From the City of Dust to the Waste Valley: Rats as the Threat of Social and Cultural Contagion in Bram Stoker's "The Burial of the Rats" and H. P. Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls"[1]

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Abstract

Rats have long been figures of monstrosity in the Gothic tradition. Early portrayals of rats in Gothic works focus on the vile, menacing potential of the animals, and they are closely associated with the demonic and tyrannical characters in the stories. However, Gothic fiction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—most obviously Bram Stoker's "The Burial of the Rats" and H.P. Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls"—marks a shift in the representation of rats from ominous, devilish agents to the modern threat of contagion by which, though they themselves do not carry any particular disease, they are a danger to both public and individual health and well-being. Stoker's portrayal of rats in a filthy suburban district in Paris is related to the middle-class fear of being corrupted and overpowered by the poor. Lovecraft's tale, on the other hand, explores the theme of contagion through atavism, as rats lead the narrator down to the sub-cellar of his estate, where he encounters the horror of ancestral crimes and becomes mentally degraded to a state of madness and cannibalism.

Keywords: Gothic fiction, urban horror, atavism, rats in fiction, degeneration

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Rats have long been figures of pestilence and monstrosity in the literary imagination. In Robert Browning's "The Pied Piper of Hamelin," rats are directly associated with the outbreak of the plague "five hundred years ago" or the Black Death (1842/2009, line 7) and are a source of harm and disturbance that need to be exterminated. Other portrayals of rats in literature belong more to the Gothic tradition, as they focus on the vile, menacing potential of the animals, which serve partly as a proxy for the demonic and tyrannical characters in the stories. While rats themselves represent the starving poor in Robert Southey's "God's Judgment on a Wicked Bishop" (1799), their brutal assault on the bishop—picking his bones and gnawing the flesh from every part of his body—also exhibits a divine and violent retribution on the bishop who locks up and burns all the poor that beg him for food. Despite their ability to bite through the bandage and set the captive free, the swarming rats in Edgar Allan Poe's "The Pit and the Pendulum" (1842) stand for the horror of the Spanish Inquisition. As a common, anti-Catholic element in Gothic literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Spanish Inquisition was renowned for its abuse of power and severe torture of its victims. Likewise, in Bram Stoker's "The Judge's House," the "enormous rat" with "baleful eyes" (1891/2000, p. 156) is the counterpart of the late cruel and vindictive judge who mercilessly passed death sentences by hanging his prisoners from the alarm bell rope of his house. As "bogies"[2] or supernatural agents, rats in *Dracula* (1897) belong to the underworld of cadavers and vampires as they are under the control of the Count and fill up the grounds of Carfax house where Dracula's boxes of earth are kept.

Stoker's "The Burial of the Rats," however, is altogether different from his other works that deal with rats. First published in *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* in 1896 and later in book form as a short story collection in 1914, "The Burial of the Rats" is set in a realistic, suburban area of Paris and does not portray rats as evil or diabolical. H.P.

[2] In "The Judge's House," Mrs Dempster, a charwoman, repeatedly refers to rats as "bogies" when she talks to Malcolm Malcolmson, who is the new tenant of the judge's house (Stoker, 1891/2000, p. 154).

Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls" (1924), though markedly different in detail from Stoker's work, similarly presents the vermin as a source of disturbances, connecting them to the narrator's ancestral land and psychological condition. Despite the prominent roles of rats in both "The Burial of the Rats" and "The Rats in the Walls," no studies have compared the two short stories. Focusing on the narrator's transatlantic heritage, Denise Wilson Wise's article on the "international weird" in "The Rats in the Walls" examines the geographical relationship between America and England as signifying "the historical rise and fall" of culture (2021, p. 96). In her article, "Stoker, Paris and the Crisis of Identity," Elizabeth Tilley explores Stoker's depiction of Paris as the site that conceals the author's anxiety over his heritage as Anglo-Irish. Matthew Crofts and Janine Hatter, on the other hand, interestingly highlight the role of rats as "signifiers of past crimes and repression" in Stoker's *Dracula*, "The Burial of the Rats" and "The Judge's House" (2019, p. 136). Relying on evidence from contemporary newspapers and advertisements, Crofts and Hatter also show how the Victorian depiction and rhetoric about rats are "rearticulated" in Stoker's Gothic works, bringing to light the social concerns over the problem of poverty (p. 129). This paper aims to extend Crofts and Hatter's discussion of the social and cultural significance of rats in literature. As this paper will argue, "The Burial of the Rats" and "The Rats in the Walls" mark a shift in the representation of rats in Gothic fiction in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries from ominous, devilish agents to the threat of social and cultural contagion**.** Though the rats in these stories do not bring death or carry any particular disease, they can be seen to destabilize the health and well-being of both the individuals and the social organism.

From a post-Darwinian perspective, rats are not merely a symbol of the lowest social order and the uncivilized, but also a force that corrupts the narrators. In contrast to Crofts and Hatter's claim that rats are "the antithesis of modernity" (2019, p. 134), this paper argues that they are a part of modernity—the part that is hidden or alienated but threatens to resurface and plague humanity. Along with the concern about urban hygiene and sanitation in the period, Stoker's depiction of rats in the outskirts of Paris, which is filled with dirt, filth and

waste, conveys the horror of urban degeneration. On the other hand, Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls" represents contagion in the form of hereditary madness, as the rats take the narrator down to a hidden cavern under his ancestral home, where he discovers the abhorrent crimes of his progenitors that hasten him to a state of lunacy. The cave's prehistoric wasteland, which conceals "a ghastly array of human and semi-human bones" (Lovecraft, 1924/2011, p. 19), also reveals the threat of atavism or Darwinian devolution as the narrator himself eventually turns into a bloody cannibal. The appearance of rats in Stoker's and Lovecraft's stories bears evidence to the threat of contamination and decline that undermines modernity. Along with Lovecraft's removal of space and time at the end of his short story, it even serves to shake the core of human identity, bringing fears of destabilization to the readers.

"The Burial of the Rats" and Urban Degeneration

The nineteenth century was a period of intense social classification. Following the Industrial Revolution, the growth of the population and ensuing urban sprawl motivated several advocates of social reform to carry out in-depth research into the life of the poor and the working class. Henry Mayhew's groundbreaking work, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851/2017), for instance, divides the London poor or "street-folk" into a large number of categories based on their occupations. The classification ranges from those who sell food and objects in the street to people with harsher work conditions such as the bone-gatherers, scavengers, cigar-end finders, sewer-hunters, and mud-larks who wade through the mud on the river shore for articles washed up by the tide. "Those that will not work," as Mayhew puts in a separate category, include prostitutes, beggars and vagrants. They are what Mayhew calls "the nomadic races of England," "the wandering tribes" of the country, distinctive for "a greater development of the animal than of the intellectual or moral nature of man," "their general improvidence" and "their repugnance to continuous labour" (1851/2017, pp. 2-3). Charles Booth's copious survey *Life and Labour of the People in London* from 1889 to 1903 geographically features the inhabitants of the East End as the poorest population in London—those who

occupy the outer ring of the city, the "girdle of poverty," as he calls it (Fried & Elman, 1969, p. 27). Based on income, Booth divides the people in London into eight classes, from "the lowest class of occasional labourers, loafers, and semi-criminals" to the "upper middle class" (p. 29). The A type or the lowest class, according to Booth, are "savages, with vicissitudes of extreme hardship": "It is not easy to say how they live; the living is picked up, and what is got is frequently shared" (p. 30). Whether by setting, occupation or income, these classifications played a major role in constructing the image of the poor in the late nineteenth century as the Other—the destitute, the uncivilized, "the vice of the great Metropolis" (Mayhew, 2010, p. 3).

In "The Burial of the Rats," Stoker opens the narrative with a specific topography of outer Paris: "Leaving Paris by the Orleans road, cross the Enceinte, and, turning to the right, you find yourself in a somewhat wild and not at all savoury district" (1896/1914, p. 121). The area, as the narrator reveals, is Montrouge: a southern suburban district and one of the most populated communities in Paris. What makes Stoker's Paris closely akin to Henry Mayhew's London is that it is "the Paris of 1850" (p. 123). Paris in this period comprised suburban communes that were densely occupied by the lower echelons of society, which can be easily identified with the poor of Victorian London in Stoker's and the narrator's imagination. The French capital in the story, as the narrator asserts, is markedly different from "the Paris of Napoleon and Baron Haussmann" (p. 123). The names refer to Louis Napoleon and Georges-Eugène Haussmann, who was appointed by the former as prefect of the Seine to improve the hygiene and environment of Paris from 1853 to 1870. Indeed, Paris in 1850, according to Rupert Christiansen, was in "a dismal state of physical decay, its oases of splendor such as the Louvre and the Arc de Triomphe surrounded by a fetid wilderness of filth, stench, and crime" (2018, p. 30) following the epidemics of cholera in 1832 and 1849. For Stoker's narrator, the areas that remain unchanged, whether before or after 1850, are "those districts where the waste is gathered" (p. 123).

From his point of view as an Englishman, the unnamed narrator describes Paris as "a city of centralization" (p. 122). "Its forerunner," as he remarks, "is classification" (p. 122). This social analysis is based

on the typical process of inclusion and exclusion, where those who deviate from the norm are relegated to the margins of society while "all things which are similar or analogous become grouped together, and from the grouping of groups rises one whole or central point" (p. 122). His illustration on the basis of similarity and difference makes the image resemble an octopus with "a gigantic head" at the center, housing key organs such as the brain, the eyes and the "voracious mouth" (p. 122). It is indeed a beastly creature, and the narrator calls it "the devil fish" or "the digestive apparatus" (p. 122) that works to enlarge itself by swallowing everything that gets in its way. Lagging behind are "many long arms with innumerable tentaculae," and an appendage that moves away from the center, uncontrollably "radiating" in all directions (p. 122). This absurd feature is what makes Paris fascinating to the narrator. As an English traveller who has already visited most of the tourist attractions in the capital, his new plan is to explore this outer part of the city (i.e., the "tentaculae") that he claims to be the "terra incognita" or "the Ultima Thule" of "social wilderness" (p. 124). Like Mayhew and Booth, the narrator asserts that he is on a civilized mission "to investigate philosophically the chiffonier—his habitat, his life, and his means of life" (p. 124).

The narrator is completely mesmerized by the community of rag-pickers or chiffoniers in Paris. The "squalid, hungry-looking men and women," as he describes them, are like "Chinam[e]n us[ing]… chopsticks" (p. 122) when they probe the dustbins with small rakes. In the narrator's imagination (and perhaps Stoker's Irish imagination), the rag-pickers' "shanties or huts" remind him of "the remote parts of the Bog of Allan—rude places with wattled walls, plastered with mud and roofs of rude thatch made from stable refuse" (p. 125). These figures can easily remind the reader of Mayhew's account of the homeless poor as nomads and wanderers. Being removed from the immediate urban space, their existence is rather uncanny, for they are part of the city but at the same time are not seen to belong to the city. Once inside the commune, the narrator cannot help "penetrating further and further into the Sahara" (p. 126). Like travelling into the "heart of darkness," the journey gradually discloses to him a filthy and repulsive world that defies progress and modernity. Indeed, the

shanties are peculiarly filled with curious remnants of the past that have lost their old values. An old wardrobe "of some boudoir of Charles VII or Henry II" (p. 125), for instance, is turned into a temporary dwelling-place. The dwellers themselves are seen as evidently worthless people— "the mauvais sujet class; their blear eyes and limp jaws told plainly of a common love of absinthe" (p. 126). Such detail is reminiscent of Booth's depiction of some examples of Class A, many of whom are drunkards, criminals or lunatics. In contrast to the young and strong narrator, the chiffoniers that he encounters are repeatedly described as "old," "wrinkled" and "bent." The old woman, in particular, is depicted with "the horrible square opening of the mouth like a tragic mask, and the yellow gleam of the few discoloured teeth in the shapeless gums" (p. 134)—a figure of the degenerate physique that is opposite to the fit and the able-bodied. As Booth elaborates about Class A people: "They render no useful service, they create no wealth: more often they destroy it. They degrade whatever they touch, and as individuals are perhaps incapable of improvement" (Fried & Elman, 1969, p. 30). Despite the end purpose of improving the urban environment and the life of the poor altogether, Booth's rhetoric inevitably shows the lowest poor as social threats and misfits and he "hoped that this class may become less hereditary in its character" (p. 30). Ironically, the narrator himself is not so different from the poor since he similarly "render[s] no useful service" or "create[s] no wealth." He seems to belong to the class that regards work as unnecessary—a lovesick Englishman who spends "six month wandering about Europe" waiting for the approval from his lover's parents who compel him "to remain out of the country and not to write to [his] dear one until the expiration of one year" (Stoker, 1896/1914, p. 123). The only thing that puts him in the position of a "useful" citizen is his role as a curious traveller who aims to "investigate philosophically" into the life of chiffoniers (p. 124).

From around the middle to the end of the nineteenth century, both Parisians and Londoners were mainly preoccupied with the poor living conditions in the capitals. While Haussmann was engaged in his long project of improving Paris, his responsibility was centered on "lawless stretches of scrub, neither rural nor urban, largely inhabited

by impoverished, undocumented vagrants holed up in miserable shacks and sustained by petty crime and cheap alcohol" (Christiansen, 2018, p. 50). As a British citizen, Stoker must have been even more familiar with the predominant social discussion of the living conditions in London that connected the poor and labouring classes to disease and contagion. Before the second outbreak of cholera, Edwin Chadwick proposed in his "Report on the Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain" (1842/2021) that London had to improve its physical circumstances, most necessarily the drainage system, ventilation and removal of refuse. The "atmospheric impurities," as he stressed, were the main factors that contributed to "the various forms of epidemic, endemic, and other disease caused, or aggravated, or propagated chiefly amongst the labouring classes" (p. 369). From the middle to the end of the nineteenth century, London's environmental problems even increased, and the public was particularly concerned about the accumulation of human waste and sewage in the gutters, as well as the rivers that produced the widespread miasma known as the Great Stink. The issue remained well into the 1880s when Andrew Mearns observed in his pamphlet, *The Bitter Cry of Outcast London: A Enquiry into the Condition of the Abject Poor* (1883), about the East End "courts, many of them, which the sun never penetrates, which are never visited by a breath of fresh air, and which rarely know the virtues of a drop of cleansing water" (as cited in Greensdale, 1994, p. 48). James Cantile similarly remarked in his lecture, "Degeneration Amongst Londoners" (1885), that in his investigation into the "city disease" (p. 24), he found that sunlight and fresh air played a crucial role in shaping a healthy nation, and the lack thereof would generate backward development in physiology as well as morality. Dirt and defilement, in Eileen Cleere's words on Victorian dust traps and insanitation, altogether "infect[ed] the healthy spirit of modern life" (2005, p. 146).

In "The Burial of the Rats," rats are apparently representatives of the poor, urban pollution and the power to degenerate. When the narrator converses with an old woman inside a shack, he suddenly finds that he is amid "all sorts of curious objects of lumber," "a heap of rags," "a heap of bones whose odour was something shocking,"

and, most importantly, "the gleaming eyes of … the rats which infested the place" (Stoker, 1896/1914, p. 129). As he lingers on into the evening, taking notice of "the baleful glitter of the eyes of the rats," the narrator starts to realize "the full extent of … danger" since he is also "watched and surrounded by desperate people" (p. 131). Together with the "old butcher's axe … stained with clots of blood" (p. 129) on the wall, the woman's story of the lost ring and the sewer rats that ate a man up in the drains further intensifies the narrator's belief that the people in the shack are villains, Booth's "semi-criminal" type, waiting for the moment to rob and murder him. His juxtaposition of the eyes of the rats in the bone heaps and the eyes of the men "through some of the chinks of the boards at the back low down close to the ground" (p. 131) signifies that both the poor and the rats are the same thing, both equally conveying a sense of danger and death.

Rats and the urban and suburban impoverished denizens are indeed closely connected in the Victorian imagination. Mayhew's London street-folk includes rat-killers who keep bulldogs especially for rat catching and sometimes participate in rat-killing matches in public houses. Along with street-sellers of poison for rats, a rat-catcher is also reported to occasionally have "a tamed rat run … about his shoulders and arms, or nestles in his bosom or in the large pockets of his coat" (Mayhew, 2010, p. 137). The sewer-hunters, as Mayhew remarks, usually tell tales of rats that "have been known … to attack men when alone, and even sometimes when accompanied by others, with such fury that the people have escaped from them with difficulty" (p. 184). Both the poor and rats thrive on the waste generated by the consumption of the inhabitants of the city. Their existence is parasitic, as Mayhew observes in the London vagabonds to "mov[e] from place to place preying upon the earnings of the more industrious portion of the community" (Mayhew, 1851/2017, p. 2). Places such as the underground sewers and the open suburbs function as cesspools that carry all the decay and debris of the bourgeois materialistic lifestyle and excessive consumption. In Paris, as Christiansen (2018) has noted, a well-known picture was that of open sewers that "received the contents of the chamber pots" while human excrement was "still gathered in medieval fashion on carts" and "dumped … into pits in the suburbs"

(p. 85). In "The Burial of the Rats," the persistent images of rats among heaps of rags and bones and the accumulation of waste—"the inferno of dustheaps" (p. 141), as the narrator calls it—become an index of rapid urban expansion. The narrator's visit to the City of Dust, in this respect, is not merely related to the nineteenth-century middle-class interest in keeping the poor at bay, but also their anxiety over the declining state of the city. This sentiment, according to David Pike, was evident in the widespread sewer tour in Paris, where the tourists or investigators had to wear sewer workers' costume before travelling down to the underground, resulting in "anxiety over the change of identity" as well as accounts about "the contact of skin with excrement and the encounter with rats" (2005, pp. 67-68).

Both the middle-class attraction to and fear of the filthy life of the lower orders are obvious in "The Burial of the Rats." While early in the story the narrator shows a strong inclination to investigate into the life of the chiffoniers, later when the day gets dark, the restlessness of those people in the shack causes him to realize that he is in danger. Once the narrator hurls himself against the shanty wall and flees, bringing on "a really horrible chase" (Stoker, 1896/1914, p. 140), the terror shifts from the threat of murder to an encounter with the new filthy and hostile environment. In accordance with Andrew Mearns' (Greensdale, 1994) and James Cantile's (1885) descriptions of the East End, the place is "dank", "dark" and "dismal" (Stoker, 1896/1914, p. 141). Almost in blindness the narrator has to climb a steep mound, noting how the "dust rose and choked me; it was sickening, foetid, awful" (p. 138). Falling "headlong into a reeky, stagnant pool," he can feel the water and the mud "filthy and nauseous beyond description" (p. 143). Like a cornered animal, the narrator throws himself into the nearby river, observing how the "several splashes" that his pursuers make are "soft and stealthy, like the sound a rat makes as he plunges into the stream" (p. 146). Referring to his enemies as "shadowy forms" or "dark figures" (p. 146), he also seems to leave behind his human identity, as he sees himself like a hunted animal and even remarks once how the old woman watches him like "a cat does a mouse" (p. 137). This Darwinian backsliding becomes most horrifying when he finally staggers and falls, realizing that he himself, "covered with

dust and blood" (p. 150), is no longer different from his enemies. Although rats seem to disappear from the story in this part, the narrator's comparison between himself and a mouse, as well as his observation of the sound, the malodor, and the "dark figures" that are associated with rats and keep following him, reveals the spectral existence of the vermin that haunts the narrator and the text in different forms. Rats can therefore be regarded, to borrow Julian Wolfreys' (2002) wordplay, not merely as the parasite of the city but also the "*para*-site" or the component that always accompanies modernity (p. 2, emphasis in original).

In addition, the chiffoniers are people involved in the Revolution. The old woman, as the narrator explains, "had been one of the ceteuces who sat daily before the guillotine and had taken an active part among the women who signalized themselves by their violence in the revolution" (Stoker, 1896/1914, p. 128). The man named Pierre is also an old veteran who passionately immerses himself in "revolutionary reminiscences" (p. 128) during his talk with the narrator. Indeed, the association between rats and revolutionaries is closer than one might imagine. As Haewon Hwang (2013) remarks, the sewer in Paris during the French Revolution was known as "the locus of political activity"—a site occupied by criminals, escaped convicts and political agitators (p. 30). To the narrator's English, reactionary imagination, the affiliation between the rag-pickers and the French Revolution means a threat of violence and social disorder. The new representation of the working classes in connection with filth and sewers, as Hwang points out, poses a "threat of revolution from below"—"the basis for anxieties of a Marxist overthrow by the proletariat" (p. 35). While the narrator can narrowly escape the clutches of the chiffoniers, the horror that persists is the image of the rats among the heap of warm bones, especially those of the old woman and the sixth veteran in the end. The rats' power to consume and degrade, reducing their victims to becoming part of the refuse, can be seen as an inversion of the octopus' "voracious mouth" (Stoker, 1896/1914, p. 122) that keeps swallowing and enlarging itself—a revenge of the lower classes, in other words, upon their social betters who consume, accumulate and generate waste. Rescued by the police officers, the narrator can reaffirm his status as

an English traveller. What he cannot get rid of, ultimately, is the painful memory of his one-time association with the City of Dust.

Beyond the Haunting of Heredity: "The Rats in the Walls"

Rats in Lovecraft's story are certainly the "*para* [*sic*]-site" or the uninvited inhabitants living "in the walls." According to the first-person account of the narrator, these rats tend to assume a spectral existence as they seem to be the products of his imagination: "These rats, if not the creatures of a madness which I shared with the cats alone, must be burrowing and sliding in Roman walls I had thought to be solid limestone blocks" (Lovecraft, 1924/2011, p. 16). The place that he refers to is his ancestral seat, Exham Priory, in a remote and "desolate valley" (p. 2) close to the village called Anchester in England. While the story of Exham Priory can be traced back to ancient times as "the site of a prehistoric temple" (p. 5), the land was granted by Henry III to Gilbert de la Poer, First Baron Exham, who built Gothic towers, "whose foundation in turn was of a still earlier order or blend of orders—Roman, and even Druidic or native Cymric" (pp. 1-2) on the precipice that overlooks the desolate valley. The narrator belongs to a much later generation who moved to the United States. While he pursued a business career in Massachusetts, his son, an aviation officer in the First World War, became acquainted with family legends when he was in England. The narrator, therefore, turned his attention to his ancestry and decided to purchase and restore the estate after the death of his son.

Rats are first mentioned when the narrator recounts old legends about his family seat. "[T]he dramatic epic of the rats," as he puts it, involves "the lean, filthy, ravenous army which had swept all before it and devoured fowl, cats, dogs, hogs, sheep, and even two hapless human beings before its fury was spent" (p. 7). The "rodent army," as the villagers believe, always brings "curses and horrors in its train" (p. 7). After the narrator occupies his estate, a sequence of events that echo the legend of the rats follows. First, he experiences a recurring dream in which he sees "a twilight grotto" where "a white-bearded daemon swineherd" drives his flock of "fungous, flabby beasts" but both the man and the animals in turn are rapidly devoured by "a mighty

swarm of rats" (p. 12). Waking up from the dream, the narrator once claims that he, as well as his cat, can hear the movement of "ravenous, gigantic rats" (p. 12) behind the walls. Their motion towards the lower part of the house leads him to discover a vault, an altar (for some ancient rites or sacrifice), and a door to the sub-cellar below. In the final episode when the narrator explores the sub-cellar with his friends, he finds heaps of "human or semi-human bones" with "the marks of rodent gnawing" (p. 19). In the twilight grotto more or less similar to the one he sees in his dream, there are the remains of ancient building as well as prehistoric ruins related to "the most shocking ritual" (p. 22) of his ancestors. While the narrator does not actually see any rats, he incessantly reminds the reader that he always hears them or pictures them "feast[ing]" somewhere in the "accursed infinity of pits" (p. 23). Mentally disturbed by "the impious, insidious scurrying" (p. 23) of the rats, he resolves to take revenge upon them—"Why shouldn't rats eat a de la Poer as a de la Poer eats forbidden thing?" (p. 24)—only to find out later, in the most bloody and harrowing scene of all, that he is feeding on the body of his friend, Captain Norrys.

On the surface level, the themes of family secrets, madness and perversion are typical of Gothic fiction. What is most intriguing, however, is the subject of heredity that underlies the text and the interest of the narrator, as the narrative opens with the history of the De la Poer family and it dominates one third of the story. In *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault (1976/1978) remarks that in the nineteenth century there was a significant shift in values from the aristocratic concern with "genealogy"—the notion of ancestry, caste and social alliance—to the bourgeois preoccupation with "heredity":

> Included in bourgeois marriages were not only economic imperatives and rules of social homogeneity, not only the promises of inheritance, but the menaces of heredity; families wore and concealed a sort of reversed and somber escutcheon whose defamatory quarters were the diseases or defects of the group of relatives—the grandfather's general paralysis, the mother's neurasthenia, the youngest child's phthisis, the hysterical or erotomanic aunts, the cousins with bad morals. (pp. 124-125).

Several publications after Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) paid attention to evolution and, applying the idea to humans, these studies proposed that the possibilities for the human species to progress or to regress lay equal. Heredity, as many observed, played an important role in human degeneration. In 1869, Francis Galton (1892) wrote in *Hereditary Genius: An Inquiry into Its Laws and Consequences* that "a man's natural abilities are derived by inheritance," arguing that "careful selection" was necessary "so it would be quite practicable to produce a highly-gifted race of men by judicious marriages during several consecutive generations" (p. 1). His investigation into the English peerage, in particular, showed that the main reason behind the potential extinction of eminent families was the eldest son's marriage with an heiress, who was "the sole issue of a marriage," and, in effect, could pass on infertility to later generations (p. 132). In the late nineteenth century, the discourse of degeneration pervaded biological and medical discussions. While his work mainly focuses on animal species, Edwin Ray Lankester (1880/2019) emphasized, like Galton (1892), that "the white races of Europe" are "also subject to the general law of evolution, and are as likely to degenerate as to progress" (Lankester, 1880/2019, p. 60). The uncertain future of the human race was similarly noted by the writer H. G. Wells (1897/2006), who was famous for his interests in science and zoology, how the world could be "devoured" by "the migratory ants of Central Africa" that could "drive men and animals before them in headlong rout, and kill and eat every living creature they can capture" (p. 118)—a scene no less dramatic than that of the rodent army in Lovecraft's story. In his "Remarks on Crime and Criminals," Henry Maudsley (1888) accounted for "bad inheritance" as a factor that contributed to one's criminal inclination (p. 165). To prevent crimes from these people, a solution, as Maudsley suggested, was to build up the method of "individual psychology" to "trace out the evolution of events from generation to generation—to discover and describe the exact life-history of the particular degeneration" (p. 167). Indeed, the works of Galton (1892) and Maudsley (1888) heavily contributed to the shift from Darwin's natural selection to man's social and rational "selection" that served to prevent human

degradation—studies that became a pivotal foundation for the development of eugenic practices in the early twentieth century.

Following the Gothic mode, Lovecraft's "The Rats in the Walls" draws heavily upon local myths and legends about Exham Priory and its owners. One chronicle, for example, refers to a de la Poer in 1307 as "cursed of God" (Lovecraft, 1924/2011, p. 5). A number of fireside tales also represent the family as "a race of hereditary daemons" and "hint … whisperingly at their responsibility for the occasional disappearances of villagers through several generations" (p. 6). Part of the detail of the de la Poer ancestry, however, pays particular attention to the "bad inheritance" that can be detected. "Temperament," as the narrator asserts, is the most vivid trait transmitted from one generation to another (p. 6). While the most atrocious characters "apparently, were the barons and their direct heirs," many who married into the family display the trait strongly (p. 6). In members who are more morally elevated—ones "of healthier inclinations," "an heir would early [*sic*] and mysteriously die to make way for another more typical scion" (p. 6)—the kind of heredity that seems to operate upon its own law of natural selection.

From the outset the narrator seems to be particularly careful to present himself as a modern man, identifying himself as a descendant of the newer generations of the Delapores who have settled in America and cherish the "glories … achieved since the migration" (Lovecraft, 1924/2011, p. 2). After the Civil War, his family moved to the North where he "grew to manhood, middle age, and ultimate wealth as a stolid Yankee" (p. 3) and a businessman. As an aviation officer, his son, Alfred, belonged to the most advanced aerial warfare service of the United States. In England, the narrator regards himself as superior to the poor and superstitious villagers around Exham Priory. This attitude carries itself to the point of racial discrimination, as he names his favorite cat "Nigger-Man" (p. 8) and describes his household as consisting of "seven servants and nine cats," calling them two "species" (p. 8) that keep him company in his old estate. His stay at Exham Priory, above all, includes an elaborate plan to modernize the original medieval construction by making its interior totally "new and free from old vermin and old ghosts alike" (p. 8). Such heavy reliance on

modernity, however, cannot help the narrator from backsliding. While his life seems to progress along with modern advancements of the New World, dark mysteries surrounding his lineage persist as he mentions the fire that killed his grandfather at Carfax house in Virginia and his cousin Randolph "who went among the negroes and became a voodoo priest" after returning from the Mexican War (p. 7). His son's interest in the family history, which results in the narrator's travelling back to the rural quarter in England and adoption of his ancient surname De la Pore, foreshadows atavistic returns. Calling himself "a pronounced sceptic" (p. 7), he is at the same time peculiarly fascinated by all the weird and disturbing tales about the family. The narrator's account of Exham Priory reveals that he is, in fact, well-versed in Greek and Roman myths, rites of Eastern gods and goddesses, as well as local myths and superstitions around the village of Anchester. His elaborate description of the family seat shows that he has knowledge in archeology and is also familiar with ancient inscriptions. Although he intends to restore the place by making its interior a modern, comfortable living space, he somehow continually reminds the reader of its counterfeited nature and of the ancient walls behind the tapestry where he repeatedly hears the sounds of rats.

Rats are indeed the crux of the narrator's anxiety. His narrative, which was actually produced after he went insane, betrays his obsession with rats as he relentlessly refers to the creatures, whether as part of his dreams and the rural legends, or as uninvited visitors behind the walls of the house. What Lovecraft (1924/2011) creates is a fantasy of reverse courses of evolution: the upward development of rats and the decline of human beings. In the narrator's imagination, rats belong to the primitive and repulsive realm of vermin and diseases. In the story, however, rats can also be seen as part of the modern world. Firstly, the appearance of a great number of rats in a remote and deserted region was plausible, especially around the time of the First World War when the lack of pest control was caused by labour shortage in the English countryside (as recorded in several reports on rats and agricultural damage by vermin in large, provincial estates [Burt, 2005, p. 143]). Moreover, rats could quickly spread through transportation along with increasing human activities in trade and commerce. They

were hence capable of migrating, like the Delapores, from one continent to another. From a Post-Darwinian perspective, Lovecraft (1924/2011) also seems to portray how rats can potentially replace humans as the superior species. As implied in the narrator's account about the old legends, rats—in spite of their size—are physically threatening as apex predators, as their chain of food progresses from small "fowl" to "cats, dogs, hogs, sheep, and even two hapless human beings" (p. 7). In *The Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin remarks on rats' distinctive quality to acclimatize—in other words, to "withstand … the most different climates" and be "perfectly fertile … under them" (1859/2003, p. 136). Rats, in addition, are proved to be intelligent animals, most obviously in the 1907 experiments of John B. Watson, who trained rats to run in a maze to study behavioral patterns. In Lovecraft's (1924/2011) short story, rats do not only succeed in escaping traps, but also lead the narrator down to the hidden cavern under his ancestral home.

For the narrator, rats represent an evil, threatening force that seeks to destroy his sanity and undermine his human identity. They are an agent that usher him downward to explore the foundation of his estate, bringing him face to face with ancestral savagery and driving him inexorably to insanity and reversion to the bestial, primitive practice of cannibalism. The Roman inscriptions that he finds in the crypt bear evidence to ancient rites of castration in celebration of "the Magna Mater whose dark worship was once vainly forbidden to Roman citizens" (Lovecraft, 1924/2011, p. 5). As the narrator describes, he seems to enter "a subterraneous world of limitless mystery and horrible suggestions" (p. 20). The ruins that he encounters are an eclectic collection of "a weird pattern of tumuli, a savage circle of monoliths, a low-domed Roman ruin, a sprawling Saxon pile, and an early English edifice of wood" (p. 20), all of which insinuate either hideous customs or "most shocking ritual[s]" (p. 22). Here, the narrator's descent to the base of his estate suggests something more than personal, hereditary regression. As Dennis Wilson Wise (2021) remarks, the narrator's transatlantic heritage and his atavistic return to the family seat rather culminate in an "inevitability of cultural collapse" (p. 98). This shift in "spatial and temporal scale," according to Jeb J. Card (2018), marks the kind of "cosmic horror" (p. 227) that Lovecraft

develops further in his later works. The movement from personal to cultural degeneration and the crumbling of civilization can be seen in the narrator's reference to "Nyarlathotep, the mad faceless god" who resides at the center of the earth (Lovecraft, 1924/2011, p. 23), and his loss of sanity through linguistic disintegration as his speech changes from coherent English to fragmented Latin, Gaelic, and mere utterances of sounds. Equally horrendous are the bones that the narrator finds among the ruins before he reaches the earth's center. They reveal "a ghastly array of human or semi-human bones" and the skulls "denoted nothing short of utter idiocy, cretinism, or primitive semi-apedom" (p. 19). Most of the bones are gnawed by rats but many seem to be devoured by "others of the half-human drove" (p. 21). Some even show that these creatures were kept in stone pens and fed on meat and coarse vegetables. This departure from the anthropocentric world is typical of Lovecraft's fiction in which the vast, indifferent universe and removal of man's central role in modernity are usually portrayed (see also Touponce, 2013; Schultz, 1991). The narrator's final remark of "the daemon rats" that "beckon me down to greater horrors than I have ever known" (p. 24) depicts rats as the persistent, spectral force beyond heredity that haunts and threatens to destabilize his human identity from within.

Conclusion

The Gothic world is indeed a world of chaos and disorder—an anachronistic world where the primitive surges amid civilization and a world in which both human and non-human bones are equally gnawed by rats and prove consanguineous. The role of rats in "The Burial of the Rats" and "The Rats in the Walls," as this paper has shown, is not directly related to disease per se, but the middle-class's fear and anxiety about the kinds of corruption that uproot their human confidence. While the nineteenth century witnessed rapid urbanization and scientific advancement integral to human progress and modernity, rats in these two stories serve to remind the readers of the possibility of degeneration. Stoker's outskirts of Paris, portrayed as a cesspool of waste, vermin and the low denizens of the city, do not only result from the nineteenth-century urban sprawl, but also reflect the middle-

class fear of being contaminated and revenged upon by the poor. In Lovecraft's work, despite the narrator's utmost efforts to rely on the modern world of reason and human progress, the threats from rats and the haunting of heredity eventually cause him mental collapse and shatter his sense of wholeness as a human being. Rats in "The Burial of the Rats" and "The Rats in the Walls" are, therefore, a persistent agent of social and cultural contagion portending human decline.

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