

Dead Doesn't Mean Gone

The Haunting of Bly Manor as a Neo-Victorian Text

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ABSTRACT

This essay places Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020) within the theoretical framework of the neo-Victorian genre. Based on the work of Henry James, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* figures as the second instalment in Flanagan's *Haunting* horror anthology series, exploring the themes of memory and trauma through the Gothic tropes of spectrality and haunting. The essay assesses whether Flanagan's adaptive decisions constructively engage in a dialogue with the nineteenth-century socio-political structures and their haunting effect on the present. Placing emphasis on the issues of sexuality and class, he relies on the neo-Victorian practice of rendering visible the historically invisible, as well as the genre's central metaphor of the mirror as a window to the past. The essay, therefore, considers the extent to which the narrative possibilities Flanagan creates for contemporary re-imaginings of James's characters utilize the neo-Victorian genre's subversive potential.

Henry James's 1898 horror novella *The Turn of the Screw* continues to inspire both literary and transmedial adaptations, appropriations, and rewritings, many of which are subject to interpretations through the neo-Victorian lens. Joyce Carol Oates's *Accursed Inhabitants of the House of Bly*, Sarah Waters's *Affinity*, and A. N. Wilson's *A Jealous Ghost*, as well as films like Jack Clayton's *The Innocents* (1961), Alejandro Amenábar's *The Others* (2001), and, more recently, Flóra Sigismond's *The Turning* (2020), are only a handful of works which borrow characters, motifs, and plot elements from the classic novella and deploy them to different ends, attesting to the persisting appeal of the source material to the contemporary (re)imagination of the nineteenth century.

The most recent adaptation, and the one that concerns this essay, is the second instalment in Mike Flanagan's *Haunting* horror anthology streaming series titled *The Haunting of Bly Manor* (2020). Although the plot most distinctly echoes *The Turn of the Screw*, the series interweaves several of Henry James's ghost stories into a contemporary gothic romance set

in England and the United States in the late 1980s. The frame narrative, however, is set in 2007, with an enigmatic grey-haired woman (Carla Gugino) attending a rehearsal dinner in California, where she offers to tell the guests a ghost story she insists is not hers, though "it belongs to somebody [she] knew" ("The Great Good Place"). Once she begins her narration, the story rewinds to 1987 London, introducing Danielle "Dani" Clayton (Victoria Pedretti), an American expatriate hired as an *au pair* for the orphaned Wingrave children (Benjamin Evan Ainsworth and Amelie Bea Smith) living on a remote family property in Bly under the legal care of their absent uncle, Henry Wingrave (Henry Thomas). While the storyteller's identity remains unknown to the guests, Flanagan offers the viewers clues throughout her narrative, with the show's closing scene confirming that the woman is indeed Jamie, the former gardener at the manor who remained Dani's lover until her death seven years prior.

Whereas James dilutes the governess's story by filtering it through a male perspective, Flanagan's gender-swapping

of the frame narrator, as well as the introduction of a lesbian protagonist, suggests the potential for destabilizing the patriarchal and heterosexist structures upheld during the Victorian period, the ramifications of which persist well into the late twentieth century with Thatcher's reinforcement of "Victorian values," despite Great Britain's seemingly promising redirection toward more progressive politics in the 1970s. Resulting from a contemporary fascination with the nineteenth century, the neo-Victorian genre has opened up spaces for historical, cultural, and aesthetic exploration of the Victorian era and its unyielding effect on the present. In literature and media, this effect is often metaphorically conveyed through the master trope of spectrality and haunting (Arias and Pulham xi), as ghosts are traditionally taken to represent projections of cultural fears and unresolved trauma.

In *The Haunting of Bly Manor*, Flanagan's reimagining of a classic Victorian ghost story suggests the possibility for conveying anxieties about social and political uncertainties pervading Great Britain and the United States at the time both nations were under extremely conservative leadership. Such updating of Henry James, particularly his thematic preoccupation with the nature of storytelling and its inherent mirroring of the nineteenth-century social structures, blatantly points toward the Victorian past as a spectral presence that continues to haunt

engaged with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorians" (4, original emphasis). Based on this definition, there appear to have emerged two distinct categories of texts that engage with the nineteenth century. The first are the texts in the vein of Sarah Waters's *Affinity* and A. S. Byatt's *Possession*, which operate within the boundaries of historiographic metafiction, revisiting and often rewriting historical events, and problematizing the relationship between history and fiction. Put another way, these texts challenge the cultural memory of the Victorians, seeking to right the wrongs of the past from the vantage point of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and often doing so by playing upon the contemporary stereotypes about the period or by giving a voice to the historically ostracized. As a result, they often adopt an ironic stance and are characterized by political undertones. Positioned at the intersection of the neo-Victorian genre and postmodernism, these texts rely on dismantling the official version, offering instead a pluralist view of history, that of which Hutcheon is the foremost proponent. By drawing attention to their own fictional nature, they suggest that the desire for the knowledge of history is continually undermined by the postmodernist notion of the impossibility of attaining such knowledge, thus consciously denying the historical plausibility even of the alternate histories that they

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contemporary society. Moreover, it offers a metafictional exploration of the ghost story genre itself and the implications of the genre's conventions in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Placing the series within the neo-Victorian theoretical framework, this essay aims to determine its attitude toward the Victorian past; it considers the changes made to the source material as well as the extent to which the series realizes its subversive potential as opposed to appropriating the Victorian era for aesthetic and commercial appeal.

Although she never uses the term "neo-Victorian" to describe contemporary returns to the Victorian past, Cora Kaplan ponders the motivation behind these returns, highlighting the importance of "asking whether the proliferation of Victoriana is more than nostalgia—and more, too, than a symptom of the now familiar, if much debated, view that the passage from modernity to postmodernity has been marked by the profound loss of a sense of history" (3), thus hinting at the ongoing discussion about historical fiction's critical versus nostalgic engagement with the past as dichotomized by Linda Hutcheon in *A Poetics of Postmodernism* (45).

In the frequently cited definition of neo-Victorianism, Heilmann and Llewellyn contend that to be considered neo-Victorian, a text "must in some respect be *self-consciously*

construct. In that respect, these texts reveal the unreliability of cultural memory, highlighting the fact that it is underpinned by inherited ideas and stereotypes about the past rather than historical facts, and is, therefore, ultimately dependent on the accumulated sense of history.

In the other group are the texts which are not concerned with critically engaging the Victorian past, but rather with adopting a celebratory and often sentimental approach to it, which tends to further perpetuate cultural clichés about the period. Guy Ritchie's *Sherlock Holmes* (2009), for instance, prioritizes aesthetic reproduction of Victorian London over engaging in a critical dialogue with the social structures of the period. These texts emphasize nostalgia with no aspiration to subvert dominant historical discourses. Because they lack both a metahistoric aspect and "a self-analytic drive," Heilmann and Llewellyn are wary of labelling these texts neo-Victorian, referring to them broadly as "historical fiction set in the nineteenth century" (5-6). Elaborating on the example of nostalgic cinema, Fredric Jameson is highly critical of purely stylistic engagements of the past, of "conveying 'pastness' by the glossy qualities of the image" (19), having famously described such endeavours as "cannibalization" due to their negligence of "genuine historicity" in favour of nostalgia.

Nonetheless, because literature and media which employ a Victorian setting, character archetypes, and/or other conventions of the time have proven incredibly versatile, the neo-Victorian genre continues to evade a stable definition despite scholarly attempts to narrow it down to only the texts that exhibit a conscious effort to enter into a dialogue with the Victorian past, often with the objective of resolving present-day social and political tensions that stem from the nineteenth century.

If Henry James's ghost stories are a cultural product of his time, the question that arises is whether Flanagan's setting update is a deliberate attempt at establishing an analogy between the two social climates—the Victorian era and Thatcherism, as well as its American counterpart, Reaganism. *The Haunting of Bly Manor's* most chilling and memorable line may well be Flora's assertion that "dead doesn't mean gone" ("The Way It Came"), which figures as the motif throughout the series. When considered within the neo-Victorian framework, the line reads as a metafictional affirmation that the Victorian era, although long behind us, continues to exert its influence on the present.

Flanagan's iteration of James's haunted countryside estate is populated with marginalized characters, including two black women, two lesbians, and an Indian immigrant, all of whom are employees of Lord Wingrave; the foundation is therefore laid for a narrative that will abound in political implications. Another significant change to the source material lies in Flanagan's decision to rid the story of its signature ambiguity surrounding the supernatural presence at the manor. In *The Turn of the Screw*, upon her arrival to Bly, the governess begins to see two mysterious figures on the premises. None of the other residents appear aware of the figures, which leads the governess to suspect that the manor is haunted. She soon learns that her predecessor, Miss Jessel, was having an affair with the manor's valet, Peter Quint, and that both of them are dead. The novella's eerie atmosphere is deftly built through the governess's point of view as she becomes convinced that the ghosts of Jessel and Quint intend to harm the children. The governess's narrative ends with Miles dying in the governess's arms after she tries to protect him from Quint's ghost. The ambiguity which permeates James's story has sparked various interpretations; however, the one which appears to have enjoyed the most popularity in critical discussions about *The Turn of the Screw* centres on the governess's presumed insanity.

The Haunting of Bly Manor, on the other hand, confirms early on that the ghosts of Peter Quint (Oliver Jackson-Cohen) and the former governess, reimagined by Flanagan as Rebecca Jessel (Tahirah Sharif), are not figments of Dani's imagination. Flanagan rejects the readings of James's text as a case study for female madness, foregrounding instead social and romantic relationships at the manor as they are embedded within the dominant social institutions that all trace back not just to the Victorian era, but, as the eighth episode, "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" suggests, all the way back to the seventeenth century.

LIBERATING JAMES'S GOVERNESS

Seeing that "subversion is only possible in the presence of a norm against which that subversion is directed" (Booker 188), Dani and Jamie's lesbian relationship is continually contrasted to Peter and Rebecca's, its hetero-patriarchal and ultimately doomed counterpart. The contrasting nature of the two relationships is introduced in "The Two Faces, Part One" when Dani, having learned of Peter's controlling behaviour, concludes that "People do that, don't they? Mix up love and possession. I don't think that should be possible. I mean, they're opposites, really. Love and ownership." Thus, Dani not only alludes to her failed engagement to Edmund (Roby Attal), but also foreshadows a happy and healthy relationship with Jamie. Additionally, unbeknownst to Dani, the dichotomy also takes on a literal meaning as Peter's ghost possesses Rebecca's body before he compels her to drown herself in order to reunite with him in death.

Flanagan furthers the disparity between the two relationships by means of flower symbolism. Although he does rely on flowers as a traditional symbol of romance and sexuality, Flanagan expands their connotations to convey political metaphors. The prematurely cut roses which Peter gives to Rebecca thus become emblematic of their relationship. When Peter is surprised that someone of Rebecca's intelligence is content working as a nanny, "scrubbing up some rich kid's puke while his guardian drinks himself into a coma," she admits to having applied for the job knowing that Henry Wingrave works for a prominent London law firm, telling Peter that she had always wanted to be a barrister—the ambition he ultimately cuts short when he compels her to drown herself ("The Two Faces, Part One"). Appropriately, the bouquet he gives her consists of both red and white roses, while the scene in which Peter is driving Rebecca to Bly for the first time momentarily freezes on the garden, focusing on a single white rose struggling to bloom, with the thorns from the surrounding roses looming over it (Fig. 1).

Dani and Jamie's relationship, on the other hand, is symbolized by a moonflower. In "The Jolly Corner," Jamie reveals that she took up gardening in prison out of boredom, but has grown to love it as she believes it has given her life purpose: "people aren't worth it, but plants... you pour your love, and your effort, and your nourishment into them, and you see where it goes [...] you watch them grow and it all makes sense." She then compares Dani to a moonflower (Fig. 2)—a flower which, like marginalized identities, blooms only at night and is "bloody hard to grow in England." Jamie contends that, although "everyone is exhaustive, even the best ones [...], sometimes, once in a blue goddamned moon, I guess, someone, like this moonflower, just might be worth the effort."

By using a nocturnal plant to illustrate a lesbian relationship in the 1980s, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* alludes to the contemporary attitude surrounding non-reproductive families. This proves particularly resonant in light of the Section 28 of the Local Government Act introduced in 1988 by



Fig. 1 | A foreshadowing of Peter's intentions, 00:09:47. "The Two Faces, Part One" (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

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Fig. 2 | Jamie's moonflower blooms against a prison-like trellis, 00:34-39. "The Jolly Corner" (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

Thatcher's government, prohibiting "the promotion of homosexuality by local authorities" on the basis that it clashed with traditional family values which stem from the hypocritical notions of sexual morality fostered in the Victorian era: "Thatcher's invocation of the Victorian era centred upon her particular re-creation of the Victorian family with the heterosexual marriage as the permissible locus for sexual activity" (Mitchell 48). In that respect, Thatcher's idea of the Victorian mirrors the exact image of the period that the neo-Victorian genre strives to expose and ultimately reconstruct. When Dani and Jamie kiss next to the blooming moonflower, the shot is initially framed through the trellis, indicating Dani's

entrapment, while in the next shot the trellis is removed, as Dani has embraced the previously repressed transgressive desire (Figs. 3 and 4).

Given contemporary curiosity surrounding the cultural stereotype about the Victorians's rigid attitude toward sex, it is no surprise that sexual liberation is a frequent subject in neo-Victorian fiction. Antonija Primorac infers that the neo-Victorian re-imaginings of Victorian sexuality represent "a foil to contemporary notions of the sexually liberated and sexually knowledgeable individual" ("The Naked Truth" 92). But is Flanagan's apparent favouring of Dani and Jamie's relationship over Peter and Rebecca's actually subversive? To what

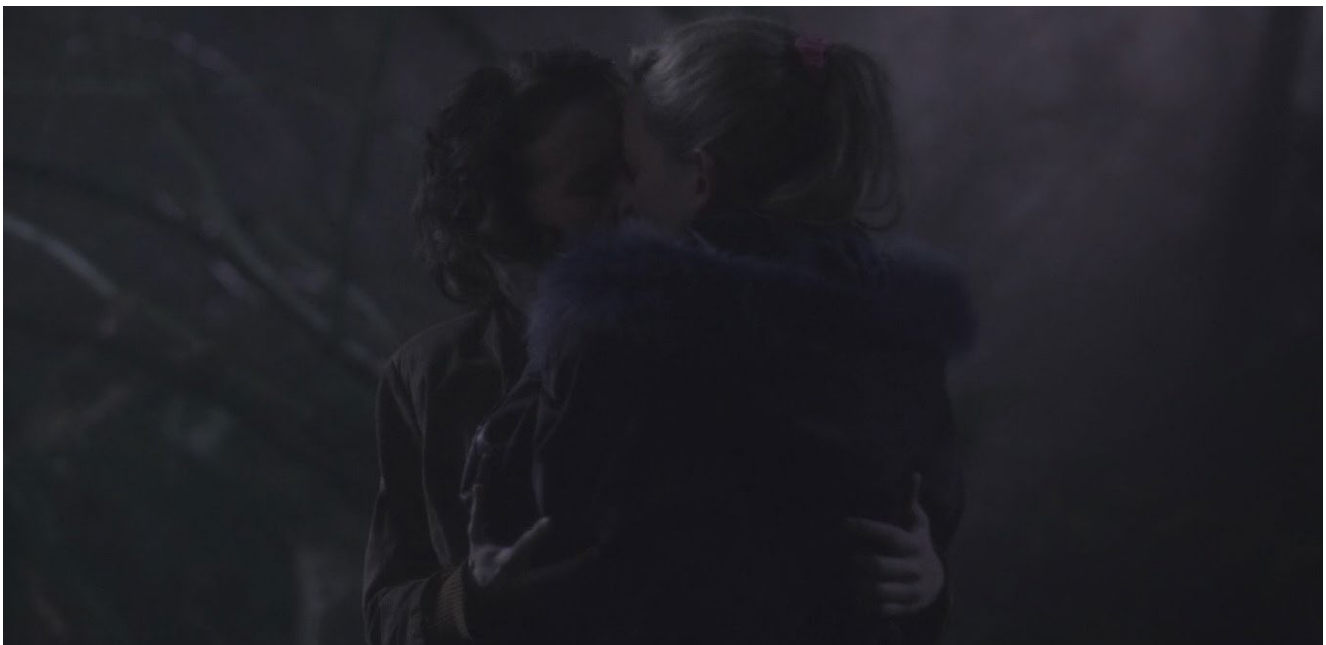


Fig. 3 and 4 | A symbolic representation of Dani's liberation, 00:34:49; 00:34:53. "The Jolly Corner" (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

extent, if at all, are dominant Victorian structures de-centred? To ensure the safe distance from which we engage with the Victorian, the neo-Victorian genre relies heavily on the mirror metaphor, which is closely connected to the previously mentioned master trope of spectrality and haunting. In the first four episodes, Dani is quite literally haunted by the ghost of heteronormativity. From the moment she is introduced, she is continually startled by the figure of a man with glowing eyes that appears behind her in reflective surfaces (Fig. 5). In “The Way It Came,” it is revealed that the spectre that haunts her is her childhood best friend-turned fiancé Edmund, who was killed in a traffic accident, his eyes reflecting the headlights of the truck that hit him.

The episode delves into Dani’s past, outlining the trajectory of her coming to terms with her sexuality since early childhood up to the moment at Bly when she confides in Jamie. Six months before her arrival in England, Dani obliquely comes out to Edmund, saying that she thought “[she] could just stick it out and eventually [she] would feel like [she] was supposed to,” ultimately breaking off the engagement and causing Edmund to angrily exit the car and walk into traffic. After Edmund’s death, traumatized and overwhelmed with feelings of guilt and shame, Dani develops a habit of covering mirrors to avoid facing him, and essentially herself, as she is illuminated by his glowing eyes, thus symbolically conveying her repressed lesbianism. However, the most eerie and spatially significant of Dani’s encounters with Edmund’s gaze occurs in “The Great Good Place” when Miles and Flora lock Dani in a closet; Edmund’s appearance in the closet mirror causes Dani to have a panic attack, screaming to be let out, as the fear of sexuality is projected onto the fear of spectrality (Figs. 6 and 7). Moreover, Flora and Miles are eventually revealed to have trapped Dani in order to protect her from the murderous ghost of Viola Lloyd (Kate Siegel) who roams the manor nightly, therefore reinforcing the idea of the closet as the only safe space for perceived deviance.

By intertwining sexuality with guilt and trauma, Flanagan evokes the standard Gothic trope in which the return to the repressed is conveyed by means of spectrality. Dani’s being haunted by her past thus metatextually reflects the neo-Victorian genre’s preoccupation with the Victorian past and its influence on the present. However, to invoke Simon Joyce’s idea about the act of looking back, there is “the inevitable distortion that accompanies any mirror image, whether we see it as resulting from the effects of political ideology, deliberate misreading, exaggeration, or the understandable simplification of a complex past” (4). The mirror image therefore reveals our own misconstrued (although culturally accepted) ideas about the nineteenth century. As Heilmann and Llewellyn note, “neo-Victorian spectrality can be seen as a reflection of our inability to recapture the Victorians, and the impossibility of see(k)ing the ‘truth’ of the period through either fiction or fact” (144). In that respect, Dani does not remember Edmund as he was; rather, the image of him that haunts her is the one shaped by the trauma and guilt

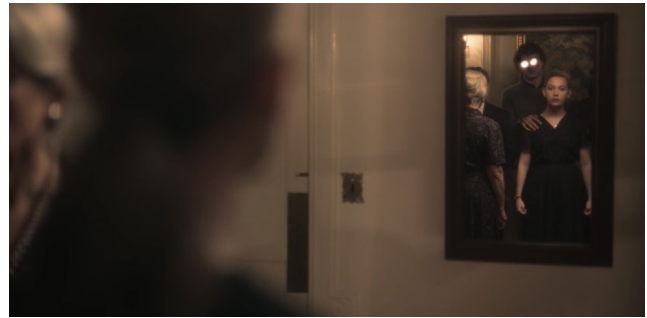


Fig. 5 | Dani is haunted by Edmund’s illuminating gaze, 00:36:09. “The Way It Came” (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

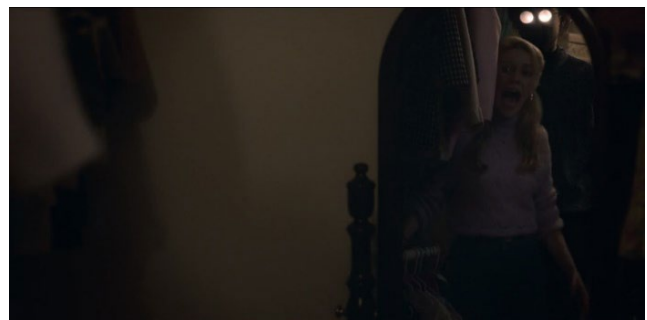


Fig. 6 and 7 | The fear of sexuality is projected onto the fear of spectrality, 00:48:48; 00:49:01. “The Great Good Place” (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

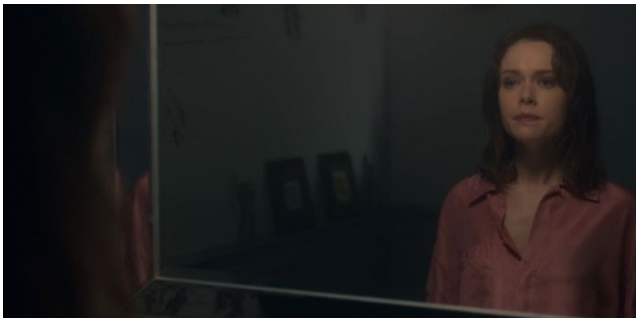
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she associates with it. Dani affirms her transgressive desire by burning Edmund’s broken glasses, thus freeing herself from his constant surveillance and rendering herself a threat to the hetero-patriarchal system (Fig. 8).

Therefore, having established Dani and Jamie’s relationship as a viable threat to the social order embodied by Edmund’s now dissipated spectre, Flanagan is able to subvert the mirror metaphor: years after Dani’s death, as Jamie is narrating the story to the guests, she reveals that “for the rest of her days, the



Fig. 8 | In “The Way It Came” (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*), Dani renders herself a threat to the hetero-patriarchal system embodied by Edmund’s gaze, 00:49:36. Netflix, 2020.



Figs. 9 and 10 | Dani’s fear of a spectral presence is contrasted with Jamie’s grief over its absence, 00:35:33; 00:39:46. “The Way It Came”; “The Beast in the Jungle” (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

gardener would gaze into reflections, *hoping* to see [Dani’s] face,” as the spectre is now a desired presence rather than a source of terror (authors’ emphasis, “The Beast in the Jungle,” Figs. 9 and 10).

Focusing on neo-Victorian heroines on screen, Primorac has observed a persisting trend in the neo-Victorian genre’s sexing up of female characters, contending that the genre’s overemphasis on exposing Victorian sexual hypocrisy ultimately compromises its subversive potential (93). Because these texts are often insistent on sexually liberating the Victorians, “the spectacle of the nude or scantily-clad female body draws viewers’ attention away from diminished rather than enhanced female agency in these contemporary renditions of female characters” (93). Notably, Flanagan’s screen text steers clear of a sensationalist depiction of its heroine and therefore does not weaken its critical stance on the historically dominant institutions. As a contemporary afterlife of

James’s repressed governess, Dani’s liberation is achieved on her own terms; in other words, her liberation from Edmund’s gaze and her subsequent relationship with Jamie effects a change in the historical discourse, destabilizing the hetero-patriarchal system without weaponizing the female body or otherwise compromising Dani’s agency informed by her marginalized identity.

Unlike Rebecca, whose relationship with Peter does not pose a political disturbance, Dani is granted full agency over her life and ultimately her death. Both Rebecca and Dani commit suicide by drowning in the lake at Bly, and while Rebecca’s is orchestrated by Peter’s ghost possessing her body, Dani’s suicide marks an ultimate act of service for Jamie, protecting her from the malevolent ghost of Viola Lloyd. Whereas Rebecca’s death proves futile and a hallmark of Peter’s betrayal, Dani’s sacrifice offers a cathartic conclusion to her and Jamie’s relationship. Bound by the conventions of the Gothic genre, Dani and Jamie’s decade-long domestic idyll, eventually fortified by a civil union in 2000, does end in death. However, Dani’s suicide is not painted as a tragedy; rather it is framed through the Wordsworthian philosophy about the renewal of life, tying it up to Jamie’s own, inherently romanticist worldview expressed in “The Jolly Corner” and centred around the idea that the beauty of a moonflower lies in its mortality: “life refreshes and recycles, and on and on it goes, and that is so much better than that life getting crushed, deep down in the dirt, into a rock that will burn if it’s old enough.” Jamie’s rejection of the finality of death is ultimately embodied in the final shot of the series, which reveals that Dani’s ghost never left Jamie’s side, despite Jamie’s being unaware of her presence (Fig. 11).

PETER QUINT AND NARRATIVE (IM)POSSIBILITY

As Kate Mitchell points out, “Thatcher used the term ‘Victorian values’ as a measure against which to identify the social ills of her milieu” (48), particularly in relation to ever-growing class tension. In Thatcher’s England, therefore, to reinforce Victorian values meant to strengthen the boundaries of the clear-cut social categories of class, race, gender, and sexuality, as well as the way in which these categories overlap. In the *Haunting of Bly Manor*, the tension between these categories is explored through the characters of Peter Quint, who is immediately established as the main antagonist, and Jamie, who is one of the romantic leads.

While *The Turn of the Screw* deliberately refrains from providing Peter Quint with motivation for tormenting the governess, sparking a debate on whether his ghost really *is* there, as opposed to being a reflection of the governess’s deteriorating mental state, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* gives Peter strong motivation which is revealed in “The Two Faces, Part Two.” The episode endeavours to explain the roots of Peter’s behaviour, ultimately sourcing it to his frustration about Britain’s class division. Read in light of the neo-Victorian genre, the exploration of Peter’s past opens up a possibility for Flanagan to construct a working-class revenge narrative in the vein of Waters’s *Affinity*, which allows its unscrupulous



Fig. 11 | The final shot of the series reaffirms Jamie's romanticist rejection of the finality of death, 00:49:01. "The Beast in the Jungle" (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

working-class deuteragonist to deal a severe blow to the rigid Victorian social structures. Namely, Waters's Selina Dawes and her working-class lover, Ruth Vigers, successfully trick the bourgeois protagonist Margaret Prior into helping Selina escape from Millbank prison, ultimately embezzling her, before fleeing the country. The working-class characters are therefore allowed a happy ending in terms of both cheating the class system and cultivating a lesbian relationship despite the confines of Victorian norms.

In contrast, Peter Quint's plan to embezzle the Wingraves and flee to America is cut short by his being killed by the ghost of Viola Lloyd, and *The Haunting of Bly Manor's* critical attitude toward the issue at hand is immediately brought into question. Although Peter's preoccupation with class immobility

one rigid class system to another that appears less rigid in his eyes. He describes how in Britain, class is the only thing that matters, while in America, it is only money that is important, and he hopes that with the money embezzled from the Wingraves, he will be able to start a new life on top of the hierarchy. Thus, his story is not one of rebellion, but rather one of upholding the capitalist class system and simply climbing its ladder. His description of the differences between the class systems of Great Britain and America only shows a fundamental misunderstanding of the problem, since his statement only uncovers that in both places, class is the only important thing. The only difference is, most of the wealth in Britain is held by families of aristocratic origins, while in America, it is held by capitalists who do not descend from noblemen. However, both

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does create narrative anxiety, his being denied a chance to free himself from the shackles of the rigid class system suggests that Peter is ultimately punished precisely for his marginalized status as a working-class man. Jamie serves as Peter's foil but despite her marginal status as a working class woman being furthered by her being a lesbian, she is rewarded with a comfortable life in America with her lover, even though she remains relatively passive in effecting a change in the class discourse.

Moreover, Peter's thoughts on the class system in Britain are not a product of inspection and analysis, but of personal anger and naïve idealism. His thoughts are not focused on dismantling the class system; he simply seeks to move from

countries are ruled by capital and are defined by the same capitalist–proletarian class division present in all capitalist countries. Therefore, Peter remains within the confines of the class system that he seems to detest, and he inadvertently upholds its primary value: the acquisition of capital.

Peter's naivety is essentially a blind belief in the American dream, the belief that any person may achieve a prosperous life and attain wealth in America regardless of their background, race, creed, or nationality. In Peter's eyes, unlike Britain, America is a place of progress. This belief on Peter's part is quite problematic, both narratively and politically, as the series falls short in critically engaging with American ideology and



Fig. 12 and 13 | Peter muses about his and Rebecca's carefree future in America, revealing his blind faith in the American Dream, 00:35:41. "The Altar of the Dead" (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

history. While *The Haunting of Bly Manor* does engage critically with British past in a manner that is typical of neo-Victorian fiction, it does so from a markedly American perspective and with an uncritical representation of Reaganite America. Peter's idealist idea of America positions the country as a place of progress, whereas rural Britain is shown to still retain a similar social structure that it had in the 17th century when Bly was owned by Lord Willoughby. The place is still owned by a lord, albeit one who evades it due to trauma, and much like in the early modern period, there is a clear distinction between him and his inferiors. This rigid distinction is well exemplified when Peter tells Hannah (T'Nia Miller) that "there's *them* and then there's *us*" ("The Altar of the Dead," authors' emphasis).

Such representation of the British-American relationship appears to strengthen and uphold the position of America as the new global superpower, which looks at Britain as a waning imperialist power that is stuck in the past and cannot step into the contemporary era. *The Haunting of Bly Manor's* framing of the British-American relationship in this way is what distinguishes the series from the neo-Victorian narratives that engage critically both with the British past but also with the rise of America as a new dominant power. A.S. Byatt's *Possession*, for instance, also criticizes the American drive for acquisition of capital through the heavily stereotypical characterisation of the prestigious literary scholar Mortimer Cropper, who obsessively collects memorabilia despite having no passion for the subject of his study.

Neo-Victorian fiction is deeply marked with an engagement with Thatcherism, whose American counterpart was Reaganism. Much like Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan

was a conservative leader whose economic goals sought to decrease government spending and liberalize the market as much as possible. This would allow *The Haunting of Bly Manor* to encompass both systems and create a holistic neo-Victorian critique of both Britain and America; however, the only engagement with America is filtered through Peter's subjective, overwhelmingly positive view of the country. Therefore, the only narrative possibility for Peter is a rags-to-riches story, as is often the case with working-class characters who either seek to climb the social ladder, are represented as antagonists, or in Peter's case, both. The same narrative possibility is given to Dani and Jamie, who rise from working-class to petite-bourgeoisie. However, unlike Peter's narrative, theirs is completed in this manner since their stories are motivated mainly by sexuality and not class. Class struggle cannot be incorporated into capitalist ideology, which is probably the reason why Peter is given no chance at redemption, while Dani and Jamie's struggle, especially when it is stripped of all its revolutionary potential, can. As a result, Dani and Jamie are allowed to enjoy a somewhat happy ending as long as they stay within the confines of the capitalist class system and ideology.

Upon relocating to Vermont, Dani and Jamie start a successful flower arranging business and are shown to be living blissfully as the sequence eerily recalls Peter's musings about his and Rebecca's carefree future in America only moments before he is killed: "We're getting out of here. The things we're gonna be, you and I, in America... A lord and his lady. No. A queen and her stable boy" ("The Altar of the Dead," Figs. 12 and 13).

Although Peter and Jamie come from virtually the same background—the characters are strongly implied to have endured child abuse, and both have juvenile records, with the criminal behaviour overtly linked to their traumatic childhoods—Jamie's antagonism toward the class system is only touched upon and, as previously mentioned, she remains passive in effecting change but is nonetheless allowed sympathy. Conversely, Peter is vilified for being a product of the same corrupt system that ultimately kills him in his attempts to prosper within it.

As the titles of the two episodes centred on him and his relationship with Rebecca suggest, Peter is extremely cunning despite his outwardly charming persona. Accordingly, upon his introduction, his face is first seen in the reflection of a tailor's shop window in Kensington as he pictures himself in an expensive suit, before he is seen shopping for luxurious whiskey and driving away in a Rolls (Fig. 14).

The sequence is framed as Peter's fantasy and his self-deception translates onto the viewers as they are led to believe that Peter is indeed a rich man. However, both Peter and the viewers are soon disillusioned as it is revealed he was only running errands for his boss, Lord Wingrave. Metaphorically, class immobility in Thatcher's England is conveyed by means of the gravity well which surrounds the manor. After Viola's ghost has drowned him, Peter, too, returns as a ghost but soon learns that he is confined to the grounds of Bly. Once "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" reveals that Viola's spite for



Fig. 14 | Peter 'tries on' an expensive suit in "The Two Faces, Part One" (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*), 00:01:27. Netflix, 2020.

her husband and sister is responsible for the gravity well which traps the ghosts of all who die on the premises, it becomes evident that Peter's chance at crossing the class boundary is denied him by those at the very top of the hierarchy. When even the murderous Viola, the former lady of the manor, is given a lengthy backstory with the intention of painting her as a tragic figure, Peter remains the only character whose personal tragedy is insufficient to redeem his actions in the eyes of the viewers, despite the narrative's insistence that Peter's antagonism is a product of the British class system rather than his being inherently evil.

Peter is notably absent from the story after the events at Bly. Once the curse of Bly has been broken and the ghosts released, Peter's fate is deliberately left unknown as the narrative focus shifts entirely to Dani and Jamie's life in America. Such conclusion, or lack thereof, to Peter's narrative allows Flanagan to expose, and ultimately reaffirm, the historical injustices of the Victorian era that continue to plague Britain in the late twentieth century. However, given *The Haunting of Bly Manor's* mishandling of Peter's motivation for his villainy, especially in relation to the other marginalized characters, Peter's defiance of the class system is essentially reduced to his being the collateral damage of a wealthy woman's ghost.

CONCLUSION

The central question that permeates the majority of discussions within the field of neo-Victorian studies has been succinctly articulated by Kate Mitchell: "can [the neo-Victorian novels] recreate the past in a meaningful way or are they playing nineteenth century dress-ups?" (3). Undoubtedly so, Mitchell's claim extends to neo-Victorian screen texts as well, despite the fact that neo-Victorianism on screen occupies a

While *The Haunting of Bly Manor* does engage critically with British past in a manner that is typical of neo-Victorian fiction, it does so from a markedly American perspective and with an uncritical representation of Reaganite America.

marginal position within the field (Primorac, *Neo-Victorianism on Screen 2*). Given the dual approach to the past within the neo-Victorian genre, this essay has explored the ways in which Mike Flanagan's *The Haunting of Bly Manor* revises the work of Henry James. Flanagan transposes James's narrative into the 1980s, assigning the characters ex-centric identities. As a result, the series expounds political themes, raising questions about class, gender, and sexuality in both Victorian and Thatcher's England, as well as in Reagan's America.

Ultimately, Flanagan heavily relies on the neo-Victorian practice of rendering visible those whose histories are elided by the official version; he writes against the Victorian tradition by allowing Dani and Jamie's lesbian relationship to take up the central position of the narrative, therefore utilizing the subversive properties of the genre. Upon her introduction, Dani is a closeted lesbian whose guilt and fear manifest in the form of her fiancé's ghost. Edmund appears behind her in reflective surfaces, invoking Simon Joyce's idea about looking forward in order to make sense of the past. The story thus acquires metafictional properties as it points toward the haunting presence of the Victorian past in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. In an attempt at renegotiating the official history, Flanagan allows Dani and Jamie's relationship



Fig. 15 and 16 | Aging Jamie seeks Dani's face in the water in *The Haunting of Bly Manor*'s opening scene...., 00:02:01; 00:02:03. "The Great Good Place" (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

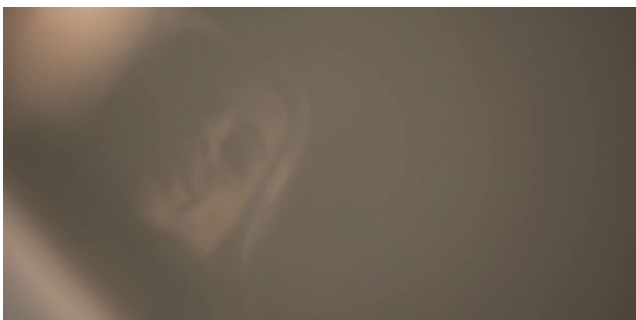


Fig. 17 and 18 | ...and again in the closing scene of the series, however, this time with her identity known to the viewers, 00:47:31; 00:47:37. "The Beast in the Jungle" (*The Haunting of Bly Manor*). Netflix, 2020.

to prevail over its heteronormative counterpart, with Dani's reaffirming of her transgressive desire by burning Edmund's glasses and therefore freeing herself from the socio-political constraints his gaze represents.

The narrative thread focusing on Peter Quint and class conflict, however, proves problematic, consequently blunting the criticism of the state of the nation. Although it acknowledges the rigidity of the British class system by employing the metaphor of the gravity well, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* fails to engage in a constructive dialogue with class discourse; if anything it further complicates the matter by its portrayal of the character who is most deeply rooted in being working-class as a murderer and whose antagonism is also fuelled by his blind faith in the American Dream. Peter Quint is demonised, marginalised, and eventually omitted from the narrative, which goes to show that *The Haunting of Bly Manor* operates within the confines of bourgeois fiction and ideology, preventing it from fully realizing the potential of the neo-Victorian tropes it employs. On the other hand, Viola Lloyd, whose vengeful ghost ruthlessly drowns everybody who crosses her path during her nightly roaming of the manor, but whose actions are ostensibly rooted in a tragic family history, is a wealthy landlady. Unlike Dani and Jamie, whose relationship withstands and successfully undermines the dominant order, Peter's ambition to climb the social ladder is eroded by his being killed by Viola, his ghost remaining trapped within her gravity well.

Therefore, as a neo-Victorian screen text, *The Haunting of Bly Manor* readily employs the genre's central metaphor of the mirror as a window to the (distorted) past, while the conventions of the ghost story genre prove as useful a tool in delineating the social mores of contemporary society as they were in the Victorian era. Flanagan's adaptive decision to sexually liberate James's governess demonstrates an overt intention of destabilizing the hetero-patriarchal order, as Dani and Jamie's relationship ultimately subverts the mirror metaphor by having an aging Jamie seek Dani's ghost in the reflection of her bathtub in a scene that bookends the series (Figs. 15-18).

Conversely, Flanagan's meditation on the British class system, although given a significant amount of attention, does little beyond merely acknowledging the issue as he steers clear of making bold decisions when it comes to the conclusion of Peter's story. ■

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