

A Victorian Christmas in Hell: Yuletide Ghosts and Necessary Pleasures in the Age of Capital.

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DISSERTATIONS

A Victorian Christmas in Hell: Yuletide Ghosts and Necessary Pleasures in the Age of Capital

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how the cultural and literary development – one might argue, creation – of a specifically Victorian Christmas arose in response to social anxieties related to the expansion of industrial capitalism, Darwinian theories of evolution, and the increasingly problematic definition of the family during the nineteenth century in Britain. Using a Lacanian psychoanalytic lens, the dissertation explores how the liminal figure of the ghost pervades the literary narrativization of the Christmas holiday, and how such ghosts provided uncanny comforts to a reading public increasingly horrified by social, economic, and natural forces seemingly beyond their control. The dissertation argues that the success of the literary institution of Christmas as a necessary assurance of cultural pleasure in the face of social anxiety has made it perhaps the most long-lived of Victorian artifacts. Indeed, the importance of Christmas to our late capitalist present suggests post-modernity is not so far removed from Victorian sensibilities as we might suspect.

The first chapter of *A Victorian Christmas in Hell* examines the seminal role of Charles Dickens' *Christmas Carol* in constructing the Victorian Christmas narrative, and its astonishing longevity as a living cultural touchstone to the present day. The chapter argues that *A Christmas Carol*'s success is due in large part to its construction of a seductive injunction to enjoy that deflects and transcends social anxiety. The second chapter examines the role of mourning and grief that pervades Victorian Christmas texts, and how this focus on melancholy paradoxically underwrites the command to enjoy Christmas. The third chapter focuses on how the uncertainty of the role of women in Victorian culture helped lend a volatility, urgency, and horror to the genre of the Christmas ghost story – a genre developed in large part by women writers. The fourth chapter explores the role of children in Christmas ghost stories, and argues that the social guilt of child abuse gave rise to the figure of the child ghost: a transcendent figure with the power to believe in the fantastic and phantasmic aspects of Christmas for an increasingly skeptical, and guilt-ridden adult population. A brief postscript considers the possible evolution of the Christmas narrative beyond its capitalist trappings. What would a post-Victorian Christmas look like after capitalism? Is it even possible, or desirable, to exorcise our Victorian Christmas ghosts?

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Speculative Ontologies and Cautionary Horrors: The Literary Zombie's Answer to what We are and where We're

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