian literature is marked by the reign of Queen Victoria, roughly from 1837 to 1901. This was a time of social reform, with introductions to Darwinian concepts that drove tensions between science and religion, a rise in industrialism, and increased literacy among the masses. There was a certain draw to beauty through aestheticism, which grew out of the preceding Romantic period.² Though we may note the various progressions of the era, we must also acknowledge that the period was marked with imperialism, colonization, the imposition of patriarchal values, and reliance on the labor of children and enslaved peoples – the oppression of those marked as less.³ While the definition of Victorian literature is accepted by scholars, the term “Neo-Victorian,” often applied to texts like The Lie Tree, has proven much more troublesome to define.⁴ “Neo,” meaning new or taking on a different form, holds various implications when tied to Victorianism, a time notorious for the objectification of various peoples. Neo-Victorian literature takes on “the aesthetic form and ideological messages of nineteenth-century literature” while giving readers enough temporal distance from the period to feel comfortable addressing issues of oppression.⁵

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Neo-Victorian aesthetics have increased exponentially, with a reemergence of Victorian themes and ideals taking hold in literature, television, and other media. This was manifested in the 2002–3 traveling show, BodyWorks, which was compared to “the displays of human oddities that were so central to nineteenth-century British popular culture” in the media.⁶ Other modern examples of Neo-Victorian body fetishization include various shows on TLC, such as “Little People, Big World,” or the ‘Freak Show’ season of “American Horror Story.” Ideals introduced in the Victorian era set the foundation for modern society and our views on the “other,” especially those pushed to the margins. With our current knowledge of the past, and our move towards equality through movements like feminism, racial justice, various disability movements, and the like, we are able to “rethink the forms and contents of the past.”⁷ At the same time that we may be critical of certain beliefs, especially those so imbued with imperialism and colonization, we acknowledge that broader society is indebted to this period. We, like those that write Neo-Victorian stories,
have the power to view the Victorian as an oppressive force, or to look deeper for areas of resistance and progressivism.

In nineteenth-century texts and Neo-Victorian literature, one pocket of resistance exists in the ghosts and spirits who haunt the narratives of both periods. Some scholars have argued that the nature of classic Victorian ghost stories is based on conservative values. Historically, however, the spiritualism movement, which moved talking to the spirits of the dead into the cultural mainstream, was a very progressive force. Its intent was to give voice to those who had none and were disregarded; its followers believed that “the dead were willing and able to communicate with the living, and that what they had to say was worth listening to.” It was also led by women and allowed women to work outside of the house and to have a sense of authority. Jennifer Bann claims explicitly, however, “I would not argue that the literary ghost story [...] should likewise be viewed as radical, subversive, or even progressive in any overarching sense,” which overlooks the very clear pattern of oppressed ghosts that exists within these texts. In fact, most of the Victorian and Neo-Victorian ghosts present in my archive or those they haunt are women or children.

Looking closely at these characters and their interactions with others allows us to analyze what they tell us about the treatment they faced while dead and alive. It also forces readers to examine why they may resist spectral characters or the serious treatment of supernatural fiction. To give context to various ghost narratives from the nineteenth century, in this article we bring them into conversation with sociological research and theory about the treatment of women and children and the evolution of education, thus situating them within the cultures contemporary with their publication and exploring their relevance to our modern views of monstrous figures. By doing so, I unveil that the various specters act progressively, revealing the symptoms of their oppression through their haunting and their hauntedness. This extends to contemporary Neo-Victorian fiction, where I contend that the hierarchies revealed in the Victorian era are flipped, in that the oppressed person now has power over their oppressor.

One of the most eccentric progressive forces in the nineteenth century was the spiritualism movement, which was centered around speaking to ghosts and spirits. With the movement’s progression – which began in 1848, with the Fox sisters of New York – came the belief that the “self retained some form of spatial individuality in the form of the spirit, which in life existed as an intermediary between soul and body.” Even the way ghosts were treated within Victorian literature emphasizes the movement’s revelations about marginalized peoples – the ghost itself is objectified and battles to gain subjectivity. Spiritualism was criticized by many, both those who didn’t believe in speaking to ghosts and those who were uncomfortable living among haunted objects. We can see that even long past the movement’s heyday, it pushed back on dominant beliefs surrounding production and purchasing power, suggesting that “consumers had much less authority over things than they liked to imagine,” thus undermining the prerogatives of capitalism. Using Bill Brown’s Thing Theory, we can understand this further. As Brown describes it, Thing Theory involves looking at various objects and understanding why and how we use them “to make meaning, to make or remake ourselves, to organize our anxieties and affections.” A dependence on and desire for objects comes as a result of consumerism, as we have learned to accumulate things of value or to want things that make a particular argument about ourselves, whether it be that we belong to a certain group or can afford a particular luxury. Our objects become a part of who we are. This results in a peculiar problem where one may associate their being with the ownership of an object. In this way, Brown points out the irony that we are forced to confront: “that we do not
possess [objects]; they possess us.”

We, in this acknowledgement, have given objects a sense of agency, of control, where they are “no longer inert matter or mere backdrop of human action and consciousness,” but instead “have a vitality of [their] own.”

If we then apply Thing Theory to the supernatural, by looking at objects being haunted, the resistant force of haunting becomes clear. Bill Brown quotes Frances Ponge, saying that while ideals are nausea-inducing, objects are delightful. He notes that we desire contact with the real – and therefore, the tangible – while the intangible is startling and full of fear. When an object becomes possessed by a ghost, I argue, the safe and desirable tangible item becomes marred with the intangible specter. We see this often in the Victorian era, particularly in the 1850’s and 60’s, “a phase of British spiritualism in which the presence of ghosts was registered primarily through animated objects.”

For an example, we can look at Margaret Oliphant’s “The Open Door” (1881). The story follows the first-person narrator, who has just moved into a new home with his family. While exploring his newly acquired land, he stumbles upon an abandoned and decaying house, with a door that is described as being “void of any meaning.” Despite this, the narrator tells us that “[his] mind was prepared to attach to it an importance which nothing justified.” We later find out that beyond this door, within this house, lies the ghost of a child who wishes to see his mother. This door, something that ordinarily would draw no attention, becomes the forefront of this character and his son’s attention when it acquires a spectral association.

Similarly, we can look at the aforementioned Neo-Victorian novel, The Lie Tree, where the titular tree draws the protagonist, Faith, her now-dead father, and a third character, Agatha Lambent, all of whom wish to lie to it and receive the supernatural secret sharing fruit it bears. Both Faith and Agatha do not initially suspect each other of desiring the tree, as women were societally excluded from scientific study. When Faith, who has the tree, finds out Agatha killed her father for it, she is in disbelief: “Here was that mythical beast that everybody had told her could not exist: a female natural scientist.” Similarly to how the door, and by extension the abandoned house, in Oliphant’s narrative draws attention to the motherless ghost, the lie tree acts as a prop to demonstrate the oppression of women. In the case of The Lie Tree, however, the supernatural gives the protagonist a means to challenge her oppressed state; she acts like a ghost to gain control over other characters and divert suspicion, which allows her time to make up stories to tell the tree and scientifically observe its growth.

While in the Neo-Victorian novel, Faith is able to manipulate haunting to her own advantage, she is not wholly successful. In both these texts, the objects that draw the characters lead them to act in a way – or force them to act in a way – that disrupts life for them and those around them. In “The Open Door,” the ghost possessing the door communicates with the narrator’s son, Roland, and turns him ill, which pushes the narrator to return home from a vacation. Once the narrator is home, Roland tells him the secret that haunts him. The narrator expresses the consternation this causes him: "It is bad enough to find your child's mind possessed with the conviction that he has seen – or heard – a ghost. But that he should require you to go instantly and help that ghost, was the most bewildering experience that had ever come my way." With this provocation, he is unable to continue work, or life, as usual.

Similarly, in The Lie Tree, we see that the “haunted” object forces the person who desires it to cause a disruption to those around them. Faith, as mentioned earlier, acts as a ghost in order to continue her study of the lie tree. She wires the servants’ bells from her deceased father’s room to her room so she can ring them ominously at random, stops clocks in the house, burns her father’s tobacco, and moves items around the house, creating the illusion that a spectral presence...
(specifically, her father’s ghost) is there. This causes a disturbance for everyone else who lives in the house and beyond, through the spread of rumors. Even when she wishes to stop lying, the tree bids her to continue, eventually becoming problematic for her as well.

In each of these stories, we see characters struggle against the various supernatural objects that haunt them, and both Oliphant’s narrator and Faith are unable to maintain control. Brown’s theory notes that we have a need for domination over objects. We’d like to believe we hold power over (own) them as opposed to them holding power over us. When an object becomes haunted, our sense of control becomes skewed, we are no longer the one who has the power. Aviva Briefel notes that “things possessed by spirits liberate themselves of their intended purpose [...] The innumerable descriptions of animated furniture during the early period of spiritualism emphasize this persistent refusal of function.”

23 It is not just that the object is haunted – some note that dead workers who needn’t eat or sleep could prove quite useful – but that it refuses to act according to the owner’s wishes. The object, in these cases, becomes detached from its use value and thus, liberated. Through the object, the person being haunted or the ghost itself is liberated. Could these objects, the books we ourselves are looking at, then demonstrate how Victorian oppression continues to haunt contemporary culture and therefore act as liberators for our own consciousness in relation to “othered” peoples?

**The Victorian Period: The Supernatural Reveals Hierarchies**

As we begin our examination of the nineteenth century, we will focus on the pervasive societal objectification of women, governesses, and children as our primary subjects. This selection is the result of the literature at the time, as there were plenty of other disenfranchised groups in the forms of racial and religious “others” who were largely silenced by the culture. As there is an abundance of scholarship surrounding the treatment of women in the nineteenth century, we will avoid repeating that which is already so well known. Instead, we will begin by looking at the role of governesses, who appear as central characters in many Victorian ghost stories.

In many respects, governesses were completely devoid of personhood in the home. They were embellishments that displayed a family’s high-class status and were given no more importance than their role as the child’s instructor. “The governess was a testimony to the economic power of the Victorian middle-class father,” in much the same way a valuable artifact or painting would be shown off to guests of the house, allowing the family to “indicate her presence in the home and display her as a symbol of economic power, breeding, and station.”

24 In this way, the governess, her work and her body, acted as “little more than a standard furnishing” in the home. In any case, her position in the home is equal to that of an object and she is treated as such, with little power to advocate for herself politically, as Peterson points out, and socially, as Erin Chamberlain points out that ads depicted governesses as a standard part of the house.

A literary example of such a disempowered governess can be seen in Henry James’ *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). The governess, who is nameless – a direct acknowledgement of her lack of personhood – is taken over by her belief that ghosts are haunting her and the children she watches. There is much conjecture among scholars over whether the ghosts are physically in the house or if they are a product of the governess’s declining mental condition. Diverging from either of these schools of thought, we can choose to look at them as representative of her being synonymous with her work as a governess. The ghastly figures she sees – the former governess and valet – are previous employees of the house, who have died and been replaced. She sees
Miss Jessel, the former governess, at a desk in the children’s nursery, suggesting that she (the ghost) wishes to reclaim her former position as keeper of the children, which highlights the narrator’s own replaceability. The new governess believes the ghost’s influence is the cause for the change in behavior she sees of the children, leading them to separate from her. Miles wants more freedom: his behavior exposes “the fiction that [the governess] had anything more to teach him.” With Miles, the governess comes to the realization on her own; Flora, conversely, casts the governess out explicitly, emphasizing the strain in their relationship. With nothing more to teach Miles, she becomes unnecessary in his upbringing. Flora, on the other hand, grows displeased with her company: she cries, “‘Take me away from HER!’” in reference to the governess. As Flora refuses to interact with her, the governess loses her status as a companion and, consequently, her place in the house. In both of these cases, her distance from the children demonstrates a failure in her employment, allowing her to be replaced. She and the ghost of the previous governess reveal their awareness of this position and the lack of power the governess has over her job (and financial) security.

This objectification that governesses face is not theirs alone; it spreads to their pupils as well. As a testament to the overlooking of young people in Victorian society, there is comparatively little to be said about the conditions in which they lived. Thomas Jordan writes that “the quality of children’s lives in nineteenth century Britain varied greatly” and “data on adults in Victorian Britain are more extant than those about children.” Their lives and their deaths often drew little interest from those who were to look after them, as Viviana Zelizer notes. Children, like governesses, were objects that could be used to display the superiority of their family (especially in regard to young boys), who came out to show themselves to guests but were otherwise hidden.

There are many examples of the dehumanizing treatment of children in Victorian ghost stories. In *The Turn of the Screw*, we see this subtly in the way the children’s uncle abdicates all responsibility for their care. An even more poignant example occurs in “The Lost Ghost” (1903) by Mary Wilkins Freeman. Here, the ghost haunting the house and the three women who live in it is the apparition of a child. Whenever she comes into contact with the living people in the house, she says, “‘I can’t find my mother.’” We learn her past – that her mother abandoned her and left her to starve – and can see how her haunting actions reflect the mistreatment she faced – she does chores like helping to wash the dishes. She only leaves the house and moves on when Mrs. Bird, one of the homeowners, dies and chooses to take care of her: the other women see “Mrs. Abby Bird walking off over the white snow-path with that child holding fast to her hand, nestling close to her as if she had found her own mother.” This sentence indicates a calmness and innocence – “the white snow-path” – and a warmth between the two parties – “holding fast to her hand,” “nestling close,” and “as if she had found her own mother.” As opposed to any malevolence, we see the young girl’s ghost only resolved with love and care.

An even more poignant depiction of children’s oppression and silencing comes from M. R. James’ “Lost Hearts” (1895). The text itself is highly aware of the space taken up by the various children Mr. Abney “adopts.” Stephen, the protagonist, and his situation are quickly related to us: “some six months before, he had been left an orphan.” His new guardian receives much praise for his care: “now, owing to the generous offer of his elderly cousin, Mr. Abney, he had come to live at Aswarby.” Upon entering the home, however, Stephen is haunted by the ghosts of two children previously in the care of Abney, one a girl of Romani descent and the other, a foreign boy, both of whom disappeared mysteriously from the home. Their racial difference holds the implication that they will not be looked for, as societally they are silenced.
and uncared about. Abney is portrayed to be highly calculating. In his plot to gain immortality through procuring and ingesting the hearts of 12-year-olds, he ensures that those he kills will not be children cared for by society. In his notes, Abney writes that he chose subjects who could “conveniently be removed without occasioning a sensible gap in society.” The “convenience” Abney refers to is their disconnection from others, in that they are orphans, and the word choice, “sensible gap,” emphasizes his choice of minority children in his first two murders. Within the societal context, these children are not worth noticing, and their disappearances are not worth investigating, allowing Abney to continue for 20 years until, with the help of the ghosts of these children, Stephen puts an end to his experiments.

When speaking of the nineteenth-century child, we cannot go without speaking of the sexualization of their being, which happened due to the romanticization of the child, placing them close to all that is holy and creating a being which is most desirable to the most devout. This is present in many a Victorian story. We see this in James’ *Turn of the Screw*, as various scholars have hypothesized whether the relationships between Miles and Peter Quint were sexual. We also see it in Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market” (1862). Though the spectral figure is not a ghost but rather a goblin, the sexual nature of the exchange between girl and goblin is clear. In order to pay for the special fruit, Laura must pay with her body –

“You have much gold upon your head,”

They answer’d all together:

“Buy from us with a golden curl.”

She clipp’d a precious golden lock,

She dropp’d a tear more rare than pearl,

Then suck’d their fruit globes fair or red.

This exchange mimics the Biblical serpent’s interactions with Eve, placing her on an initial pedestal of innocence before her first sin. In this way, Laura is made an idol and ideal, stripped of what makes her human: her mistakes. It is also worth noting that to pay for the fruit, she must give them pieces of her physical body – the “golden curl” and the “tear.”

It is my belief that, within Victorian literature, the continuous objectification of a person strips away their personhood, until they are unable to view themselves as a person. When this occurs, they have made themselves available to be haunted by a spectral figure. Nellie Wieland contends, “it is a romantic view that each oppressed person maintains an authentic self” when they exist in an oppressed state – “it ignores one of the greatest harms of mistreatment—namely, losing one’s self altogether.” This is precisely what we see with the Governess in *The Turn of the Screw*, becoming synonymous with her employment to the point that she is haunted, and Laura in *Goblin Market*, losing both her physical body and her values by going back on her word. Instances of this nature occur in an abundance of Victorian literature. Immanuel Kant writes that “regarding a person as an object is powerful enough to make that person into a kind of thing.” Robin Berstein reinforces this idea, noting that as objectification turns the “human body [into] a ‘thing among things,’ it upsets the boundary between person and object.” Our examples of the Governess and Laura emphasize this point. We even see this in the stories mentioned at the beginning of our analysis: Stephen in “Lost Hearts” acts as a mere host for the heart needed for Abney’s experiments; Roland in “The Open Door” is turned into an immovable object, due to his illness, which confines him to his bed. Thus, these characters become hauntable.

For those who were silenced in life, “death began to bring freedom: shackles, silence, and regret were cast aside, and ghosts became active figures empowered rather than constrained by
their deaths.” The child-ghosts in “Lost Hearts” were able to use their spiritual presence to guide Stephen to the secret Abney keeps, his intention of murdering his nephew. The ghost’s mortal, physical weight – and the weight of their oppressors – is lost and they are gifted room to express their pain and suffering freely. Therefore, we can read the ghosts in Victorian literature as being liberated through death. The social injustices the ghosts experienced in “Lost Hearts” are brought to light after (a much older) Stephen looks through his uncle’s notes about his studies. Their haunting may also “rectify a loss they experienced while alive.” In this instance, it is their experience of childhood that they seek to regain, if only through Stephen, living to adulthood. He fulfills their desire as we see him grow up and understand what Abney did.

Another example of spectral reflecting comes from “The Old Nurse’s Story” (1852) by Elizabeth Gaskell. The narrative is told by an old governess, Hester, as she recounts her experience raising Miss Rosamond when she was a young child. Over the course of the story, a secret of one of the tenants living with the pair is revealed: she and her sister shared a lover and her sister, while unwed, gave birth to a child and was cast out by their father to suffer and die in the cold. The mistreatment of Miss Grace, the ghost, and her child, who also takes the form of a ghost, comes to light after they return and replay the scene for the governess and Miss Rosamond. Miss Rosamond, a young child, is the first to have interactions with either of the spectral figures. She is brought out into the cold by the girl she sees (the child-ghost) and plays with them, recalling the event fondly: “‘and this little girl beckoned to me to come out; and oh, she was so pretty and so sweet, I could not choose but go.’” Hester is ordered to keep Miss Rosamond from the ghost, as it is unforgiving and will “‘lure her to her death.’” Much like we saw with “Goblin Market,” childhood and its physical embodiment are attractive – “‘so pretty’” and “‘so sweet.’” It is through the children’s interactions that Hester learns of the tragic history of Miss Grace. In death, Miss Grace was able to rectify the loss she felt, as her sister never stood up for her. Her sister, Miss Furnivall, receives the same treatment bestowed upon her, and she is left with the words “‘What is done in youth can never be undone in age’” during her final moments. In life, Miss Grace was unable to express the pain she felt over the loss of her lover, her family, and her home, but, in death, she is not only able to show others what she went through, she is able to make them feel everything that she felt.

Interestingly, we can see the ghosts liberate those they haunt in many stories as well, as we saw in “Lost Hearts,” in which Stephen is able to avenge the murdered children and avoid his own death. For instance, we can look at Edith Nesbit’s “The Marble Child” (1910). The ghost in this story exists within the titular marble statue that stands in the church Ernest, the protagonist, and his aunts attend. Ernest is described to be “of weary eyes and bored brain,” and is constantly met with reprimands by his guardians. The ghost visits Ernest in his dreams after he is sent to bed early as a punishment for speaking in church, offering the boy a reprieve from the monotony of his day-to-day life and what he really desires: “some one to play with.” As the story progresses and he becomes more discontent, Ernest decides that he will run away and live with the Marble Child and, on a stormy night, the church collapses with him inside. The ghost saves Ernest, running with him out of the church. This event, which leaves Ernest very ill, forces his aunts to realize that he needs to be in “‘young society,’” relieving his initial problem of boredom. Similarly, the ghost in “The Open Door” forces Roland’s father to listen to him, and the ghosts in “Lost Hearts” free Stephen from the impending doom of murder at the hands of his uncle. These stories and their characters set the necessary foundation for the hierarchies revealed in the Victorian period to be flipped in contemporary literature.
The Neo-Victorian Moment: The Supernatural Flips Hierarchies

The most striking area of aesthetic crossover between the nineteenth century and modern literature comes from stories based on prior texts. For example, Joyce Carol Oates’ “The Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly” (1994) and John Harding’s Florence and Giles (2010) are based on James’ Turn of the Screw. In the former, we follow much of the same story as the original, only told through the eyes of Miss Jessel and Peter Quint, the ghosts. Oates’ story emphasizes the position of the two servants, their existence being tied to their duties as Governess and Valet: “Quint would not wish to name it thus, but his attachment to them, as to Jessel, is that of a man blessed (some might say, accursed) by his love of his family” in reference to the children he’s employed to serve. The “family” Quint references is not actually related to him, but rather the children he watches and Miss Jessel, who he has an affair with. In naming those he serves and works with as his family, Oates demonstrates the bounds by which members of the lower class were constrained to, in that he and Miss Jessel have no room to explore life beyond their jobs and must find comfort within it. In the end, Miss Jessel and Quint force the newly-hired governess to leave the house, taking back their power and underlining the replaceability highlighted in James’ narrative. On the other hand, Florence and Giles obscures the original text. The reader is placed in Florence’s (a stand-in for Flora) point of view, and watches as she, a living child, haunts the members of her household: “thus, I peopled the house with their ghosts, phantomed a whole family.” Her reason for doing so is simple: she wants to read. The ghost she creates acts as a distraction to those who are meant to watch her, and so in her haunting, she takes back the power from both authority figures and from her uncle who forbids her education.

As we see with Harding’s text, both Victorian and Neo-Victorian texts question the role of education in the social marginalization of children. As school is uniquely tied to childhood, it acts as the center of children’s oppression. Being a place that enforces the State’s ideals, it naturally reinforces social hierarchy, with the potential to “other” various children, especially those who fall into various marginalizations, like race and class. Concerns about “the various harms that are the direct result of a profoundly reductionist and dehumanising ‘education’ system” can be found throughout Neo-Victorian stories. As awareness for these potential mistreatments increases, it is only necessary to reflect on how this feeds off of what we saw in the Victorian examples.

In Neil Gaiman’s The Graveyard Book (2008), we get the notion of negative schooling through the protagonist Bod’s interactions at school. Initially, as he lives in a graveyard and is raised by ghosts after the murder of his family, Bod has no connection with the outside world. He suggests that he ought to attend school upon finding out that the man who murdered his family is hunting for him and believes school will better prepare him in the event the murderer appears. While he is there, he encounters a kid being bullied for money. Though Bod does the right thing, telling his peer not to pay them, he is met with retribution from the bullies, who try to follow him home and corner him in the hallway at school. Bod is described by the teacher to be the perfect student as he is quiet and goes unnoticed – “The boy was a model pupil. Forgettable and easily forgotten […] even the other kids forgot about him.” In this way, Gaiman criticizes the equation of being a good student with being invisible or silent. If he were to speak up or to act in a way that drew attention (positively or negatively), he would be viewed poorly by his instructor. In the end, when he is forced to face the murderer, the knowledge Bod gained from attending school does not help him. Instead, his protection comes from his time spent living in the graveyard and interacting with the ghosts. The ghosts work to create distractions for the
attacker, much like the ghosts in “Lost Hearts,” allowing Bod to use his skills to defeat him, and proving that his practical education was more useful than his lessons in the classroom.

The narrative of Bod and Gaiman’s critique of systems of education extends beyond the text; teachers and parents, those who influence children, are widely criticized in the Neo-Victorian. It is also worth noting that school acts as a stand-in for society, in that as the child rejects school, they also reject society more broadly. We can see this in Derek Landy’s *Skulduggery Pleasant* (2007), where Stephanie, the main character, rejects school and normalcy. Landy poignantly notes that she dislikes her teachers, “the way they demanded respect they hadn’t earned.” Stephanie defies traditional social order by pointing out the respect demanded by those older than her, even if they are not (in her eyes) deserving of it. Much like with *Florence and Giles* and *The Lie Tree*, the story questions what it means to be an obedient girl. In the story, interest and growth lies in things marked as strange by her family – in the titular character, an animated skeleton detective named Skulduggery, who acts as her teacher and is characterized by his strange dressing habits, and by the “weird” people she meets and strange magic she learns. Through his instruction, Stephanie begins to realize the world isn’t what she thought it was. The places she initially believed to be unsafe, likely as the result of societal influences as well as her family, such as the neighborhood marked with graffiti and litter — are actually full of magic. “[L]ooks are, more often than not, deceiving,” Skulduggery tells her. “A neighbourhood like this [...] is the safest neighbourhood you could possibly visit,” he continues, noting that the uncleanliness is meant to keep people unaware of magic away. In this, we can see that both the book and its characters acknowledge the often negative perceptions associated with “dirty” neighborhoods, especially how they are framed to children. The typical idea of a safe neighborhood is flipped on its head, forcing the reader to reevaluate their own views on what a safe living condition is. Where we saw revelations of social ills in Victorian literature, the modern Neo-Victorian novels make a strong argument against the maintenance of social hierarchy. As we see with *The Graveyard Book* and *Skulduggery Pleasant*, many of these reflect negatively on teacher-student relationships in which the former has the power. In fact, learning magic liberates Stephanie from the middle-class, school-home expectations she was confined to at the beginning of the story.

We can also look to Holly Black’s *Doll Bones* (2013) as a demonstration of questioning authority in parent-child relationships. The story follows Zach, a young boy whose father has just moved back in with him and his mother. Upon deciding that it’s time for him to grow up and commit to playing basketball, his father destroys his figurines, with which he has constructed an elaborate imagined world with his friends. Upon discovery, Zach is heartbroken, unable to express the situation to his friends, who believe he now hates them. The group is brought back together to return a haunted nineteenth-century doll to the grave of Eleanor Kerchner, a child-ghost. The doll, while maintaining the appearance of a person, is also an object belonging to the child and a demonstration of childhood. Zach and his friends’ desire to return the doll brings them out of town and across a river, with the distance emphasizing the need for the children to break away from the oppression of their parents. As the children leave in the middle of the night, no one knows where they have gone. The parents only find out about the children’s leaving because they are called after the children are caught breaking into a library. This causes much distress for those involved – “Zach wasn’t sure why, but more than anything else, his dad sounded scared.” Eleanor Kerchner, like the child-ghost in “The Lost Ghost,” finds peace upon being returned to the grave. Only after seeing his mother’s car following Eleanor’s burial, and his dad in the passenger seat, does Zach make the choice to continue playing with his friends:
“‘Maybe we can’t play it the way we used to, but we could still tell each other what happens next.’” In liberating the child ghost, Zach is able to free himself from the developmental trajectory that emphasizes gender norms in addition to expectations based on age placed on him by his parents. Here, the power is given to the oppressed person, the child, rather than having decisions be made by the guardian, as we saw in Victorian stories such as “The Marble Child.” Through the experiences of the characters in Neo-Victorian texts, we can see their understanding of normativity for what it is: a social construction. While acting in various ways, they break free from constraints this construction creates. The use of spectral figures reinforces the supernatural abilities required to live outside of social hierarchy.

**How Can We Use the Past to Understand the Present?**

Moving beyond the surface allure of Victorian aesthetics, the Neo-Victorian movement prompts us to question our societal role in perpetuating historical prejudices. The mistreated and silenced voices of ghosts, children, and governesses in the past bring attention to the longstanding oppression of those marked as “others.” The Neo-Victorian movement, and its temporal distance from the nineteenth century, allows us to either see ourselves as progressively opposed to the oppression seen in the Victorian era or as a continuation of it. Is it possible to use the Victorian and its evolved themes and aesthetics in the twenty-first century to question the continuous marginalizations of people? Do we instead use these texts as a form of escapism? Is there a proper way of returning to the Victorian through literary, film, and other media movements without reverting to the ideals of the time?

The nineteenth and the twenty-first centuries are periods centered around social change. It only makes sense that in one period where we see a push for social justice, we look back to a period where these conversations were beginning to happen. As Sylvia Wynter points out, the modern conception of what constitutes “man” (as opposed to a monster or an “othered” being) was formed during the Victorian period. It may be that we are looking for a historic “other.” If we, as a society, can look back at the Victorian period and tell ourselves to look at how far we have progressed, we can choose to idealize our own period as opposed to remaining critical and expectant for positive change. By paying attention to spectral figures, however, instead of simply writing them off as being “scary” or treating genre fiction like ghost stories as unserious, we can begin to acknowledge that while the Neo-Victorian can replicate the Victorian, and, in doing so, revive outdated values, it can also be used to create a multifaceted critique on society, past and present. In doing so, the Neo-Victorian can be used to give voice to those silenced in the past and allow us to step forward to rectify this means of oppression.

**Notes**

4. Some date Neo-Victorianism back to the 1960’s while others claim the aesthetic movement began much later, and our study does not work to quell this contention, looking mostly at pieces written in the twenty-first century.
9. Ibid., 683.
10. Ibid., 668.
11. Looking at the writings of spiritualists, we can see that ghostly behaviors were noted to act as stereotypes or hyperboles of societal expectations. Jeannie Banks Thomas recognizes a few in her writings, such as the “Extreme Guy,” who “exaggerates many of the characteristics most stereotypically associated with masculinity, such as toughness and violence,” and the “Deviant Femme,” who is “the antithesis of the traits traditionally associated with femininity; for example, she is a murdering mother.” Though we do not see examples of these in our study, it is worth acknowledging that the movement pushed back against the patriarchal influence of gender ideals. With this in mind, we can assert that the movement would have likely brought other forms of oppression to public attention like we’ve seen in each of the texts we’ve examined.

20. Ibid.
22. Oliphant, "The Open Door, and the Portrait."
25. Ibid., 7.
27. Ibid., 149.
30. For those who are reading from the perspective of the U.S., this is a starkly different view of childhood. Children in America, as opposed to the British silencing, were much more visibly connected with their parents.
31. Mary Eleanor Wilkins Freeman, "The Lost Ghost" (*East of the Web*).
32. Ibid.
33. M.R. James, "Lost Hearts" (*Short Stories & Classic Literature for Readers & Teachers*).
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid.
36. For a more in-depth discussion, consult the work of James Kincaid.
37. Christina Rossetti, "Goblin Market" (Poetry Foundation).
38. Nellie Wieland, "Agent and Object" (*Social Theory and Practice* 43, no. 3 2017), 505.
39. Ibid., 509.
40. Robin Bernstein, "Dances with Things: Material Culture and the Performance of Race" (*Social Text* 27, no. 4, 2009), 70.
41. Bann, "Ghostly hands and ghostly agency," 664.
42. The freedom that comes with death of oppressed peoples is widely acknowledged in American literature of the spirits of enslaved people. Kathleen Brogan writes that “the ghosts in recent African-American literature [...] signal an attempt to recover and make social use of a poorly documented, partially erased cultural history.”
44. Elizabeth Gaskell, "Old Nurse’s Story" (University of Pennsylvania).
45. Ibid.
46. Ibid.
47. Edith Nesbit, "The Marble Child" (*The Short Story Project*).
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid.
55. Ibid., 97.
57. Ibid., 243.