



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

Weird tales

The shifting role of science and religion in literature's search for truth

Citation for published version:

Jack, A 2022, *Weird tales: The shifting role of science and religion in literature's search for truth*. in M Fuller (ed.), *Science and Religion in Western Literature: Critical and Theological Studies*. 1st edn, Routledge Science and Religion Series, Routledge, London, pp. 25-39. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003213987-3>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.4324/9781003213987-3](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003213987-3)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Science and Religion in Western Literature

Publisher Rights Statement:

This is an Accepted Manuscript of a book chapter published by Routledge in Science and Religion in Western Literature: Critical and Theological Studies on 16 August 2022, available online: <https://www.routledge.com/Science-and-Religion-in-Western-Literature-Critical-and-Theological-Studies/Fuller/p/book/9781032077123#>

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Weird Tales: The Shifting Role of Science and Religion in Literature's Search for Truth

Alison Jack

Abstract

In this chapter, two recent readings of two key literary texts in the 'Science and Religion in Literature' field, Shelley's *Frankenstein* and Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, are considered as contributions to literature's search for truth: Greenaway's *Theology, Horror and Fiction* and Alder's *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*. A reading of Robertson's modern novel, *The Fanatic*, is then offered which draws on insights from both. It is argued that the 'weird' might offer a perspective which reflects and deflects scientific and theological concerns about literature's ability to access truth. The literary presentation of the historical figure of Major Thomas Weir is the focus for a discussion of this approach.

Introduction

Major Thomas Weir (1599-1670) is a figure who haunts Scottish literature and history, particularly the history of Edinburgh. A staunch Covenanter and a man of military distinction, his reputation as a fervent upholder of strict Presbyterianism resulted in his nickname 'Angelical Thomas'. In his old age, he confessed to a startling range of vices, including incest and bestiality, and he was publicly executed in Edinburgh. His sister, Jean, confessed to even more lurid exploits involving the occult, and was executed the day after her brother. Fascination with their story and their place of residence in the West Bow area of the city grew after their death, with a particular emphasis on the disparity between their pious public persona and their apparently depraved private lives.

Robert Louis Stevenson included Major Weir in his *Picturesque Notes* on Edinburgh, published in 1878, in the chapter on 'Legends'. He commented that Edinburgh 'cannot clear herself of [Weir's] unholy memory', although it is beyond his 'intention' to work out whether Jean and Thomas's sins were 'real' or 'imaginary'. They stand as an example, 'out of this superstitious city', which for him is 'the outcome and fine flower of dark and vehement religion' (Stevenson 1903, Chapter 4). Some readers of Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (Stevenson 1979), published eight years later, have suggested that Weir was one of the characters who influenced his creation of Dr Jekyll. Most recently, Ian Rankin, the writer of detective fiction, has advocated for this connection. It may have informed his characterisation of Detective Rebus, whom Rankin describes as his 'alter ego' who can 'transgress, break taboos, be the maverick I never was and never will be' (Rankin 2007).

James Robertson also draws on the character of Thomas Weir in his novel *The Fanatic* (2000), although this author resists such easy identifications. He has one of his modern-day characters assert that 'it's too pat' to 'pigeon-hole' Weir as 'an early version of Jekyll and Hyde' (Robertson 2000, 25). This character, Andrew Carlin, wants to explore Weir's story more deeply, and his search for truth is at the heart of the novel. The fact that Carlin makes his assertion to his reflection in a mirror who responds by suggesting he 'Lea him [Weir] alane [as t]he last thing we need's anither split fuckin personality' (Robertson 2000, 250) only adds intrigue to the unstable nature of the quest.

These multiple recreations of Major Weir offer a focal point for a discussion of religious and scientific approaches to ways of knowing in a variety of literary texts. The shocking nature of Weir's confession in his old age, and Jean's to corroborate and embellish it, has lingered in the imagination, but access to the 'truth' of this confession is denied to the

modern reader as much as it was to the contemporaries of the couple. Whether Thomas and Jean were ‘religious maniacs’, driven mad by the ‘furious’ demands of their theology, or they did indeed have ‘real as well as imaginary sins upon their old-world shoulders’ as Stevenson sets out (Stevenson 1903, Chapter 4), is impossible to establish. How to approach, and live with, such epistemological barriers is one of the concerns shared by Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (2012; published 1818), Stevenson’s *Jekyll and Hyde*, and Robertson’s *The Fanatic*. Religious and scientific solutions are sought in each case, to varying degrees and with limited success. In this chapter, I will engage with two recent contributions to the field, one which focuses on the relationship between nineteenth-century Gothic fiction and theology, and one which focuses on *fin de siècle* weird fiction and science. I will then suggest ways in which *The Fanatic* offers new insights into both, through its oblique re-creation of Major Weir for contemporary readers.

Theology and the Gothic novel

In his *Theology, Horror and Fiction: A Reading of the Gothic Nineteenth Century* (2021), Jonathan Greenaway seeks to re-establish theology as a fruitful hermeneutical lens through which to read nineteenth-century novels generally categorised as ‘Gothic’. Greenaway acknowledges that many recent studies of the Gothic novel have tended to reject readings which draw on theological ideas, in favour of explanations which are psychological or generated by reading the novels as a cultural response to the fears of the age. He notes that in their reaction to supernatural forces and interventions, the novels may naturally be read as hostile to orthodox religious beliefs. However, Greenaway develops aspects of the work of Alison Milbank who instead reads Gothic fiction as ‘a mode of religious historiography’ (Milbank 2019, 305), a way to interpret shifting theological perspectives. He further seeks to establish that these texts are examples of an imaginative form which, as Milbank in an earlier chapter about other literary forms had argued, ‘provide an epistemology, a way of knowing, that is inherently religious’ (Milbank 2011, 32). Literature may provoke in the reader a new sense of the many aspects of the ‘real’, and enable through the imagination a new encounter with ‘the other’, including the religious although not necessarily the orthodox. Theology on this view is less tied to a set of statements to be assented to and much more identified with qualities of the imagination and aesthetics which may be expressed and experienced in literature. Greenaway draws the insights of this imaginative theology and Gothic fiction together to identify ways in which such fiction might offer ‘an imaginative resource for theological work’ (Greenaway 2021, 14).

The supernatural aspects of Gothic literature, that which is unexplained and left uncertain within the world of the ordinary, offer the reader, whether theologically-literate or not, a space in which to explore deeply theological concerns. The result may be challenging and even hostile to traditional religious ideas, but for Greenaway this is a positive space with which the contemporary church should engage in order to experience the ‘ongoing revelation of God in the world’ (Greenaway 2021, 17). In particular, Gothic literature reflects on the ‘theological and material instability, contingency and fragility’ of human subjectivity as it contests and mediates understandings of ‘evil, the supernatural and revelation’ (Greenaway 2021, 24).

For Greenaway, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* is a key text in the Gothic canon which is deeply amenable to such a theological approach, lacking up until now despite the close relationship between the novel and creation themes through its intertextual use of Milton’s *Paradise Lost*. At the heart of this reading is a focus on Frankenstein’s creation’s need to develop a relationship with his creator, which Greenaway identifies as ‘seeking a theology’

(Greenaway 2021, 26). As in many Gothic texts, competing narrative frames, in this case letters, written and oral testimony and journals, disrupt a sense of one authoritative voice, mirroring the multiplicity of biblical revelation and inviting reflection which has to negotiate what lies beyond the rational. Within this narrative complexity, Frankenstein is presented as taking upon himself the role of creator, with a purpose he believes is ‘assigned to [him] by heaven’ (Shelley 2012, 223). He takes on the role of the Romantic genius, but fails to appreciate the distance between his creative powers using body parts of the dead, and divine creativity out of nothing. He operates with ‘profane fingers’ and in the ‘workshop of filthy creation’ (Shelley 2012, 48), and the result is catastrophic for himself and those around him.

While Frankenstein’s Romantic isolation is emphasised, his creature’s need for community and self-understanding is highlighted in contrast. As the creature says, ‘I had never yet seen a being resembling me, or who claimed intercourse with me. What was I?’ (Shelley 2012, 120). Reading *Paradise Lost* offers him a way ‘to frame his position in theological terms, as both created and abandoned by his creator’ (Greenaway 2021, 34). He is unlike Adam, as his creator rejects him before he has even come to know him: Frankenstein, for Greenaway, is too caught up in the ‘terrible genius of the Romantic Imagination’ (Greenaway 2021, 36) to acknowledge him, and it is this which results in the creature’s descent into monstrosity. The reader is aware of Victor’s assertion of the creature’s ontological evil, but is also granted an insight into his emotional state which brings understanding and empathy. The monster is more than an allegory, as some readings of the novel would reduce him to, and shares with humanity its fallen status. He becomes a ‘theologically abjected, compelling human figure’ (Greenaway 2021, 48), while Frankenstein’s inability to relate to the physical materiality of his creature leads to his eventual destruction, finally aware of the theological consequences of his actions: ‘Like the archangel who aspired to omnipotence, I am chained to an eternal hell’ (Shelley 2012, 218). As Greenaway concludes: ‘While Romanticism seeks the transcendent in the sublimity of the imagination, *Frankenstein* shows that such searching may be both creative but is also deeply dangerous and theologically naïve’ (2021, 53-54). Taking seriously the profound theological engagement present in the novel highlights neglected aspects of its meaning. Here, Frankenstein represents more than the dangers of scientific enquiry carried out in the hubris of isolation: his response to his creature and the disastrous consequences which ensue suggest that theological hubris carries its own risks also.

Greenaway develops this contrast between science and theology in his reading of Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. In common with other *fin de siècle* Gothic texts, this novel is often read as exploring aspects of secular concerns of the time, in particular ‘degeneration theory’. Criminal, amoral behaviour under this theory was associated with a reversion in biological terms, an evolution which was degenerate rather than advancing in a positive fashion. Materialism and science rather than a lived experience of theological transcendence are taken to be the dominant discourses to express these concerns. As Knight and Mason argue, *Jekyll and Hyde* reflects a period in which ‘religion has been translated into a veneer of bourgeois respectability that can no longer offer a meaningful distinction between the morality of Jekyll and his alter ego’ (Knight and Mason 2007, 176). For Greenaway, in contrast, the novella may be read from a theological perspective as highlighting the insufficiency of materialistic and scientific language to describe the fear of what lies beyond the boundaries of the acceptable and normative. Specifically, the novella draws on the language and theology of the Pauline epistles to explore a fear of the divided sense of self which the terms of the day prove insufficient to cope with. Appearance and reality map onto Pauline understandings of flesh and spirit in this reading, to correspond with Jekyll’s sense of his split nature which he attempts to resolve through transcendent medicine, with fatal results.

Greenaway carefully establishes the theological language used by the characters in *Jekyll and Hyde*, such as Utterson's assessment of Hyde as 'the radiance of a foul soul, ... disfiguring its clay continent' who has come into Jekyll's life because of 'the ghost of some old sin' (Stevenson 1979, 40-41, quoted in Greenaway 2021, 133). This does not translate into religious commitment or belief, however, and refers instead to moral respectability and class status. Science seems not to have a vocabulary for the feelings provoked by the sight of Hyde. Jekyll is presented as the product of his society's inability to accept or deal with his tendency towards duplicity which isolates him from his peers. Turning to science, the only solution available to him, results in the appearance of Hyde who is both '[a]n embodiment of the moral failings and tensions within Jekyll's own subjectivity' and the product of 'the moral discourses that have informed the construction of this apparent model of moral respectability' (Greenaway 2021, 136). For Greenaway, it is important to stress that Jekyll and Hyde are not treated as separate entities but share the same physical and ontological space: as Jekyll says on seeing Hyde in the mirror, 'This too was myself' (Stevenson 1979, 84). Theological introspection is recommended in Romans 7.14-19 as the remedy to the deep inner division described in terms of law and flesh by Paul, and public opinion and personal moral standards in the novella. However, Jekyll as a person of his time unsuccessfully attempts to solve this theological and metaphysical problem through medical means which, for Greenaway, signals that Stevenson is aware that these means are inadequate to overcome all that Hyde represents.

The human condition, on this view, depends on accepting the insights of theology, rather than relying, in a hubristic manner, on the apparent advances offered by the scientific materialism of the age. A similar openness to the insights of theology are needed to see the faintest glimmers of optimism which Greenaway finds in Stevenson's text. His approach, involving 'imaginative apologetics' (Greenaway 2021, 175), takes seriously the deeply embedded nature of revealed and natural theology within Gothic Nineteenth Century fiction. It does not depend on orthodoxy of belief on the part of the writer or reader, but encourages the theologian to find God in textual places which may be both monstrous and strange. The sceptical reader might find his approach to be indicative of the invested readings which both Shelley's and Stevenson's texts seem to encourage or at least enable, but this does not necessarily reflect negatively on Greenaway's interpretation. As Paul Sherwin had earlier identified regarding readings of the significance of Shelley's monster:

If, for the orthodox Freudian, he is a type of the unconscious, for the Jungian he is the shadow, for the Lacanian an objet a, for one Romanticist a Blakean 'spectre', for another a Blakean 'emanation'; he also has been or can be read as Rousseau's natural man, a Wordsworthian child of nature, the isolated Romantic rebel, the misunderstood revolutionary impulse, Mary Shelley's abandoned baby self, her abandoned babe, an aberrant signifier, *différance*, or as a hypostasis of godless presumption, the monstrosity of a godless nature, analytical reasoning, or alienating labor (Sherwin 1981, 890).

Chris Baldick has argued, in light of this overwhelming range of possible meanings, that in Shelley's text (and we might add in Stevenson's also), 'no single line of interpretation can convincingly fend off all the others' (Baldick 1990, 56). The parallel 'codes of signification' (Baldick 1990, 56) in both texts are so intertwined and complex they anticipate what Stevenson has Jekyll prophesy will be understood as the multiplicity of the human condition. While Jekyll has gained, through his 'mystic and ... transcendental' scientific studies, the knowledge that 'man is not truly one, but truly two' (Stevenson 1979, 55), he goes on to assert that '[o]thers will follow, others will outstrip me on the same lines; and I hazard a guess that man will ultimately be known for a mere polity of multifarious, incongruous and

independent denizens' (Stevenson 1979, 56). When we refuse to close down interpretation in both of these texts, and are open to read that which is mysterious as a sign there is more to discover about the human condition and the world, we are ready to consider the insights of weird fiction, and the way it pushes at the boundaries of Gothic. Emily Alder's *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle* (2020) is both an excellent introduction to the parameters of weird fiction, and an exploration of its relationship to science in the texts we have been approaching from a more theological perspective up until now.

Science and Weird Fiction

Alder notes that *Frankenstein* is an early example of the way Gothic and scientific enquiry might be brought together in literature. Moreover, she suggests that Frankenstein may be read as one the first of many 'borderland scientists' to be found in fiction (Alder 2020, 3). In this novel lie the roots of what might appropriately be called 'weird fiction' by the time of the *fin de siècle*, in which science at the edges of that which is known makes space for all that is troubling and strange in texts such as *Jekyll and Hyde*. Key to this approach is a reading of science in its fullest sense which pushes at the limits of human knowledge at any one time, and which does not depend on reading the 'laws of Nature' as inherently stable. Crucially, weird fiction is resolutely materialist and collapses the boundaries with the otherworldly by appealing to that which is yet to be understood rather than to the supernatural:

In the storyworlds of weird tales, things that are new, unknown, and cannot be explained in relation to human concerns are being encountered for the first time, but yet have always existed, abhistories in which time, space, and the past are radically reconstructed in unfamiliar ways... Weird is not a consolatory form; it replaces a fatalistic totality with a cosmos decidedly not organised around the fulfilment of human narratives or fantasies. The "evils" of weird fiction are amoral and generalised forces; the narratives are not arranged around a binary of good and evil or according to a moral code (Alder 2020, 11-12).

For Alder, all that is weird within *fin de siècle* science itself generates the possibilities opened up by some of the fiction of the age. These literary innovations may go beyond indicating cultural anxieties about gender and class issues, for example, and instead point to new ways to cope with cultural shocks which cannot be undone, however fear-inducing they may seem at the time. When the human is no longer understood to be the centre of the world's existence, and absence replaces any sense of divine imminence, any breach in the apparent natural laws of the universe as they are understood may generate in this fiction a sense of wonder while at the same time being completely terrifying.

As Alder establishes, science in the late Victorian era has distinctly murky boundaries, including a fascination with the occult and spiritualism in particular, and multiple attempts to reconcile tradition Christian beliefs with new understandings of evolution. The limits of knowledge were uncertain, and what was valid in scientific discourse was yet to be established. The weird tale involves itself in the limitless potential of this fluid situation, inhabiting the 'borderlands' between knowledge and the unknown. *Jekyll and Hyde* is a key text in this regard, highlighting the weird aspects of the scientific fields of psychology and the transcendental. The contested and oblique representation of Hyde as a character combines with the complexities of the narrative form, as in *Frankenstein*, to highlight the instabilities of epistemological categories such as truth and knowledge. The result is a weird tale which

presents a contested and complex world of science generating a monster which goes beyond rational explanation at the time, but which is thoroughly material rather than supernatural in nature. The possibilities Hyde's creation opens up speak to potentially revolutionary ideas about the stability of the self and the multiplicity of psychological states which would be developed in creative dialogue between the novella and later psychology and psychiatry, as Julia Reid has explored (Reid 2006, 6).

Alder traces some of the ways the novella appears to encourage speculation about who Hyde is, such as a blackmailer on grounds of illegitimacy or homosexuality, only to reject them; and she highlights some of the binary distinctions Jekyll and his friends make between himself and Hyde, such as saint and sinner, natural and unnatural. However, what makes this a weird tale is the way that these attempts to stabilise the text are undermined. This happens through the multiple endings of the narrative, with Lanyon, Jekyll and Utterson all offering their own versions of events, and through the uncertainty of who the 'I' is who finally lays down the pen and 'brings the life of that unhappy Henry Jekyll to an end' (Stevenson 1979, 70) before taking the poison that will kill both Jekyll and Hyde. This has been much commented-upon, but perhaps less discussed is the horrific reality Hyde reveals:

Hyde is a troublingly liminal figure, the physically manifested proof that a radical new understanding of reality must be accepted. This material identity that returns after Jekyll's severe physical and existential trial is, in effect, a weird horror, monstrous and amoral and unknown (Alder 2020, 51).

When Utterson, Lanyon and the others meet Hyde they encounter something inexpressible but which fills them with "hitherto unknown disgust, loathing and fear" (Stevenson 1979, 16). As Alder argues, the horrified attempts to describe what Jekyll has produced prefigure and exceed later psychological studies of the potential of the human psyche, such as those of Frederic Myers (1886), and present the characters with aspects of themselves they shudder to acknowledge. Jekyll's description of Hyde as 'amorphous dust' which 'gesticulate[s]' and 'sin[s]' (Stevenson 1979, 69) points to the weirdness of that which he has created and to the alternative, otherworldly reality which Hyde presents to the reader as much as to his narrative context.

To sharpen the relationship between the weird and the novella in scientific terms, Alder suggests that an important aspect of weird tales is the way they are 'sites of experiment, narrative laboratories in which alternative systems of knowledge and knowing can be imaginatively tested' (Alder 2020, 79). The weird neatly inhabits the space between two epistemological spheres, the narrative and the real, to offer new, wondrous and terrifying ways to explore the boundaries of the knowable. Alder notes that the occult occupied a place in the *fin de siècle* scientific world, contested although it was, and that this epistemology was 'ready made for weird fiction' to explore (Alder 2020, 88).

Reading *Jekyll and Hyde* in this way highlights Jekyll's credentials as a medical doctor and chemist, but also as an expert, as he openly asserts, in fields which lead 'wholly towards the mystic and the transcendental' (Stevenson 1979, 42). His interests overlap with occultism in his focus on 'spirit' rather than 'mind', and on his growing acceptance of the illusory nature of the flesh: 'I began to perceive, more clearly than it has ever yet been stated, the trembling immateriality, the mist-like transience, of this seemingly so solid body in which we walk attired' (Stevenson 1979, 56). Significantly, however, he discovers that this spirit is affected by chemical agents and is a resolutely material entity, and that experimentation in the laboratory may provoke a similar response to that of a séance, in which the spirit is detached from the body and may take on a new form. As Alder notes, this is also similar to the psychology of Myers, who identified the multiple parts of the self and spoke in terms of

one personality vacating the body, leaving space for others to become dominant (Alder 2020, 87). In Jekyll's writing up of his experimentation on his own body, he notes both physical and spiritual effects: both 'deadly nausea, and a horror of the spirit' (Stevenson 1979, 57). The weird nature of his experimentation offers results which go beyond the insights of either approach, so he is instantly aware, on taking the drug, that he is 'tenfold more wicked' than before and only later is he aware of the effect on his now limited physical stature. The distinction between the immaterial and the material worlds are blurred here, with the experience of Jekyll as the narrative laboratory. Crucially, what is demonstrated is that the state of the spirit has an impact on the physical form, but that both are unstable and both may be the subject of experimentation. Conventional science is not sufficient to access reality, but it is one of many ways of knowing, as *fin de siècle* literature explores from its own narrative borderlands. *Jekyll and Hyde*, like the weird tales that followed it, 'unsettle[s] conventional hierarchies of intellect over feeling, human over nature, mind over body' (Alder 2020, 109).

The Weird in *The Fanatic*

The recent studies of Greenaway and Alder indicate that science and religion continue to be fruitful areas of debate in literary studies. In particular, *Frankenstein* and *Jekyll and Hyde* continue to generate theological and scientific reflection about the world of their genesis and the world of today. In what follows, I argue that James Robertson's *The Fanatic* stands in a similar tradition and generates new scientific and theological questions (although perhaps few answers) for the new millennium. The character of Major Weir is presented as a creation in the same way that Hyde and Frankenstein's monster is presented and the implications of the multiplicity of his incarnations are both theological following Greenaway's approach and 'weird' in the sense that Alder discusses.

The central character in the modern sections of *The Fanatic*, Andrew Carlin, is presented in no uncertain terms as strange and not quite of this world. At the moment he appears in the narrative, he is defined as 'a bit weird' by the woman, Jackie, who knew him at university, and who notices he 'disturbs' those around him (Robertson 2000, 14, 15). The chance meeting in a pub between Jackie, Carlin and Hugh Hardie at which Carlin is invited to play the part of Weir in Hardie's Ghost Tour of Edinburgh is given further weird significance. Hardie and Carlin discuss the meaning of the 'reality' of the character of Weir as he is 'packaged' on the tour (Robertson 2000, 18, 19), before Carlin seems to disappear from their presence. Hardie then has a surreal encounter with a drunk man who hopes Hardie will be able to identify him. Meanwhile, Carlin is described by the narrator as 'the kind of man that might slip between worlds', a dream-like character (Robertson 2000, 23). In a further layer of narrative strangeness, the reader is offered Carlin's memory of a 'sensation' he had experienced before entering the pub, a feeling of being 'right on the edge of something'. This is related in his mind to another experience he has had, 'an overwhelming sense of being elsewhere, or that he could reach out and touch things that were long gone' (Robertson 2000, 24). Carlin is presented as someone who has a particular relationship to the past, which is 'like having the second sight in reverse'. His mind is a conduit for the past to enter and which he then brings into new focus. In the very mundane world of modern Edinburgh, in contrast to the economic and personal lives of the peripheral characters of Jackie and Hugh, Carlin is clearly liminal, puzzling and other-worldly from all angles. His role as potential interpreter is being carefully established, and it depends on a psychological empathy rather than spiritual revelation. It also seems to have a physical manifestation which is obvious, and somehow disturbing, to those around him. Unlike Hyde in *Jekyll and Hyde*, the reader is given access to his reactions and experiences, as well as to his effect on others,

and we grow in understanding of him as he develops insights into the significance of Major Weir, although both remain incomplete.

The key historical witnesses to Weir within the novel do not share Carlin's liminal strangeness, although they present two contrasting perspectives on Weir himself. James Mitchel, presumably the 'Fanatic' of the novel's title, seeks to understand Weir in order to justify his religious zeal; John Lauder has a forensic desire to understand Weir and his sister's motives, driven by a sense of the passage of time and the need to record something approximating to the truth. The connection between Mitchel and Carlin is established through the world of dreams rather than faith or the supernatural. With Lauder, the connection is made through a text of dubious origins, presented to Carlin by a librarian who later seems to disappear. We will examine each in turn.

The novel opens with Mitchel's dreams as he awaits his fate on the Bass Rock. Mitchel has been tortured and imprisoned and is expecting to be tried for attempting to shoot the Archbishop of St Andrews. A figure haunts his dreams, but only when 'his mind grew slack', someone who appears to have been on the Rock for an eternity of years, and who represents 'doubt and self-loathing' for Mitchel. Mitchel is described as identifying him only obliquely: 'He knew who it was, and it was not himself; but he feared becoming him' (Robertson 2000, 6). The association of this figure with Major Weir as the reader later encounters him gives this dream added significance in terms of Mitchel's religious fervour: Mitchel's faith is deeply shaken by Weir's confession. It also relates Mitchel to Carlin, as both are characters who enter dream-like states to access new psychological insights about themselves and others from the past. Robert Morace (2011) associates the ubiquity of 'dwamming' in the novel with its Gothic preoccupation with the relationship between the past and the present, the repressed and the marginalised, and suggests that the novel is an extended dwam from which a reader only awakes in the final four chapters, set in the recent past. For him, 'Scots dwam is English dreams uncanny other, suggesting trance rather than sleep and evoking the supernatural and communal where dream suggests... the psychological and individual' (Morace 2011, 34). However, this overplays the contrast between 'dwams' and 'dreams' in the novel, which draws on both to explore issues of religious and epistemological meaning, particularly for Carlin and Mitchel. In both, the psychological significance is stronger than any suggestion of supernatural intervention, and it might be argued that this shifts the novel into the category of 'weird' rather than, or at least as well as, 'Gothic'.

The pervasiveness of dreams may be resolutely materialist in nature in the novel, but these dreams and their significance remain resistant to rational explanation within the available terms of Mitchel's and Carlin's times. An episode told from Mitchel's perspective highlights the intertwined issues of dreams, science and belief. While he is in self-imposed exile on the Continent, he talks with a fellow Scot about the shocking experience of seeing someone executed and their remains publicly exhibited. As his friend says, 'We canna aye be skewerin flesh...but it maks for strength o a kind', before the narrator details the story of James Guthrie (Robertson 2000, 124-125). Guthrie had met the public hangman on his way to sign the Covenant in 1638, which he took as a portent that signing it would lead to his death. Later he delivered the sentence of excommunication to General John Middleton, who was perceived as a traitor to the cause. At the Restoration, Middleton took his revenge by arresting Guthrie, who was then tried and executed. At the service before his arrest, Guthrie had been unable to preach from his chosen text, Hebrews 11, on martyrdom, because of a violent nosebleed. The narrator comments 'it was a terrible portent of what was to follow' (Robertson 2000, 125). The execution is not described, but some weeks after Guthrie's severed head and hands are impaled on the Netherbow port, blood pours onto Middleton's coach from the now desiccated head as it passes through the gate. The blood cannot be

removed and the 'physicians and scientists [who] were called in to ascertain why the blood should have started to flow so long after death, and at that particular moment...could give no natural cause' (Robertson 2000, 125).

Mitchel's response to this tale, which is understood as a 'great and fearful marvel' by the godly (Robertson 2000, 125), is complex. He is 'fascinated by the story of the blood Middleton had called down upon himself', but he also had a 'sneaking sympathy' for Middleton, which is defined as a 'weird thing' (Robertson 2000, 125). The connection between them in terms of their shared lowly background, and unfair treatment because of this, leading to exile, tantalises him. During his time on the Continent, he has dreams of Edinburgh and a 'gate that dripped blood whenever he approached it' (Robertson 2000, 126). However, when his passage home is arranged, he has another dream of the gate but instead of blood he encounters Jean Weir who leads him to a prison room, resembling a room in Weir's house. He sees a man trying to read by the light of a tiny window while another man smokes a pipe, making him cough. Mitchel identifies the smoker as Weir, who laughs at him, as a gun goes off.

For Mitchel, as for Carlin, dreams are one context in which Weir appears and his presence seems to demand interpretation at the same time as it resists this impulse. He is part of a wider complex of signs and signals which contemporary science is unable to explain. Mitchel is on the margins of the religious interpretation of the apparently miraculous event into which the dream-figure Weir is inserted. He is attracted and repelled by the image of the blood which runs through Guthrie's story of martyrdom. Weir's appearance in a prison dream-world might be taken as a warning to Mitchel of the consequences of his plan to shoot the Archbishop, which is his intention on his return to Scotland. Or it could represent his concerns at a religious level about his salvation, which Weir up until this point had sought to reassure him about, and which would later, on Weir's fall, present such a challenge to his self-belief and faith. If Mitchel associates himself with Guthrie and his experience of portents, it predicts his imprisonment, which he accepts will be a consequence of his actions, and Weir's smoke is a distraction he must overcome. If Mitchel associates himself with Middleton and his struggle for recognition, Weir's laughing presence in the dream mocks him for his pretensions to greatness.

Mitchel may have fled Scotland, but his experience of this world beyond Scotland is as closed and confusing as the society he had left. Just as science could not explain the blood pouring from Guthrie's severed head, Mitchel's religious convictions offer little certainty, and Weir's presence in his dreams adds to his perplexity while leading him back to Scotland to attempt to make sense of his role. The novel presents his experiences of this weird world while, in its intertwining of historical periods and perspectives, it adds to a sense of alternative meanings lying beyond the grasp of character and reader.

Lauder's experience of travel is quite the opposite of Mitchel's, and leads him to experience new horizons of thought and possibility which underpin his desire to understand Weir. While in France as part of his legal studies, he watches a brutal execution which 'haunts' him (Robertson 2000, 211-212), but he also learns about himself and Scotland in a way which fundamentally changes him: 'I gaed there as John Lauder, and I cam back as John Lauder, but it wasna the same fellow that wan home' (Robertson 2000, 72). In particular, Lauder abroad gains an understanding that he is 'teeterin on the brink o time', that important things will be lost if not set down and explained: he wants to 'see in baith directions' towards both the past and the future (Robertson 2000, 73). While he has a lawerly interest in Mitchel and his guilt or innocence, he labels him a 'fanatic' which puts a distance between them. His more pressing interest in Mitchel is in his relationship with Weir and his sister, and why Mitchel visited Weir in his prison cell. He has a deep need to understand 'the world that moved through [this world], beneath it', and fears the consequences of losing a belief in this

other world in terms of the abuse of power which he already sees is taking place (Robertson 2000, 74). Reconstructing Weir's understanding of this other world, through the process of cross-examination of the evidence he can muster, seems to offer Lauder a way to 'see the things that are becoming invisible' (Robertson 2000, 74).

Lauder's meeting with Mitchel on the Bass Rock offers the reader Mitchel's interpretation of Weir's self-understanding. Through Mitchel, Lauder hears Weir's description of the moment he realises he has been following the devil rather than God, and is 'chosen, but not for grace' (Robertson 2000, 191). It is a moment of horror in which Jean is perceived as turning into the hairy-footed, but un-named, devil: 'I kent who it was, who it had been all along. He stood up before me laughing. Huge, like a giant. I saw that I was destroyed' (Robertson 2000, 191). On hearing this, Mitchel is unable to stand any more, and demands to be released, but not before 'he thought he could see something, a dark figure, looming up behind Weir' (Robertson, 2000, 191). Unlike Lauder, he refuses to hear Jean's side of the story, and dismisses what she might have been able to tell him. His experience of Weir's encounter with the other-worldly is horrifying but it does not lead him to change his fixed set of beliefs, which contain this possibility within them: he accepts Weir's version of events and believes his damnation is sealed. In contrast, Lauder's inconclusive encounter with Jean in prison offers the alternative possibility of a heaven in which, as he reflects later, there were no witches, or 'everyone could be a witch in safety' (Robertson 2000, 285). His response is to write in his 'new and secret book' to try to 'make sense of it all', while also being aware that it was now 'too late' to answer the riddle about the reality of the other world which he continues to define in religious terms (Robertson 2000, 286). His broader insight is that understanding of the times is only to be arrived at from a later perspective, and that all he can offer are his own incomplete and contingent reflections.

It is this text which Carlin, from his much later perspective, is apparently led towards and to which he brings his own, decidedly weird, insights. The motives which lead him to try to access the 'real character' of Weir overlap with those of Mitchel and Lauder and are approached through the shared media of dreams and forensic investigation. However, he brings an awareness of the weird to the quest which resists religious, supernatural or scientific explanations, such that Lauder and Mitchel had been haunted by. In his world, he comes to accept that such a quest reveals, as Alder had described, that the 'cosmos [is] decidedly not organised around the fulfilment of human narratives or fantasies' and that evil consists of 'amoral and generalised forces' (Alder 2020, 12) rather than a religious binary of salvation and damnation. His conclusion is that 'there is nae explanation' (Robertson 2000, 247) for his perceived strangeness, and this is extended to his attempt to understand Weir, when the librarian and the 'Secret Book' he had offered him are mysteriously no longer to be found in the library. He describes Mitchel's trial to Jackie, as Lauder would have done, but then accounts for the physical turmoil in his flat as his experiencing of the trial in a dream. He accepts the only evidence for Lauder's book is now in his head, and he will never finish it: the loose ends will never be tied up. He leaves the props he used to impersonate Weir for the Ghost Walk for the homeless woman he had met by chance to find, and considers this was 'the best... he could do in the circumstances' (Robertson 2000, 294). The first ending of the novel leaves him feeling liberated from the burdens of the past, with little further resolution offered to the reader about Weir or about Carlin's engagement with his presence.

The novel continues, however, to play with weird issues by presenting events 'beyond the last page' and offering a glimpse of Hardie haunted by the presence of Carlin as Weir (Robertson 2000, 295-7). The homeless woman is also given an experience beyond the ostensible confines of the narrative as she watches ships in Leith dock and imagines being 'taken to the end of the earth' (Robertson 2000, 304). Finally Carlin is presented at Portobello beach, watching the 'indifferent' sea, and coming to the 'terrifying' conclusion that 'there

was no end to life. Like the sea, it was utterly oblivious of you' (Robertson 2000, 306). The human and the divine are effectively de-centred, and there remain at work forces beyond human control or understanding, which provoke both horror and wonder.

Robertson's novel is a weird tale with a Weir at the heart of it, a historical figure in whom multiple characters and writers have been fascinated, bringing the perspectives of their time to bear upon their search for answers about his life. Robertson's is drawn from the secular age of Scotland at the turn of the millennium, and highlights the inadequacies of readings which impose rigid religious or scientific views on Weir's strange inaccessibility. Alder's application of the notion of the 'weird' leaves open a space for the unexplained and unexplainable which Robertson exploits. It is a better fit for this novel than even Greenaway's generous application of imaginative theological reflection in terms of literary truth-making, although the novel deals with explicitly theological concerns. *The Fanatic* stands in the tradition of *Frankenstein* and *Jekyll and Hyde* in its opening up of epistemological possibilities, and in its refusal to offer definitive answers, whether scientific or theological.

Bibliography

- Alder, Emily. 2020. *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*. Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science and Medicine. Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi-org.ezproxy.is.ed.ac.uk/10.1007/978-3-030-32652-4_1 date accessed 1/6/2021
- Baldick, Chris. 1990. In *Frankenstein's Shadow: Myth, Monstrosity, and Nineteenth-Century Writing*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011. doi: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198122494.001.0001.
- Greenaway, Jonathan. 2021. *Theology, Horror and Fiction: A Reading of the Gothic Nineteenth Century*. New York: Bloomsbury.
- Knight, Mark and Emma Mason. 2007. *Nineteenth Century Literature and Religion: An Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Milbank, Alison. 2011. 'Apologetics and the Imagination,' in *Imaginative Apologetics, Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*. Edited by Andrew Davison. London: SCM Press.
- Milbank, Alison. 2019. *God and the Gothic: Religion, Romance and Reality in the English Literary Tradition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Morace, Robert. 2011. 'James Robertson and Contemporary Scottish Gothic', *Gothic Studies* Vol. 13, no. 2, 22-36.
- Myers, Frederic W. H. 1886. 'Multiplex Personality', *The Nineteenth Century* Vol. 20, no. 117, 648-666.
- Rankin, Ian. 2007. 'Was an unrepentant Edinburgh sorcerer inspiration for Dr Jekyll?' *The Herald* 14th June. https://www.heraldscotland.com/default_content/12779732.unrepentant-edinburgh-sorcerer-inspiration-dr-jekyll/
- Reid, Julia. 2006. *Robert Louis Stevenson, Science, and the Fin de Siècle*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Robertson, James. 2000. *The Fanatic*. London: Fourth Estate.
- Shelley, Mary. 2012. *Frankenstein*. London: Penguin.
- Sherwin, Paul. 1981. 'Frankenstein: Creation as Catastrophe', *PMLA* Vol. 96, no. 5, 883-903.
- Stevenson, Robert Louis. 1903. *Edinburgh: Picturesque Notes*. London: Seeley & Co. Ltd. Gutenberg Ebook no. 382. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/382/382-h/382-h.htm>

Stevenson, Robert Louis. 1979. *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde and Other Tales of Terror*. London: Penguin.