Transnational Gothic
Literary and Social Exchanges in the Long Nineteenth Century

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Chapter 14

Stranger Fiction: The Asian Ghost Tales of Rudyard Kipling and Lafcadio Hearn

Mary Goodwin

A central feature of nineteenth-century Gothic fiction is a confrontation with a monstrous Other, an aggressive alien presence that threatens to invade the home area and menace the very heart of civilization, as Bram Stoker’s Dracula seeks to relocate to London, to stalk its bustling urban population, and Mary Shelley’s monster, abandoned and unloved, takes its revenge on its creator’s family. But writers of Gothic fiction have also made gestures in the opposite direction, out beyond the boundaries of “civilized” social contact toward the imperial frontier, in work described by David Punter and Glennis Byron in *The Gothic* as the intersection between the political and cultural forces of empire with concepts of racial difference and the irruption of colonial guilt and fears of the Other (54–8). This form of cultural crossing had a particularly rich development in the ghost tales of Rudyard Kipling and Lafcadio Hearn, Western writers who were long-term residents of Asia. The “haunting” presence of the British empire in India, and of Western incursions in fin de siècle Japan, manifested itself literally in stories by Kipling and Hearn in scenes flooded with typical Gothic features including revenants, ghosts, superstitious practices, supernatural events, mysterious legends, goblins, ghouls, shape-shifters and thwarted, murderous lovers.

In the same fin de siècle moment in the U.S., African American scholar W.E.B. Du Bois set out to explore the cultural and historical experience of the African American from the inside out—from the “souls,” as he put it, of “black folk” (1903). Kipling and Hearn, meanwhile, projected their narratives into and upon the “souls” of cultural and racial Others, reaching toward ghosts from other cultures entirely. However, Kipling and Hearn used native figures, folktales, native religion and rituals in quite different ways. In Kipling’s short stories, including “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes,” “The Mark of the Beast,” and “The Phantom Rickshaw,” and Hearn’s collections of “weird tales” drawn from legends and folktales of old Japan, there is a complex and disturbing display of real and imagined contact among cultures that is shaded by empire and western contact, as well as by “imperial shades.” In this essay I explore the ways in which the “alien” setting of ghost tales by Kipling and Hearn creates new possibilities for the Gothic genre and shapes as well the moral priorities in the works. I attempt to respond in particular to David Punter’s assertion in his Introduction to the *Companion to the Gothic* that “to interpret the Gothic correctly we need to pay attention not only to...
an already conventional dialectic of civilization and barbarism [...] but also to a phenomenon of inner exile” (xiii). This matter of exile takes on new significance with the geographical displacement of Gothic writing and settings, in the case of Kipling and Hearn, to the imperial frontier in Asia. Traditionally identified with claustrophobic enclosures—victims shut up in dungeons, moldering in towers, immured in walls—Gothic spaces take a different shape out on the borders of empire, where the walls are internal, and claustrophobia is as much a moral response as a physical or psychological sensation.

Efforts to define the Gothic have proved problematic, as Punter and Byron point out in their introduction to *The Gothic*, although many critics have come to think of the Gothic “in terms of a psychological argument, to do with the ways in which otherwise repressed fears are represented in textual form” (xviii). Grace Kehler asserts that the Gothic “functions more broadly as a technology or mode [...] that achieves its unsettling effects by highlighting both the vulnerability of the self to the world and the obstreperousness of the sensations at work in the individual” (438), although theorists such as Julian Wolfreys and Robert Miles refer to it variously as a “trope,” “aesthetic,” or “discourse” (454). On familiar ground in England or Continental Europe, the Gothic novel offers conventions and motifs that include turbulent weather (“wuthering heights”), ruined mansions, ancient ancestral curses, sinister aristocratic foreigners threatening vulnerable young women, and supernatural visitations. Many of these elements are present in the earliest Gothic works of Ann Radcliffe, Horace Walpole, and Matthew Lewis, and evolve in new directions through the nineteenth century in the work of the Brontë sisters and Edgar Allan Poe, among others. Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) ushered in the age of science fiction, and the Victorian period in the latter part of the century saw a turn toward more lurid blends of horror, science fiction and crime fiction, as in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886).

One important new form of the genre in the late Victorian period is imperial Gothic, defined as “fiction in which imperial exploration and power figure centrally” in the text, as with Rudyard Kipling, or where empire appears in “a more disguised role,” as in *Jane Eyre* (1847) (Punter and Byron 44). In the imperial variation as exemplified by H. Rider Haggard’s *She* (1886) and H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896), the tale is set “out there” on the imperial frontier, where threats include evil sorceresses, mad scientists, revenant mummies and de-evolution into beastliness. The imperial horror-adventure tale culminates in Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1902), in which the colonial agent Kurtz is overtaken by the powers of native darkness and degenerates into savagery. Typically, the “evil” in such fiction originates on the frontier, among native or subject peoples, reflecting an “Orientalist” bias in which, as Edward Said has claimed, “the Oriental is [perceived to be] irrational, depraved (fallen)” (40). Said maintained that “Orientalist” biases were used to rationalize European colonial rule as necessary for taming the uncivilized and irrational, while at the same time “colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism” (39). Such attitudes would be reinforced by a body of...
1 fiction that located the threat to order, reason, good government and Christian values “out there” on the imperial frontier.

2 If Gothic fiction typically involves a peril from outside that threatens the stability of the bourgeois European home, as with Dracula’s plan to take up residence in London, the colonial or imperial version of the genre conjures the return of those repressed under colonial rule, whose desire for revenge threatens the stability of the empire. In their introduction to a special edition of *Gothic Studies* on the postcolonial Gothic, William Hughes and Andrew Smith discuss what they see as the long-standing relationship between the Gothic and empire: “The Gothic has historically maintained an intimacy with colonial issues, and in consequence with the potential for disruption and redefinition vested in the relationships between Self and Other, controlling and repressed, subaltern milieu and dominant outsider culture” (1). In both the home and away versions of Gothic fiction, moral closure is often achieved by the end of the work with bourgeois Christian, Eurocentric values reasserting themselves to “right” the narrative. Count Dracula is hunted down and killed by the Van Helsing party, whereupon his spell—particularly his hold on young women, and English real estate—is broken. Typically the source of horror is vanquished by a brave and right-minded fellow, or the monster is destroyed by its own evil, as in the case of Ayesha, the sorceress of Haggard’s *She*, who bursts into flames at the conclusion, and that of the deranged Dr. Moreau, who is killed by one of his own laboratory creatures.

3 But if in imperial Gothic fiction moral closure typically involves restoration of dominant Western values and defeat of a malevolent Other, particularly an “Oriental,” racialized Other, such is frequently not the case in Kipling’s ghost tales. Rudyard Kipling was born in India in 1865 to a British art teacher and his wife, and after an education in England returned to work in Lahore in 1882 as an editor and writer on the *Civil and Military Gazette*. Identified with the British Empire body and soul, aesthetically and ideologically, Kipling frequently wrote of the soldiers and civil servants laboring on the frontier to advance the interests of the British empire. Often in Kipling’s stories the colonial experience is seen to derange the colonizer and body forth an “unease” or dis-ease already latent within him. Kipling twists the genre to cast primary blame for the degradation of values on the Europeans themselves, whose latent corruption emerges when they are transposed to the frontier, and whose personal flaws prove their own undoing. In reworking certain Gothic conventions, Kipling’s stories expose as problematic the Self-Other, Master-Subject formula associated with imperial politics and culture. Kipling’s tales can be mined for unexpected conclusions and moral “lessons,” and seem indeed to serve as a spur to moral correction within the Western colonizers themselves.

4 In the same fin de siècle moment, Lafcadio Hearn, a journalist of Irish and Greek heritage who had worked as a journalist in New Orleans, Cincinnati and the French West Indies, moved to Japan in 1890 at the age of 40. Hearn, who had developed a taste for the macabre, gruesome, and occult in his tenure as a crime reporter, was drawn to Japan by literary models such as Pierre Loti’s *Madame Chrysanthème* (1897), which was one source for Giacomo Puccini’s
opera Madame Butterfly (1904), as well as Percival Lowell’s Soul of the Far East (1888), a popular travel account based on the author’s voyages in Asia (Mordell 195). Hearn had collected supernatural lore in New Orleans and the West Indies, and wrote literary essays including “The Value of the Supernatural in Fiction,” collected in Talks to Writers (1920), and “Gothic Horror,” from Shadowings (1900). Hearn, who eventually married a Japanese woman and became a Japanese citizen, made a name for himself that endures to the present day in Asia with his observations of Japanese life, customs and history, as well as his reworking of old legends and tales of the weird and supernatural.

In a review of Kwaidan: Stories and Studies of Strange Things (1904), Ray Lawless called Hearn an “Orientalized Poe” (200). But this epithet is misleading, as Poe did. In Japan, with his study of karma and Japanese cultural traditions, Hearn began to regard the “ghostly” as a fertile and positive source of art, of religion, of generations of families, of historical tradition, indeed of the universe itself. As Beong-cheon Yu puts it:

Lafcadio Hearn rapidly departed from conventional Gothicism […]. Hearn explores the basis of psychic reality in terms of local ghost stories, folk superstition and mythological subjects. […] In Hearn’s work] the psychic horror of ghost stories is changed into something entirely different. It begins to assume a strange beauty, a kind of weird beauty. (“Lafcadio” 57–8)

It is worth noting that for years Hearn made his living as a travel writer and journalist, producing sketches of New Orleans, the French West Indies and other destinations for popular publications. Indeed he first went to Japan as a travel writer, and published several volumes of essays on curious festivals and customs in the countryside of Japan. The aspects of Japanese life he sought out for his sketches—for example, in Glimpses of Unfamiliar Japan he has chapters on “In the Cave of the Children’s Ghosts,” “Two Strange Festivals” and “Of Ghosts and Goblins”—served as a foundation for the weird tales he would “interpret” in later works.1 Unlike Kipling, Hearn was not part of a massive, long-term imperial incursion; in turn-of-the-century Japan, he would not encounter crowds of western imperial administrators. Thus was he able to avoid to some extent the “imperial anxieties” noted by Patrick Brantlinger in Rule of Darkness, including concerns about “the degeneration of [British] institutions, culture and racial stock” (230). Reflecting the nervous tensions inherent in imperial rule, Brantlinger notes the three principal

1 Recent scholarship of the Gothic has focused on the overlaps and intersections between travel writing and Gothic writing; see in particular Dennis Porter, Haunted Journeys: Desire and Transgression in European Travel Writings (Princeton UP, 1991), which looks at Freud’s theories about why travelers trying to “recover an original lost home” (12) find ghosts along the way. See also work by Chris Bongie, Helene de Burgh, Justin Edwards, Andrew Hammond, George Hughes, Roslyn Jolly, Andrew Ng, Pam Perkins, and Gina Wisker.
themes of imperial Gothic are “individual regression or going native; an invasion of civilization by the forces of barbarism or demonism; and the diminution of opportunities for adventures and heroism in the modern world” (230). While Hearn can be said to have “gone native” as he assimilates Japanese culture, he sees it as moral progress rather than degeneration. As will be discussed later in this paper, the development in Hearn’s Gothic art—from a rather morbid obsession with the gruesome fringes of society, such as in his New Orleans writing to an interest in spiritual obligations and a moral code of fidelity, even to the dead—moves past the conventions and typical Orientalist structure of imperial Gothic.

“Anxiety” as regards empire and the rule of subject peoples might also seem an unlikely claim to make for Kipling, author of Kim (1901) and the children’s tales in The Jungle Books (1894–95). In his time Kipling achieved lasting fame—and notoriety—for his support of Britain’s imperial mission. One of the most notorious concepts associated with Kipling is that of “The White Man’s Burden,” from a poem he published in McClure’s magazine in 1899 urging the U.S. to take up the task of developing—“civilizing”—the Philippines after the Spanish American War. The poet asserts that white Europeans and Americans have the responsibility, however hard and thankless it might prove, to “lift” the “inferior” races with education, hygiene, Christianity and most importantly, Western rule:

Take up the White Man’s burden—
The savage wars of peace—
Fill full the mouth of Famine
And bid the sickness cease. (lines 17–20)

His jingoistic reputation notwithstanding, Kipling seems to turn the imperial project inside out in the many ghost tales he set in India, casting the shadow of guilt on the white colonizer for his misconduct and personal failings on the frontier. In the Jungle Books story “Letting in the Jungle,” the child hero Mowgli takes revenge on a village for threatening violence against him and his adoptive parents by encouraging the jungle creatures to reclaim the land occupied by the village, and chase the humans away. Mere months later, the jungle has covered all, and Mowgli’s revenge is complete (187–212). In a number of Kipling’s ghost stories, the “jungle” of consequences for immoral acts by a white male colonist—often his adultery or mistreatment or disrespect of natives—overtakes the guilty party. In these stories the Gothic embodiment of fear is not that of an external threat, but of the corruption the westerner carries within himself, another sort of “white man’s burden.” The message from these tales seems to be that an ethical code is more difficult to keep to far from the oversight of one’s “civilized” compatriots, thus making it easy to go astray on the frontier.

A typical pattern in Kipling’s tales of the supernatural is that a colonial civil servant is in over his head in a situation he cannot control, and eventually is destroyed by his own weaknesses. Kipling’s characters are typically British civil servants in India; the problems they encounter are often related to sexual dalliances and professional rivalries, as well as cultural clashes with the native population.
Kipling doesn’t “go native” or evince an ethnographer’s interest in Indian culture, although he shows broad and generous sympathy for many native characters in *Kim*. The non-Europeans in his fiction are frequently types rather than individuals, often used as “straw victims” to flog the British for their failings.

In “The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes” (1885), a waking nightmare in the style of Poe or Kafka, the English imperial engineer Jukes falls into a no man’s land, an Indian city of the dead in a sand pit where natives thought to have died but who subsequently revived are abandoned. In this isolated pit from which escape is impossible, Jukes finds that the inhabitants of this city of those abandoned for dead do not observe the usual colonial social hierarchies. Once subservient and submissive to the Sahib, these “undead” natives do not defer to him in the pit; indeed they hardly notice him at all, intent as they are on their own survival.

Reduced to the same basic human needs as those he once governed, Jukes endures a nightmarish disorientation of identity in a post-postcolonial setting: “Here was a Sahib, a representative of the dominant race, helpless as a child and completely at the mercy of his native neighbours” (13). Although for the most part unmolested by the natives in the pit, Jukes must (literally) eat crow along with the others in order to survive—a fitting karmic burden. The story ends with his rescue by a loyal servant but the reader is left with the feeling that Jukes’ humiliation has been complete.

What is “strange” about Jukes’ ride is that its Gothic elements—confinement in a nightmare, from which there seems no escape; sudden and humiliating loss of identity, for unknown causes—invert the Orientalist pattern, laying guilt and blame with the colonizer rather than with a monstrous “other.” In his plight Jukes seems to internalize the failures of empire, reflecting Glennis Byron’s description of the great anxiety over national, social and psychic decay, in step with the waning of imperial power in late Victorian Britain, as described by Max Nordau: “the day is over, the night draws on” (qtd. in Byron 132). Jukes’ nightmare is a form of “internal exile” (recalling Punter’s directions for scholars of the Gothic), in which all his assumptions of easy and natural superiority over the Indian natives break down, as he is stranded in a no-man’s land in which the standards he has grown accustomed to no longer apply.

In several of Kipling’s weird tales, British colonials who show disrespect to local gods, religion and social culture are summarily punished. In “The Mark of the Beast” (1890), the narrator relates the story of a colonial civil servant, Fleete, who insults a local god by grinding his cigar into its icon. The western narrator, who has remarked that “all gods have good points, just as have all priests” (131), is horrified by Fleete’s deed. Cursed by a leper who tends the temple, Fleete soon transforms into a raving beast and is given up for dead by a western doctor. Strickland, the colonial police officer, realizes that supernatural forces are at work, and manages with the narrator to capture the temple leper and force him to remove the curse. When Fleete recovers, he recalls nothing of what has happened to him, and is not apparently changed in any way. The narrator himself sees at the end that “no one will believe a rather unpleasant story”; he remarks with biting irony...
that “it is well known to every right-minded man that the gods of the heathen are stone and brass, and any attempt to deal with them otherwise is justly condemned” (141). This Kipling version of the imperial Gothic story recalls David Punter’s comments on the difficulty in identifying the role Gothic modes of writing play in the circulation of fears. Punter asks: “Is the Gothic … pestifugous, or is it a pestiduct? Does it spread contamination, or might it provide a channel for the expulsion of contaminating materials? What Gothic perhaps suggests is that such a differentiation is impossible …” (Introduction xii). Kipling uses the Gothic mode flexibly, to provoke unease while uncovering flaws in the dominant colonial culture, particularly in the imperial insensitivity to local customs.

In a further twist on Gothic conventions, this time concerning the female in peril, Kipling often depicts European men, rather than women, in danger over sexual misdeeds and moral lapses. In these stories, Kipling offers a new version of generic conventions concerning sexuality, in which typically the female protagonist discovers the power of her sexuality, and is endangered by this knowledge, as can be seen in stories ranging from Jane Eyre (1847) to the modern fairy tales of Angela Carter in Burning Your Boats (1995). Glennis Byron has written in “Gothic in the 1890s” of the late Victorian crisis over gender roles; with “the breakdown of traditional gender roles, the confusion of the masculine and the feminine, was seen as a significant indication of cultural decay and corruption, an attack on the stability of the family structure” (139). In Kipling’s India, the colonists are far from the normal constraints on social behavior that would govern in England, making the setting a breeding ground for moral “lapses.” But in Kipling’s tales, it is the male who is threatened and frequently punished for a sexual misstep, with the implication that a character flaw—rather than some monstrous external threat—has corrupted the lonely and bored colonial.

In “The Phantom ‘Rickshaw” (1888), Theobald Jack Pansay, a British colonial administrator in India, is haunted by the ghost of a woman he jilted after a fling in which they fell “desperately and unreasoningly in love” (73). After making it known to the married Agnes Keith-Wessington that he was “sick of her presence” (73), Pansay dumps her and takes up with a new young woman. After speaking

2 The same question can be asked of other Kipling stories in which the erring European is abruptly and brutally warned of cultural missteps. In “The Return of Imray” (1891), Imray, a career colonial civil servant, disappears. It turns out that Imray was killed by his servant, Bahadur Khan, who believed that Imray was a wizard who had bewitched his child. Imray had patted the child on the head and called him beautiful; ten days later, the child died of fever. However, the western observers in the story do not lay blame on the Indian servant, but on Imray for not having known how to behave with native servants even after serving in India for four years: “simply and solely not knowing the nature of the Oriental, and the coincidence of a little seasonal fever,” Imray died (211). Other stories in which this theme figures include “The Bisara of Pooree,” “At the End of the Passage,” “The Sending of Dana Da,” “Haunted Subalterns” and “In the House of Suddhoo,” among many others. A good online reference with Kipling stories searchable by themes is: <http://www.kipling.org.uk/rg_index.htm>, which also has links to the Kipling Journal.
cruelly to Mrs. Wessington, he does briefly admit his guilt: “I was the offender, and I knew it” (73). Mrs. Wessington soon dies, apparently of heartbreak. But not long after she returns in a ghostly carriage that only he can see, following him everywhere and driving him out of his mind. He loses his fiancée and finally his will to live, resigning himself to a hellish eternity by the side of his demon lover. But at the end he is still ambivalent about his fate, feeling a sense of hopeless, impotent rebellion against the unreasonableness of it all. There were scores of men no better than I whose punishments had at least been reserved for another world; and I felt that it was bitterly, cruelly unfair that I alone should have been singled out for so hideous a fate. This mood would in time give place to another where it seemed that the ‘rickshaw and I were the only realities in a world of shadows. (85)

At last, however, he sees the justice in his punishment: “For as surely as ever woman was killed by man, I killed Mrs. Wessington. And the last portion of my punishment is even now upon me” (89). In an essay analyzing the “hesitation” in the narrative, William Scheik points out:

Through much of the experience Pansay hesitates between a natural and a supernatural explanation of events […] “But you shall judge for yourselves” (p. 5), Pansay writes, and this important remark directs our attention to the readers of Pansay’s narrative, which comprises most of the short story. […] We identify with the narrator, whose framing introductory remarks Kipling insightfully added in a revision of the story; with the narrator we hesitate as we struggle to judge for ourselves whether Pansay’s experiences are real or imaginary. Like the narrator we remain uncertain. (49)

It is noteworthy that Scheik focuses on the reader’s “uncertainty” as regards the supernatural events in the narrative, not on Pansay’s deed itself. The matter of the man’s unchivalrous behavior is not, apparently, a central concern in a traditional “Gothic” reading of the work, but it can be argued that whether Pansay’s experience of the “phantom” rickshaw was real, or simply a figure of his guilty imagination, is secondary to the fact of his cruelty toward Mrs. Wessington.

In “At the Pit’s Mouth” (Under the Deodars 1888), another illicit love affair provides the background as the British lover of a married woman dies in a strange accident, apparently punished for his extramarital dalliance. The Man’s Wife, as she is called, and her lover meet in a graveyard to avoid being the target of gossip. In one of these rendezvous, the lover, identified only as the Tertium Quid, has a foreboding of his death, “as if a goose had walked over my grave” (24). He does indeed die soon after, when his mare slides down in mud and he is buried under her. His lover is not harmed, but she takes to her bed in a nervous collapse, and misses his funeral.

In these stories and others, westerners on the imperial frontier suffer from a bad conscience, perhaps a consequence of being far adrift from the moral markers of their home culture. In Kipling’s version of the imperial Gothic, the burden
carried by the white man is his own conscience. Rather than being threatened by a corrupt, deadly East, the European is destroyed by something that arises from within his character. The colonial frontier is merely the setting in which the European’s self-destruction takes place, driven to an inevitable conclusion by the westerner’s character flaw, rather than evil spirits of the “east.” The claustrophobic milieu of the typical Gothic setting “at home,” in Europe, shifts in Kipling’s work to a kind of moral claustrophobia, or internal exile, on the imperial frontier. In tapping away at the bad conscience of his fellow colonists, Kipling offers proof of Fred Botting’s claim in “In Gothic Darkly: Heterotopia, History, Culture,” that “‘Gothic’ thus resonates as much with anxieties and fears concerning the crises and changes in the present as with any terrors in the past” (3).³

If Kipling’s focus and main object of blame was the erring European, Lafcadio Hearn included hardly any Western figures at all in his writing on Japan. Embracing Japanese life first as a travel writer, Hearn mined local folklore traditions, religion and culture for sources for his sketches and tales, which he used to evoke an idealized romantic past of his adopted nation. Like Kipling, Hearn used his foreign setting for his own purposes in his work, but his tales functioned as a kind of escape for the besieged and weary Westerner rather than as a scourge to conscience.⁴ Romantic and sensitive, out of joint with the times, Hearn hid inside his ghost tales and legends of old Japan from the modernization policy spearheaded by the Meiji government, which in the period between 1868 and 1912 opened Japan to the world in a search for modern technology and new knowledge. This worried Hearn, who was convinced that “Japan should keep other races at arm’s length” (Stempel 15). As Japan developed into Asia’s first industrialized nation, Hearn condemned Japan’s slide toward a policy of imperialism in the region. All there was to love in Japan, he affirmed, was passing away: “All that was noble in old Japanese life—its moral code, its household religion, and its unselfishness. Everything is now passing away. […] The New Japan will be richer and stronger and in many things wiser; but it will be neither so happy nor so kindly as the Old” (qtd. in Mordell 202).

³ For Kipling scholarship, in particular as regards Victorian fin de siècle anxieties over empire, see Elsie B. Adams, Charles Adams, Stephen D. Arata, Tim Bascom, Patrick Brantlinger (2007), Nora Crook, Peter Havholm, John Kucich, Jesse Oak Taylor, Diane Simmons, and Angus Wilson. For responses to Kipling’s Gothic tales in particular, see Terry Caesar, John Coates, William B. Dillingham, Elliot L. Gilbert, Norman Page, John H. Schwarz, and Joanna Scutts.

As he watched with dismay the creeping modernization that threatened to eclipse entirely the “magical” past of old Japan and its foundation in legend and fairy tale, Hearn grew deeply concerned about the decay of cultural morality, the role of history in a culture’s future, and the preservation of traditions in art. In “My First Day in the Orient,” Hearn makes explicit the “supernatural” connections that link generations of artists:

The idea whose symbol has perished will reappear again in other creations—perhaps after the passing of a century—modified, indeed, yet recognizably of kin to the thought of the past. And every artist is a ghostly worker. Not by years of groping and sacrifice does he find his highest expression. The sacrificial past is with him; his art is an inheritance; his finders are guided by the dead. (Writings from Japan 25)

Hearn’s stories of the supernatural frequently address moral issues involving the past, and offer as well a critique of modernization as it affected Japanese village life. When the Gothic enthusiasts of the eighteenth century plumb the “medieval” European past, they celebrated what they imagined to be its archaic, crude, barbaric and pagan traits as a source of cultural strength: “fruits of primitivism and barbarism possessed a fire, a vigour a sense of grandeur which was sorely needed in English culture” (Punter, Literature of Terror 5). When Hearn championed the “aristocratic” past of Japan, he found in it not extremity of passion or barbarous lust but a kinder, more civil, indeed more civilized society. Hearn held in high admiration the samurai code of devotion, loyalty, and self-discipline, a motif that appears in many of his ghost tales. Finding direct parallels between this ancient Japanese warrior class and the European nobility and gentry of the Middle Ages, Basil Chamberlain emphasized that “with them, as with us,” in the essence of Old Japan, “all gentlemen must be soldiers, and all soldiers gentlemen … . The Samurai’s word was his bond, and he was taught to be gentle as well as brave” (415–16). When the promises are kept, the character is to be admired; when broken, however unreasonable the demand of the promise, particularly in love matters, the character is punished severely, often by a gruesome death. As Yu points out, Hearn’s tales reinforce the basic principles of karma:

It is one’s desire or will that keeps on turning the wheel of karma. In these Japanese legends, too, there seems to be no more intense human desire or will than love. For the sake of love many a ghost returns to its former human world, either visibly or invisibly, and fulfills its original wish. (“Lafcadio” 64)

The relationships forged in these stories reach across the divide between the living and the dead, reinforcing values like loyalty, devotion, honesty and courage.

5 See for example “The Story of O-tei,” in which the samurai Nagao is betrothed to a girl who falls ill before their wedding. She tells him that they will meet again and then dies; he mourns her at an altar he has built in her memory. Many years pass; he wanders the countryside, stopping one day at a remote village inn. The inn maid reminds him of his
In Hearn’s tales, devotion is measured by an eternal or infinite yardstick, to death and beyond; it is a cowardly act indeed to try to save one’s own life if in the attempt one breaks one’s word. In “A Passional Karma,” the lover, a handsome young samurai, “selfishly” attempts to evade his ghostly lover, and meets a gruesome end. Shinzaburo meets and admires the daughter of a powerful local chieftain. He promises to call on her again; however, fearing that her father would disapprove, he avoids her. In time she wastes away and dies; her faithful servant dies soon after. Months later the samurai hears footsteps outside his home at night. It is the lovely young woman accompanied by her maid. Happy to see him, she comes calling every evening at the same hour. Eventually the neighbors and a priest see that the young woman is a ghost who will destroy the young samurai. The priest pastes holy texts all around his home so the ghosts cannot enter. But by a trick Shinzaburo’s servant is made to remove one paper, and the ghostly maiden and her servant fly in through the small opening, and the samurai ends choked to death by his ghostly lover.

But true to the samurai code—and strange enough to Western sensibilities—the narrator of the tale concludes that Shinzaburo, for evading his responsibility and attempting to save himself even from a fearful apparition, is “contemptible”:

Shinzaburo was a Buddhist,—with a million lives behind him and a million lives before him; and he was too selfish to give up even one miserable existence for the sake of a girl that came back to him from the dead. Then he was even more cowardly than selfish. Although a samurai by birth and training, he had to beg a priest to save him from ghosts. In every way he proved himself contemptible; and O-Tsuyu did quite right in choking him to death. (Lafcadio Hearn’s Japan 246)

In tracing Hearn’s career before Japan, we can see a marked evolution in his Gothic aesthetic. From 1877 in New Orleans, Hearn spent ten years as a correspondent for such periodicals as the New Orleans Daily Item, Times-Democrat, Harper’s Weekly, and Scribner’s Magazine, producing descriptions of the seamy side of New Orleans, such as voodoo queen Marie Laveau and occult practices in Louisiana, as well as pieces covering the distinctive culture, cuisine and population of the area.6 But his use of Gothic themes and the supernatural dead fiancée. Suddenly the young maid is possessed by the spirit of the dead fiancée, telling him in her voice that she is the lost girl promised to him. Later the inn girl forgets what she has said, but they marry and live together happily (Kwaidan 23–8).

6 Hearn’s writings for national publications, such as Harper’s Weekly and Scribner’s Magazine, helped create the popular reputation of New Orleans as a place with a European-influenced culture distinct from that of the rest of North America. His best-known Louisiana works are Gombo Zhebes, Little Dictionary of Creole Proverbs in Six Dialects (1885); La Cuisine Créole (1885); and Chita: A Memory of Last Island, a novel based on the hurricane of 1856, first published in Harper’s Monthly in 1888. Harper’s sent Hearn to the West Indies as a correspondent in 1887. He spent two years in Martinique and produced two books: Two Years in the French West Indies and Youma, The Story of a West-Indian Slave, both in 1890. In the past few decades, and especially in the years following the 2005 hurricane
begins to change from a rather morbid, Poe-like fascination with the gruesome and macabre, to a positive and benign view of the power and value of things unseen, in his writing on Japan. In “Some Thoughts about Ancestor Worship,” Hearn speaks of “the ghostly” as the source of all art, history, life, and religion. His analysis includes an interesting contrast between Eastern and Western attitudes toward the dead and the past:

[The dead] are thought of—as our collections of folk-lore bear witness—rather with fear than love. In Japan the feeling is utterly different. It is a feeling of grateful and reverential love. It is probably the most profound and powerful of the emotions of the race,—that which especially directs national life and shapes national character. [...] the Japanese never think of an ancestor as having become “only a memory”—their dead are alive. (Kokoro 165)

According to Yu, for Hearn, “lovers are all artists in one way or another [...] and all artists ought to be lovers at heart” as well (An Ape 63). Both artist and lover are inspired by the same flow of ghostly energy and experience, and both living lovers and artists owe a debt to the dead. Yu claims that the “archetype of all Hearn’s ideal lovers” is Ito Norisuke, a young samurai in Hearn’s “The Story of Ito Norisuke,” who is led into a ghost house in a remote forest and introduced to the reincarnation of his true love from another era (An Ape 63). Very soon the living man wastes away in an attempt to return to his dead lover, again loyal to a promise made many lifetimes earlier. Honoring his bond with the spirit of his lost love even at the cost of his own life, he longs to pass on into the next world (139–66).

Hearn, whose collection of more than 50 reinterpreted Japanese legends “constitute a quarter of his total production in Japan,” came to believe that “the ghostly is not the periphery of the human, but the very center of it, the very spirit of it: [...] everyman is haunted by ghosts” (Yu, “Lafcadio” 63). Inspired by his study of Buddhist theories of reincarnation and karma, Hearn moved beyond a voyeuristic obsession with the macabre toward a comprehensive vision of the supernatural as a source for all artistic and cultural inspiration. The weird are with us always, but not necessarily as our antagonists; their role is to bear witness to the continuum of human life and the necessity of behaving honorably toward inhabitants of both the seen and unseen worlds. For Hearn, the Gothic mode was a passageway toward spiritual development and moral improvement; a code of responsibility and discipline, rather than raging unbridled passion and the extremes of emotion that clutter the landscape in Western Gothic writing.

Hearn’s assimilation of Japanese culture and values is key to understanding the power of his version of Gothic, reshaped to encompass moral and spiritual experience. His travel writing evinces a deep cultural immersion in Japanese Katrina, Hearn’s value as a chronicler of New Orleans has received renewed interest. See in particular new collections of Hearn’s New Orleans work by S. Fredrick Starr, Delia LaBarre and a biography by Jonathan Cott.
life; unlike for example eighteenth-century Gothic novelist Ann Radcliffe, who used Italy as a setting in several works—although she hadn’t been there “and didn’t need to go,” having easy access to travel texts with vivid depictions of Italy (Perkins 35)—Hearn doesn’t use Japan simply as an exotic prop in his writing. In his enthusiasm for the traditions of old Japan, Hearn assimilates values which are not modern, not Western, not Victorian, and not Christian. As Rolf Goebel writes, in his “First Day in the Orient,” Hearn confesses to a temple guard that he is neither Christian nor Buddhist, but his visit to the temple is motivated by his “quest for intellectual and moral, not necessarily religious, growth” (200).

As Hearn is transformed by the experience of travel and cultural immersion in Japan, his Gothic aesthetic becomes more capacious, encompassing dimensions beyond the merely strange and curious. Entering Japan as a travel writer seeking the weird and outrageous, Hearn eventually reworked the Gothic mode to make it speak to issues such as the responsibility of the artist, the moral debt owed by the living to the dead, and the many difficulties involved in finding one’s place in the world—anywhere in the world. As Hearn scholar Hirakawa writes, “Hearn was a rare Westerner who was able to intuit subtleties of the Japanese world of the dead. He could sympathize with Japanese ghosts” (Introduction x). What had been mere strange tales in New Orleans evolved into a transformative theory of art and of moral improvement, in ghostly observations of ghostly Japan.

The conventions of imperial and postcolonial Gothic, typically centering on a Self-Other relationship between Western colonial overlord and an uncivilized, beast-like native, undergo a sea change in the work of Kipling and Hearn, writers who lived in Asia for much of their careers and whose “dislocation” from their native places seemed to have a powerful effect on the development of their Gothic aesthetics. Kipling and Hearn found new uses for the genre as a moral prod: Kipling flogs imperials for their brutish insensitivity and moral shoddiness, and Hearn’s stories admonish moderns for lack of discipline and fidelity to principle. Hearn mourns the loss of the noble ideals of old Japan, while Kipling writes of the danger of letting oneself abandon basic values, with swift retribution visited on the errant Westerner whose bad conscience haunts him no matter how far he runs to avoid it. In Kipling, the tendency is to demonize the European who doesn’t fit in, to find holes and weaknesses in colonial culture where horrors might filter through. Hearn meanwhile shapes his Japanese tales of the supernatural to reinforce concepts such as the debt of gratitude owed the dead and other principles of honor in Japanese society. Rather than echoing the familiar Gothic paradigm of fear of an unknown external peril, the work of these writers often serves as a spur to ethical behavior learned from the inside out. New models of moral behavior in relation to both Self and Other emerge from their innovations to the Gothic genre; the “remote” perspective of a geographical and cultural remove lends clarity to the moral exercise.
Works Cited


