

The Domesticated Monster: Freakishness and Masculinity in Fitz-James O'Brien's "What Was It?"

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<1>In "What Was It?: A Mystery," Irish-American writer Fitz-James O'Brien pulls together a variety of nineteenth-century discourses that were competing over the same territory: the extraordinary body.⁽¹⁾ O'Brien's tale employs motifs and terminology drawn from gothic literature, medical writings, pseudo-scientific treatises, and freak show ephemera to dramatize the disempowering of those whose bodies confounded preexisting systems of classification. Although "What Was It?" is a tale of terror, and the creature that serves as the source of fear within it is a fantastic invention rather than an actual human being, the story reveals the lengths to which nineteenth-century science would go to neutralize perceived threats against dominant ways of knowing bodies. It thus sheds light on the treatment of those with bodies that transgressed socially constructed boundaries.

<2>In the end, however, "What Was It?" is less about resolving the problems the extraordinary body posed for nineteenth-century scientists than it is about consolidating the power of the "normal" man. "What Was It?" was written in a period when ideas about what constituted manliness were changing, and what is at stake in the story is the redefinition of masculinity. In the tale, normative masculinity proves itself through intellectual, rather than simply physical, mastery of the world and therefore defines itself against a supposedly "primitive" version of masculinity that is both racialized and disabled. Thus, in this work, the extraordinary body becomes a tool for redefining masculinity.

<3>"What Was It?" originally appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1859 but is still frequently reprinted in collections of horror stories. In the tale, a group of boarders, including Harry Escott—a student of the paranormal—and Dr. Hammond—a medical man, take up residence in a supposedly haunted house. There, they discover and capture a seemingly malevolent, invisible being. Although they are terrified by the creature, their fear is derived not from its assumed hostile intent and potential for evil but rather from the fact that it is invisible and thus impervious to their inquiring gaze. Throughout the story, the creature is called by a variety of names indicative of its unknowability: the Thing, the Enigma, the Invisible, the Something, and the Mystery. After their initial panic, the scientists begin to study the creature. In the end, their quest for knowledge is used to justify the objectification of the creature and its subjection to scientific experiment, confinement, and finally, posthumous exhibition as a curiosity.

<4>“What Was It?” begins by presenting extraordinary bodies as terrifyingly liminal; they wield power precisely because they frustrate efforts to identify them and position them within the established hierarchy of bodies. The implied threat to conventional ways of knowing necessitates an investigation of the extraordinary body in order to discover ways of rendering it knowable or, in other words, making it fit into the categories offered within conventional sciences and pseudo-sciences. When all available means of producing knowledge fail, however, a violent act of what David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder call “narrative prosthesis” objectifies the extraordinary body and fixes its meaning as a spectacle of deviance.(2) In O’Brien’s story, this is achieved when it is decided that the proper place for the creature that is the focus of the main characters’ scientific pursuits is a museum of curiosities. The dangerous hybridity the creature represents is nullified when it is finally positioned as a freak and the extraordinary body recedes to a comfortable distance from the realm of “the human.” It is even implied at the end of the tale that the creature may be no more than a sideshow hoax; this reinforces dominant ways of understanding and classifying bodies by suggesting the inauthenticity of challenges to them.

<5>The creature begins the tale as a “monster” and ends it as a “freak.” As Jeffrey Weinstock has noted, current critical theory draws parallels between the figures of the sideshow’s freak and the horror story’s monster. Weinstock asks us to differentiate between the freak and the monster by considering the following two definitions (327). Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes the *monster* as “the harbinger of category crisis [. . .] a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (Cohen 6). Elizabeth Grosz defines *freaks* as those “who exist outside of the structure of binary oppositions which govern our basic concepts and modes of self-definition,” and continues, “[t]hey occupy the impossible middle ground between binary pairs” (Grosz 25). Both, in other words, describe their subject in terms of its resistance to integration into preexisting systems of knowledge, its transgression of culturally prescribed boundaries, and its potential to threaten accepted ways of understanding and defining self and world. Rosemarie Garland Thomson provides an example of this with regard to freak shows when she argues that bearded ladies confronted spectators with challenges to their binary notions of gender (*Extraordinary* 58-59). Similarly, Cohen cites Harvey Greenberg’s reading of the monster from the film *Alien* as a challenge to naturalist’s taxonomies, at once “bivalve, crustacean, reptilian, and humanoid” (6).

<6>“What Was It?” represents the domestication of the monster into the freak. Whereas the monster’s nature remains liminal, the freak show stabilizes identities by polarizing them. As Cohen argues, “the monster always escapes” (4); its radical hybridization cannot ultimately be contained within current systems of knowledge production. It must be destroyed in order to reduce its threat, but even then, it returns in other forms, in other tales. But, according to Thomson, while freak shows also create crises of categorization, they do so in order to enable their resolution. Whatever challenge the freak represents is ultimately subsumed by its role as representative of otherness against which a normative identity can be defined; freaks enable spectators “to constantly reaffirm the difference between ‘them’ and ‘us’” (*Extraordinary* 65). Thus, the transformation from monster to freak in the tale reenacts the historical translation of the extraordinary body from marvel to curiosity in Western culture.(3)

<7>The title of the story recalls tactics employed in the exhibition of human difference by P. T. Barnum. On two separate occasions, Barnum labeled a disabled man “What Is It?” to suggest that his body straddled or challenged classificatory categories. In both cases, the person exhibited was presented as crossing the human/animal border. The first, a New York actor named Hervey Leech whose legs were considered short in proportion to his body, was put on display in London in 1846. Leech performed the role of what Barnum termed a “nondescript” (Cook 140). Barnum’s descriptions of the act emphasized the categorical indeterminacy Leech was supposed to represent: “The thing is not to be called *anything* by the exhibitor. We know not & therefore do not assert whether it is human or animal. We leave that all to the sagacious public to decide” (Cook 145). Although the London “What Is It?” exhibit closed when Leech was unmasked as an actor, Barnum met with greater success in America when he presented William Henry Johnson, a man with microcephaly, in the role in 1860. Of course, bodily difference alone did not disqualify these individuals from being labeled fully human; it had to be supplemented by an invented history, costuming, and performance. But, spectators were more likely to believe the act when the individual differed visibly from their idealized concept of the human body, when he registered as both similar to and different from that ideal.

<8>In both cases, nineteenth-century beliefs about race and gender played an important role in the success of the exhibit. Because the supposed hybrid was racialized, the purely “human” was whitened in comparison. Leech, the original “What Is It?,” was white, but he blacked his hands and face and claimed to be a native of “the wilds of California” (Cook 145). Barnum was even more successful when he cast Johnson, an African American, in the role and billed him as a denizen of “the interior of Africa” (Cook 144). As James W. Cook Jr. notes, Barnum debuted Johnson three months after the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (140), and his advertising capitalized on the racist notion that people of color were further down the evolutionary scale than white people. “Is it a lower order of MAN?” the ads asked. “Or is it a higher order of MONKEY? None can tell! Perhaps it is a combination of both...It has the skull, limbs, and general anatomy of an ORANG OUTANG and the COUNTENANCE of a HUMAN BEING” (Thomson, *Extraordinary* Plate 6). Clearly, Barnum’s rendition of the missing link assured white spectators of their own status as representative of the human condition and justified to them their treatment of dark-skinned people as less than fully human.

<9>Less obvious are the gendered assumptions behind the “What Is It?” exhibit. The feats of strength performed by the exhibited “lower order of man” are presented as no match for the scientific and economic know-how of the modern specimens of manhood who have captured him. Thus, “What Is It?” staged a “primitive” version of masculinity against which a more “civilized” form of manliness could be defined. The exhibit upholds a supposedly new model of masculinity against an older and seemingly surpassed one. This new masculinity, moreover, is one especially suited to the urban, industrial environment in which men found themselves in the nineteenth century.

<10>According to Helena Michie, the nineteenth century “was pivotal in transforming ideals of masculinity.” Victorian Britain saw a retreat from the late-eighteenth-century model of the man of sentiment toward a more rugged view of masculinity defined in terms of conquest and control. However, since opportunities for proving one’s manhood on those terms were scarce in urban

London, conquest was redefined in terms of the workplace to produce what Michie calls “the ideal man as capitalist” (413). This shift was echoed in America; as Michael Kimmel explains, “by the 1830’s, a new version of masculinity emerged in the eastern cities. ‘Marketplace Manhood’ describes this ‘new man’ who derived his identity entirely from success in the capitalist marketplace, from his accumulated wealth, power, and capital” (13). This success was figured in terms of intellectual, social and economic mastery as opposed to the mere physical prowess displayed by “What Is It?”

<11>In addition, Thomson asserts that freak shows and museums of curiosities were often patronized by “[t]hose whose social rank was most tenuous—immigrants, the urban working class, and less prosperous rural people” (*Extraordinary* 65). According to Thomson, freak shows provided these marginalized—and often dehumanized—groups with an opportunity to see themselves as cultural insiders by defining themselves against the spectacles of “subhumanity” displayed before them. Thomson is interested in the ways in which the freak show offered the promise of membership in the national community to these outsiders. I would add, however, that the figure of the primitivized “nondescript” offered men the opportunity to demonstrate their affiliation with and allegiance to emerging concepts of normative masculinity, even when avenues to “wealth, power and capital” were denied them. It is not surprising, then, that, as a recent immigrant from Ireland to the United States when he authored “What Was It?,” Fitz-James O’Brien was preoccupied with what Barnum termed the “nondescript.”(4)

<12>In O’Brien’s “What Was It?,” the featured creature offers an occasion for “the ideal man as capitalist” to prove his mastery of the world around him, not through physical heroics but rather through scientific investigation, rhetorical skill, and, most importantly, the ability to turn a profit. In O’Brien’s horror story, the narrator aligns himself with the civilized man of science by claiming the position of the showman in opposition to a hybrid creature much like Barnum’s nondescripts. As Thomson points out, “[t]he social and economic success of the showman and the scientist depended equally on how freakish the bodies of their cultural/physical other could be” (*Extraordinary* 79). In a culture in which masculinity depends upon “social and economic success,” the man who can combine the traits of the showman and the scientist defined in opposition to the “freakish” body of a “cultural/physical other” epitomizes masculinity. Such a man is Harry Escott, O’Brien’s narrator in “What Was It?”

<13>Escott’s opening line invokes the freak show, that machine for transforming difference into profit, by mimicking the sideshow barker’s patter, which exaggerates difference and evokes the spectator’s sense of doubt: “The events which I purpose detailing are of so extraordinary and unheard-of a character that I am quite prepared to meet with an unusual amount of incredulity and scorn.” This sentence also frames the narrative as a test of its teller’s masculinity, as his next remark makes clear: “I have, I trust, the literary courage to face unbelief” (71). Escott invokes the reader’s “incredulity and scorn” in order to showcase his own “literary courage” in the face of it, and there is an understanding between the narrator and the reader familiar with the display of curiosities that unbelief is being induced that it may be allayed. Escott thus stakes out storytelling as a realm of masculine endeavor. In other words, he redefines masculinity as intellectual conquest, whether it be through the scientific means used in his domination of the

creature or by means of “conquering” his audience’s doubts. His purpose is to open up the intellectual as a legitimate sphere of manly activity.

<14>Furthermore, the introductory paragraph implicates science and medicine in the freak show milieu by recalling the way in which medical science was employed to legitimate the nineteenth-century barker’s claims; the narrator proclaims that the events he will relate “in the annals of the mysteries of physical science, are wholly unparalleled” (71). The narrator continually refers to his own (dubious) scientific standing and knowledge of scientific methods and discourses to legitimate his conquest of the material world. In spite of his freak show patter, he is not, he implies, a mere trickster, cheating his way to the top of the capitalist heap and procuring masculinity under false pretenses. His is the genuine article, a real scientific discovery.

<15>The narrator solidifies his identity as a man of science through his style of narration; he recounts his tale with clinical specificity. “I have,” he states, “after mature consideration, resolved to narrate, in as simple and straightforward a manner as I can compass, some facts that passed under my observation.” The emphasis on observation foreshadows the privileging of sight as a tool for knowledge production later in the text. He carefully provides dates and addresses for the events he recounts to foreground his scientific dedication to accuracy and detail. The tale takes place on “Twenty-sixth Street” in New York (71). The exact house number is omitted to protect the identity of the characters, but he places the house by stating that it is “situated between Seventh and Eighth Streets” (73). The story takes place in “the month of July past” (71) and the supernatural occurrences themselves on “the tenth of July” (74).

<16>This precision serves to establish a realistic setting for this tale of terror. But the narrator also draws on more traditional conventions of the gothic genre. As in many Victorian refigurings of the gothic, the terror here is domestic; horrors need not be sought in exotic locales but have come among us, invading our homes (Punter 26) and may be defeated using the resources available to the average, urban man of business. Like most gothic tales, this one is grounded in the past. The gothic dynamic between past and present is established in the description of the gardens of the house as running wild: “The dry basin of what has been a fountain, and a few fruit trees ragged and unpruned, indicate that this spot in past days was a pleasant, shady retreat, filled with fruits and flowers and the sweet murmur of waters” (71-2). As with *Wuthering Heights*, *Audley Court*, and the *House of Usher*, there is the sense of a fall, a pristine past now sullied. This Edenic reference is ironic, given that the source of terror in the tale is a sentient being that, it is implied, may not be a descendant of Adam and Eve.

<17>The fall of the house on Twenty-sixth Street provides a novel twist on the theme of the decayed house. Unlike the mansions listed above, the house on Twenty-sixth Street is relatively new. Despite the initially gothic description, the reader discovers in the following paragraph that it was built only fifteen or twenty years before the tale takes place by so mundane a person as a New York merchant who committed a bank fraud. Even with the house’s ordinary, commercial origins, however, the story is somewhat comically romanticized: the merchant flees to Europe to die of a broken heart, and the house becomes reputedly haunted. The story behind the haunted house sets the tale in a world of capitalist competition, juxtaposing the narrator’s successful bamboozling of his readers with the unsuccessful fraud of the bank manager.

<18>The tale contrasts the new men of science with more traditionally masculine men—explorers and adventurers—by showing their differing responses to the news that the house is haunted. The only two conventionally masculine characters, “a sea captain and a returned Californian,” are described as “two timid persons” who will not venture into the haunted house. The scientists are also depicted in opposition to the “black butler,” who drunkenly imagines spirits are blowing out his candle and thus combines the unmanly and primitive qualities of superstition and lack of moderation in one racialized image (74). The “philosophical” boarders, however, relish the opportunity for study and immediately begin reading Catherine Crowe’s 1848 collection of supernatural lore *The Night Side of Nature* (73). By invoking Crowe, O’Brien places his own tale squarely within the canon of pseudoscientific paranormal investigation and thus infuses it with all of the trappings of science and the implications of shamming that the genre evokes. Furthermore, Escott himself partakes of the ambiguous credibility associated with this genre, by being both “tolerably well-versed in the history of supernaturalism” as well as the author of a ghost story himself (74).

<19>At this point, O’Brien provides a catalog of ghost genre staples for his characters to investigate. The previous caretakers

declared that they were troubled with unnatural noises. Doors were opened without any visible agency. The remnants of furniture scattered through the various rooms were, during the night, piled one upon the other by unknown hands. Invisible feet passed up and down the stairs in broad daylight, accompanied by the rustle of unseen silk dresses, and the gliding of viewless hands along the massive balusters. (72)

One detail stands out in this list: the rustle of unseen silk dresses. For, as the tale progresses and the reader discovers that the focus is a creature entirely other and alien, it seems increasingly ludicrous to imagine it wearing a rustling silk dress. Is the detail thrown in to enhance the unreality of the tale, to fix it as a hoax, and not a very good one at that? It seems an oddly specific detail for this purpose. A posthumous reviewer accused O’Brien of being a slapdash writer who became “impatient and bored before he reached the final paragraph” of his tales (100). This may well be true, but excess of detail and of signification is a staple of the gothic.

<20>More likely is the explanation that the rustling silk dresses establish the unseen world as other to the masculine realm. However, throughout the remainder of the story, the creature is not feminized so much as rendered a tool for reconstructing masculinity; its affinity with women lies in its otherness to a male norm. It is placed in that position of lack that women and people with disabilities (and, doubly, disabled women) occupy in phallogentric discourses. It is denied both a voice and a visible presence. The lack of visibility, however, cannot be equated with the lack of voice (which the story associates with the lack of ability to communicate; no accommodations for communication without speech are seriously considered). The fact that the creature has no readily available means of communicating with the scientists facilitates its transformation into an object of study. Its invisibility, however, frustrates the masculinized scientific gaze. The men feel that they cannot know it until they see it. Sight, as opposed to mobility or strength, becomes a privileged term in the redefinition of masculinity as intellectual conquest. The scientists’ mission

becomes the quest to restore the privileged gaze, which had been temporarily thwarted. Implicit in this is, of course, the assumption of “wholeness” and “ability” on the part of the male gazer.

<21>Immediately before the creature makes its appearance, the text foregrounds the concept of the unknown, and specifically the unseen, and establishes it as the primary source of all fear. On the evening of the first appearance of the creature, Escott and Hammond are in “an unusually metaphysical mood” (74) as together they smoke a pipe of “Turkish tobacco.” The tobacco’s Eastern origin sets the mood for their conversation, and they attempt to construct their own orientalist fantasies in a Colridgean vein; they try to imagine “the splendors of the time of Haroun” and “harems and golden palaces.” But, because of the terms in which the story constructs masculinity and challenges to it, their primitivized visions of non-Western others cannot appear as anything but terrifying to these Western men of science: “Black afreets continually arose from the depths of our talk, and expanded, like the one the fisherman released from the copper vessel, until they blotted everything bright from our vision” (75).

<22>Eventually, the two men “yiel[d] to the occult force” and begin to speak of fear. Hammond asks Escott, “What do you consider to be the greatest element of Terror?” Escott muses on a list of frightening things, most of which include some element of obscurity and/or invisibility, such as “stumbling over a corpse in the dark” or a shipwreck that suggests “a huge terror, the proportions of which are veiled.” He concludes, however, that there is a “King of Terrors” and that its primary component is that which cannot be known or described (75). “I cannot attempt, however,” he says, “even the most vague definition” (76). Their notion of terror owes a great deal to eighteenth-century theories of the sublime, particularly those of Edmund Burke. Burke specifically lists obscurity and darkness as causes of terror; he states, “When we know the full extent of any danger, when we can accustom our eyes to it, a great deal of the apprehension vanishes” (54).⁽⁵⁾ Hammond agrees with Escott’s Burkean sentiments but elaborates further by stating that the source of fear must be something “combining in fearful and unnatural amalgamation hitherto supposed incompatible elements” (76). In other words, it must not only be indescribable, but unclassifiable—a genre-mixing and boundary-blurring anomaly that confounds the categories that define our world. Hammond thus recalls Cohen’s definition of the monster and Grosz’s of the freak.

<23>The conversation in the garden sets the reader up to doubt the narrator’s reliability and to search for alternative explanations when the creature finally turns up. First, it establishes that the narrator is in a state of “psychological excitement”(74). This is reinforced when Escott settles down to bed with his copy of Goudon’s “History of Monsters” (76) and then complains, “the confounded themes touched on by Hammond in the garden kept obtruding themselves on my brain” (77). The stage is set for a nightmare or delusional episode. The reader’s uncertainty is reinforced by the suggestion that the narrator’s judgment may have been affected by his ingestion of tobacco. Indeed, when Escott first informs Hammond about the creature, the latter immediately responds, “you have been smoking too much” (80). Thus, at the first mention of the creature, the reader is in a state of doubt as to exactly what is happening—nightmare, delusion or actual encounter. Escott himself later wonders if the creature could be an “insane fantasy” (82). This undermining of Escott is intentional; it serves to aggrandize his rhetorical powers when he

puts the reader's misgivings to rest and makes it a far greater testament to his conquest of the reader when he gains the reader's confidence.

<24>At first, it seems that the physical will be the proving ground for masculinity in the text. Obscurity sets the scene for the first terrifying encounter with the creature; Escott is lying in bed in total darkness and has even "erected ramparts of would-be blackness of intellect" to block out unpleasant thoughts. As Escott drifts into sleep, the creature drops from the ceiling onto his bed and attempts to strangle him. The attack provides Escott with the opportunity to demonstrate his physical mastery over the unseen assailant. He emphasizes his own manliness in the face of mortal danger with remarks like "the suddenness of the attack, instead of stunning me, strung every nerve to its highest tension." "I am no coward," he boasts, "and am possessed of considerable physical strength" (77). Furthermore, he does not call for help because he wants to display his prowess before the other boarders; "I wished to make the capture alone and unaided," he explains (78). Escott's word choice suggests that in his struggle with the creature, his response is instinctual (primitive) rather than reasoned (civilized): "my body acted from instinct." What is at stake at this point is not his knowledge of the creature but his self-knowledge. He admits that he is "totally ignorant of the nature of the Thing" (77), but though he may not know his opponent, he is able to state with confidence, "I knew that I was victor" (78).

<25>It appears at this point that Escott's manliness is established. But, although he maintains his physical control over the creature, his sense of mastery proves transitory and thus provides only a temporary confirmation of his masculine identity. For physical prowess is not what is at stake in this work. Escott is instantly unmanned and his victory is undermined when he lights a candle to see "nothing!" (79). It is a moment of unknowing that supposedly transcends discourse; Escott says, "I cannot even attempt to give any definition of my sensations" (78-9). Instead, all he can do is "shrie[k] with terror." The fact that he has defeated the creature bodily does nothing to allay the feelings of fear it evokes or its power to reduce him to unmanly shrieking. In this story, it is in the power to disrupt systems of signification that terror lies. Escott feels mentally powerless, and he states, "Imagination in vain tries to compass the awful paradox," the paradox that it lives and yet is "nothing" (79).

<26>As Escott begins to analyze his encounter, however, he starts to domesticate the creature and render it increasingly familiar by endowing it with recognizable audible and tactile qualities: "I felt its warm breath," "It had hands," and "Its skin was smooth like my own." This enables him to recover his masculine self-control and sense of mastery somewhat: "I seemed to gain an additional strength in my moment of horror, and tightened my grasp with such wonderful force that I felt the creature shivering with agony" (79). When Escott finally calls to the other boarders, the source of terror is further defined. The doctor, Hammond, feels the creature, and a "wild cry of horror burst from him" (80). At this point, Hammond knows nothing of the creature's attack on his fellow lodger; he is horrified by its obscurity alone. Hammond clarifies this by stating, "[t]he fact [of the creature's invisibility] is so unusual that it strikes us with terror" (82). The creature becomes a test of masculinity for the boarders. According to Escott, Hammond's "face expressed all the courage and determination which I knew him to possess," while the "weaker ones" run (81).

<27>The text makes one of its most overt gestures toward the freak show at this point, a movement that once again raises the issue of Escott's reliability and offers him an opportunity for proving his rhetorical skill. The boarders are cast in the role of Doubting Thomas; they deny the existence of the creature and yet fear to feel it for themselves. In the face of their disbelief, Escott promises "self-evident proof." He lifts the creature and drops it upon the bed, which creates a sound and leaves an impression. His patter recalls the barker: "Be good enough to watch the surface of the bed attentively" (82). The demonstration puts to rest the lodgers' suspicions. But for the reader it raises more questions than it answers, because it establishes that no one has actually verified the creature's existence beyond Escott and Hammond, the two men who will later exhibit a cast of its body for profit. The whole incident is presented in a manner so like a magician's act that it smacks of fraud.

<28>As soon as the others leave, Escott tells us that he and Hammond begin an attempt to frame the creature in a way that renders it knowable. Hammond redefines it from a "terror" to "awful," but "not unaccountable" (82). This is what Mitchell and Snyder term an act of narrative prosthesis. They write, "If disability falls too far from an acceptable norm, a prosthetic intervention seeks to accomplish an erasure of difference all together; yet, failing that, as is always the case with prosthesis, the minimal goal is to return one to an acceptable degree of difference" (7). In this case, the creature's bodily difference stands in for human disability; it represents that which must be narrated in such a way as to domesticate it and minimize its alterity.

<29>Science becomes the tool with they will reassert mastery and reclaim masculinity. Escott states, "I had recovered from my terror, and felt a sort of scientific pride in the affair which dominated every other feeling" (82). Hammond tries to explain the creature by analogy, to place it within the hierarchy of known objects:

Is there no parallel, though, for such a phenomenon? Take a piece of pure glass. It is tangible and transparent. A certain chemical coarseness is all that prevents its being so entirely transparent as to be totally invisible. It is not *theoretically impossible*, mind you, to make a glass which shall not reflect a single ray of light,—a glass so pure and homogenous in its atom that the rays from the sun will pass through it as they do through the air, refracted but not reflected. (82-3)

Escott, however, is unsatisfied with this effort to classify the creature; despite its reference to the creature's possibly homogenous composition, taxonomically the explanation emphasizes its hybridity by positioning it between the categories of living and inanimate matter. Having exhausted the possibility of legitimate scientific explanations, they turn to pseudo-sciences to continue their account: "At the meetings called 'spirit circles,' invisible hands have been thrust into the hands of those persons round the table" (83). Pseudo-science does not please them either, however; it presents a monstrous amalgam of living with dead.

<30>The friends move from speculation to investigation as Hammond proclaims, "I don't know what it is, but please the gods I will, with your assistance, thoroughly investigate it" (83). As they discover more information about it, the creature is gradually reduced from fantastical opponent

to passive object of scientific study, and, in the process, it is opposed to the active masculine role claimed by the heroes. It is even described as resisting “impotently” (82). The friends begin with tactile knowledge, feeling the creature’s features with their fingers. But they quickly decide that to be known the creature must be made available to the scientific gaze. They initially intend to trace it with chalk but soon hit upon a better plan—to take a plaster cast of the creature, and they bring in another medical man, Dr. X, to administer chloroform to it for this purpose. It almost goes without saying that their inquiry is not performed for the benefit of the creature; it rather serves to prove their mastery of the seemingly unknown. The chloroform literalizes the enforced passivity and powerlessness that the creature endures when it becomes apprehendable to the medical and scientific gazes.

<31>Rather than leading to the completion of the scientific quest and the unproblemitized legitimizing of Hammond and Escott’s civilized version of masculinity, the unveiling of the creature provides a sudden twist in the narrative. From the cast, they discover that the creature’s appearance is “distorted, uncouth, and horrible”—but it is “still a man” (84). In opposition to the civilized “men of science,” the creature looks to be a primitive, “uncouth” version of man, because—like Leech and Johnson—he appears to his spectators to be “distorted.” This distorted primitive is assumed to pose such a threat to civilization that the task of understanding the cause of its invisibility is momentarily forgotten. Escott’s describes it as a “ghoul” and remarks that “[i]t looked as if it was capable of feeding on human flesh,” which recalls the attribution of cannibalism to supposedly primitive peoples exhibited in freak shows. Although this surmise is unsupported, it becomes the justification for the creature’s bondage; it is deemed “impossible that such an awful being should be let loose upon the world” (85). Escott even advocates killing the creature in a sort of preemptive act of self-defense.

<32>The rapidity with which the quest for knowledge becomes the quest for the creature’s destruction is astonishing. But the civilized men of this tale do not wish to “shoulder the responsibility” for the blatant violence of killing the creature (85). Instead, their own ignorance of the creature becomes their weapon—a more “refined” weapon than rocks and sticks, but one equally potent. For, in spite of Escott’s unfounded suppositions that it is a cannibal, they’ve been unable to discover what it is that the creature eats. As they continue to observe the signs of its presence—its heavy breathing and disturbing of the bed sheets in its agonized writhing—the creature simply starves to death. As Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has noted, “Knowledge is not itself power, although it is the magnetic field of power. Ignorance and opacity collude or compete with it in mobilizing the flows of energy, desire, goods, meanings, persons” (102). In this case, ignorance of the creature on the part of the scientists is the mobilizing force that allows them to kill the creature while simultaneously proving their own highly evolved state by expressing pity for it. “Horrible as the creature was,” Escott states, “it was pitiful to think of the pangs it was suffering” (86). Their own culpability in its death is thus effaced through their professed ignorance. Lack of knowledge hurts no one but the thing declared unknowable.

<33>After the creature’s death and burial, the failure of their investigations becomes the scientists’ biggest problem. How will they achieve and maintain redefined masculine identities when the path to intellectual mastery has abruptly been closed off? It is now no longer possible to determine the cause of the creature’s invisibility and to discover its “true nature,” defined as

one that will integrate it into existing systems of knowledge. Furthermore, their indirect destruction of the creature has brought them shockingly close to the primitive man against whom they wish to define themselves, and their manhoods must be recovered.

<34>The resolution is to donate the plaster cast of the creature to Dr. X, who “keeps it in his museum in Tenth Street.” A note appended to the story explains further: “It was rumored that the proprietors of a well-known museum in this city had made arrangements with Dr. X— to exhibit to the public the singular cast that Mr. Escott deposited with him” (86). By labeling the creature a “curiosity” or freak, they essentially sidestep the need to explain it. They shift the grounds of the discourse away from science and pseudo-science, which can offer no reason, to the freak museum, which provides a safe space for categorical indeterminacy to be expressed without threatening the norm. They impose an identity on the creature through intellectual violence, which they oppose to the actual violence that the primitive creature is deemed capable of committing. The failure of their scientific endeavors is elided so that they may claim a civilized form of victory, parallel to that of Escott in his physical battle with the creature.

<35>The note implies that this victory is not merely intellectual but also social and, most importantly for the establishing of manhood, economic. “So extraordinary a history,” the note adds, “cannot fail to attract universal attention” (86). The tale, in other words, advertises the exhibition of the creature. This causes the reader to reevaluate the “history.” Is the entire story a promotional ploy perpetrated on the reader? Is it thus similar to narratives that advertised Leech and Johnson? If so, the story playfully emphasizes the power of the narrator as showman to assuage doubts and to prove his social and economic mastery over his imagined reader, who becomes his customer and his dupe. His success lies in the actual reader's awareness that he or she has been in on the joke. This reader is called upon to imagine a fictional, less capable, reader who has fallen under the narrator's spell and to admire Escott for his mastery of that imagined other. The creature has thus served its purpose. Escott's masculinity has been redefined and reaffirmed, while the extraordinary body has been robbed of its power to disrupt the systems of signification upon which his claim to mastery rests.(6)

Endnotes

(1)The term comes from Thomson, *Extraordinary Bodies*.(^)

(2)See Mitchell and Snyder for further discussion of “disability [. . .] used throughout history as a crutch upon which literary narratives lean for their representational power, disruptive potentiality, and analytical insight” (39).(^)

(3) See Thomson's introduction to *Freakery*.(^)

(4) Given the racialized and primitivized views of Irishness that were predominant at the time, it was particularly important for an Irish immigrant, like O'Brien, to define himself as a civilized man.(^)

(5) It also invokes Ann Radcliffe's distinction between horror and terror. Radcliffe feels that terror relies on suspense rather than shock to produce fear. In fact, O'Brien sticks to Radcliffe's terminology and does not call the creature a "Horror" until it is rendered visible.(^)

(6) I'd like to thank Adam Beach, Patrick Collier, Kecia McBride, Deborah Mix, Robert Nowatzki and Lauren Onkey for giving me feedback on an early draft of this essay and Hailey Sheets for assisting me with my research.(^)

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