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The Monsters in Our Closets:
A Cultural Look at Neo-Victorian Adaptation

The literature of nineteenth century Britain is stereotypically characterized by images of societal repression. Characters suffer from an unfulfilled need to express their true desires, which may be at odds with social expectations. The result is masked sexuality or damaging psychological rifts. The twenty-first century has witnessed a reemergence of stories that make use of similar themes in Neo-Victorian adaptations. A quick channel surf or scan of recent film debuts attests to the popularity of these works. Whether it's Showtime's mash-up of iconic nineteenth century characters in *Penny Dreadful* or the 2009 revision of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* to include a zombie element, Neo-Victorian adaptations abound. Defined in 2008 by *The Journal of Neo-Victorian Studies* as a "cultural happening," a "reinvigorated historical consciousness," and a "critical interface between the present and past," Neo-Victorianisms are adaptive works based on source material from nineteenth century Britain. The popularity and persistence of these adaptations suggest a thematic or socio-cultural connection between the Victorian era and contemporary culture. Through Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation and a cultural studies approach, this thesis aims to focus on the social work being done by these Neo-Victorian revivals. It is my goal to examine these adaptations not only in terms of the connections to their

source texts but in terms of their relevance as cultural artifacts and the

implications of this tendency towards the revival of Victorian themes and

motifs, specially monstrosity in the form of the divided-self, which I will

argue indicates evidence of contemporary societal repression similar to those

indicative of nineteenth century Britain. Modern selves are divided, but not

necessarily in the same way as Victorian selves or for the same reasons,

though the appearance of the divided-self in the adaptations reflects a similar

cultural need. For example, the popularity of Showtime's series *Penny*

Dreadful as a re-manifestation of Victorian sensationalism suggests the

contemporary presence of similar nineteenth century socio-cultural

behaviors, which are reflected by the modern audience's attraction to the

divided-self. Originally born as a consequence of the Victorian era's strict

codes of propriety, a divided-self mirrors in fiction the way in which an

individual presents a public facade to society, hiding his true self underneath.

This trope has regained popularity with millennial audiences because of the

emphasis placed on virtual identity in contemporary culture. The tendency of

millennials to carefully construct and protect social media profiles mirrors

the masking of identity performed by Victorians to hide their improprieties.

This desire to *pretend* to be other than you really are for the sake of

acceptance took root in the Victorian era but is obviously still occurring in

contemporary social media, resulting in renewed interest in Victorian themes

and imagery represented in Neo-Victorian adaptations.

Beginning with an explication of nineteenth century British culture and the development of Neo-Victorianism in the twenty-first century, my thesis will provide relevant historical and cultural analysis to construct a working definition of these terms. It will primarily focus on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* as source materials for Showtime's *Penny Dreadful* (television), and Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, the source for Seth Grahame-Smith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (text), and its film counterpart released by Sony Pictures in 2016.