



Degenerative Doctoring: Coercion, Experimentation and Ethics in Arthur Machen's Gothic Horror

Thomas G. Cole II

Abstract

In “The Inmost Light” and *The Great God Pan* Arthur Machen demonstrates a medicalised sexism through unethical human experimentation performed on women by doctors who experiment no matter the cost. In Machen’s stories, the sensationalism is meant to create a feeling of horror and disgust that hinges on the cruelty the public had begun to associate with experimental medical science. The narratives also engage with nineteenth-century perspectives on degeneration, women, and rape. Machen’s use of a sexualised rape metaphor dehumanises women and retains a gendered doctor-patient relationship. In light of this gendered relationship, this article considers Machen’s use of elements drawn from the Gothic in relation to the depiction of medicalised sexism and medical ethics in two pieces of his popular fiction.

Keywords

Arthur Machen; *Great God Pan*; ‘The Inmost Light’; medicine; medical ethics; sexism; rape; genre; experimentation

Date of Acceptance: 27 June 2023

Date of Publication: 5 July 2023

Double Blind Peer Reviewed

Recommended Citation:

Cole, Thomas G., II. 2023. “Degenerative Doctoring: Coercion, Experimentation, and Ethics in Arthur Machen’s Gothic Horror.” *Victorian Popular Fictions*, 5.1: 158-70. ISSN: 2632-4253 (online) DOI: <https://doi.org/10.46911/BZOP1116>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



Degenerative Doctoring: Coercion, Experimentation, and Ethics in Arthur Machen's Gothic Horror

Thomas G. Cole II

Introduction

In “The Inmost Light” and *The Great God Pan* (both 1894), Arthur Machen depicts a medicalised sexism through unethical human experimentation on women, portraying medical experiments as performed by doctors regardless of cost. Machen’s sensationalism draws on Gothic literature to create a feeling of horror and disgust that hinges on the cruelty the public had begun to associate with experimental medical science.¹ The tales also engage with nineteenth-century medical perspectives on women and rape. In *The Great God Pan*, for instance, a poor woman named Mary acts as the innocent subject of a scientific experiment which leaves her unresponsive, unable to recover, and pregnant with the evil spawn of Pan, a Greek god associated with nature and wilderness.² In “The Inmost Light,” Dr Black desires to explore unknown truths that are only knowable through experimentation on his wife. Mrs Black is described as having “consented” to the experiment, but only “with the tears running down her beautiful face, and hot shame flushing red over her neck and breast,” before her doctor husband “did what had to be done” (Machen [1984] 2011: 27). In both cases, a vulnerable woman gives coerced consent to medical experimentation; the resulting sexualised rape metaphor dehumanises the women as it also retains a gendered doctor-patient relationship.

In light of this gendered relationship, it is fruitful to read Machen’s stories against an analysis of nineteenth-century physicians’ perspectives on women patients and on rape. In fact, there is a history of eminent physicians who viewed women as more “natural” and therefore more naturally sexual than men. As Natasha Reby points out, “the use of women’s brains and bodies ... in Machen’s fictions implies – and perhaps even justifies – an evolutionary scale,

¹ Tony Page writes that these fictions acknowledged “the unease felt by Victorians towards their changing world and the symbolic expression of that unease through the pains engendered in the vivisection laboratory” (2015: 93-4).

² In the story, Pan is a half-human, half-god figure that bridges the human-god gap, similar to the two worlds Mary bridges when Raymond experiments upon her. According to Loredana Salis and Laura Mauro, there is also a type of Panic terror invoked in the story: “Pan can inflict death to his beholders; likewise, Helen, his daughter, spreads a disturbing (Panic) frenzy among those who establish as little as visual contact with her” (2021: 179).

where women are closer to ‘nature,’ thus animals and ‘primitives,’ which allows them to act as suitable subjects for experimentation” (2016: 15). Similarly, as discussed below, several noteworthy nineteenth-century physicians proposed that these women who were considered to be “naturally more sexual” could not be considered victims of rape unless under the influence of drugs or alcohol. It is helpful to consider this approach to women, as both sexual objects and as patients, in relation to the development of the field of Medical Ethics towards the close of the nineteenth century. What follows is an examination of Machen’s portrayals of unethical medical practice with reference to the gendered doctor-patient relationship and nineteenth-century physicians’ views of rape. Machen’s use of generic conventions of Gothic fiction are explored as a mode of highlighting contemporary concerns about medical ethics.

Machen’s Stories and the Use of Genre Fiction and Narrative

Machen’s “The Inmost Light” and *The Great God Pan* are horrifying in their engagement with nineteenth-century anxieties over doctors and medicine.³ He deploys several Gothic conventions, including a mysterious and dark London landscape and the transmogrification of people into objects. He also engages with issues of the Victorian era, such as degeneration and contamination, that would have been on the minds of his contemporary readers.⁴ David Punter writes that “Gothic fiction frequently depicted, and sometimes appeared to revel in, vice and violence,” and that, from the genre’s origins, “almost all the Gothic writers used the fear of the supernatural for one purpose or another” (1996: 8; 10). Machen’s early texts, like “The Inmost Light” and *The Great God Pan*, illustrate the author’s fascination with the supernatural, an area explored by other scholars (Sanna 2021: 82; Tait 2021: 195). Many other scholars have remarked upon Machen’s interest in the occult during the last decade of the nineteenth century.⁵ Reflecting not only his, but his society’s, interest in the occult, Machen’s stories took shape at a time when “occultism and rational scientific thinking were not considered as mutually exclusive Both people of science and occultists strongly believed in the existence of invisible worlds co-existing with the daily reality perceived by the common senses” (Pagnoni Berns and Aguilar 2021: 101). For Machen, the occult relates to the way in which he (and others) may have viewed medical science as revealing some “arcane knowledge” (Sparks 2009: 87). In “The Inmost Light” and *The Great God Pan* the supernatural, as we shall see, is used to highlight contemporary concerns about the ethics of medical experimentation. Machen therefore uses the occult as a Gothic trope to interrogate his fictional doctors’ desires for cryptic and ultimately harmful medicine.

³ James Goho argues that Machen’s fiction “portrays a scientist as able to do anything with human subjects with no concern for their care” (2014: 62).

⁴ Degeneration theory, as Kelly Hurley explains, was as a reversal of the “narrative of progress” (2004: 65), identified by medical authors such as Benedictin Augustin Morel who perceived “a gloomy sequence of causes and effects, a hereditary line that began with a first set of defective parents and ended in madness and extinction” (66). In short, Hurley claims, “degeneration was evolution reversed and compressed” (66). Additionally, regarding contamination, she writes, “suppression of the degenerate was demanded as a biological imperative, a social imperative, and a national imperative. As an unchecked source of contamination, the degenerate could destroy a family, a race, a nation, or even Western civilization itself” (79).

⁵ See Hurley’s *The Gothic Body* (2004: 117), Roger Luckhurst’s *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870–1901* (2002: 199), and *Decadent and Occult Works* by Arthur Machen, with a critical introduction by Dennis Denisoff (2018: 43).

“The Inmost Light” and *The Great God Pan*, both published in John Lane’s influential *Keynotes* as Volume 5 of the series in 1894, share decidedly similar storylines.⁶ In “The Inmost Light,” a writer named Dyson has a chance encounter with an old friend, Charles Salisbury. During dinner, Dyson begins to tell Salisbury of the Harlesden case, a neighbourhood scandal about the death of Mrs Black, a doctor’s wife. Dyson finds the circumstances of her death peculiar as he had seen a frightening face in the window of the doctor’s residence. After his dinner with Dyson, Salisbury wanders the suburbs of London during a terrible storm and chances upon a quarrel between a foreign woman and a drunk man. Salisbury acquires a mysterious note discarded by the woman, a document which Dyson later uses to determine the truth about the Harlesden case. Upon his return to Harlesden, Dyson meets a shopkeeper whose name appears in the mysterious note. Although still unaware of the meaning of the note, Dyson deceives the shopkeeper in order to acquire a strange box which contains a jewel and a journal in which Black relates his experimentation upon, and regret over killing, his wife in his “desire of knowledge of a peculiar kind” (Machen [1894] 2011: 25). The jewel, Dyson learns from the journal, contains the soul of Black’s wife. The story closes with the opal catching fire and destroying itself.

The Great God Pan begins with another writer, Clarke. Clarke is witness to Dr Raymond’s experiment upon Raymond’s ward, Mary. The doctor attempts to reveal what is beyond the realm of traditional medicine in what he calls “transcendental medicine” (Machen 1894: 2). Raymond succeeds in bridging the “gulf . . . between two worlds,” whilst putting Mary into a form of paralysis (2). Raymond’s experiment also allows the god Pan to impregnate Mary, though readers learn of this only at the end of the story. The narrative then offers a series of short, competing histories about Helen Vaughan, Mrs Herbert, and Mrs Beaumont. First, readers learn of the story of Helen, a little country girl believed to have caused a severe hysterical fit in a little boy and who had been seen playing with a “strange naked man” (23).⁷ Later, a man named Villiers meets an old friend, Charles Herbert, who relates a story about the mysterious death of his wife, Mrs Herbert. Working together like occultists searching for meaning, Villiers and Clarke try to expose the identity of Mrs Herbert. They are unable to uncover anything, until a man named Austin tells them about Mrs Beaumont, a woman who entertains well-respected gentlemen. Clarke soon learns that these men die after meeting Mrs Beaumont. He also determines that all three women (Helen, Herbert, and Beaumont) are the same person, the offspring of Pan and Mary from Raymond’s experiment. In the final chapter of the book, “Fragments,” Dr Matheson explains that he attended to an odd case where the body of Mrs Beaumont metamorphosed into different liminal entities, vacillated between the biological sexes, and finally turned to a gelatinous substance.⁸

That both Mrs Black and Mrs Beaumont turn into burned up or melted substances is just one of the key Gothic tropes Machen uses in his text. Gothic fiction, like sensation fiction and scientific romance, was uniquely situated to address contemporary issues: “popular writers primarily expressed opinions that chimed with public opinion prevailing at their time of writing” (Durey 2020: 1). Playing with generic conventions allowed Machen to portray unethical medical experimentation as analogous to the real medical science of the time. Writing

⁶ Even though “The Inmost Light” and *The Great God Pan* were published in the same year, S.T. Joshi catalogues different dates for composition in his book *The Weird Tale* (1990: 39-40). See also Geckle (1949: 61-3).

⁷ Antonio Sanna investigates the sexual nature of the scene in his essay on “Heterotopic Spaces in Machen’s Fictions” (2021: 83-4).

⁸ Kelly Hurley writes of Gothic literature, “the abhuman being retains vestiges of its human identity, but has already become, or is in the process of becoming, some half-human other – wolfish, or simian, or tentacle, or fungoid, perhaps simply ‘unspeakable’ in its gross, changeful corporeality” (2002: 190).

of vivisection, Jill Felicity Durey argues, “popular writers ... played a vital role, prior to visual and social media, in the public’s rejection or acceptance of social change, including medical practices” (1). Through engaging with the convention of the knowledge-thirsty physiologist who experiments on women, and plotlines which see a female patient reduced to a burning opal and melting jelly, Machen exposes concerns about medical ethics and the gendered nature of the relationship between doctor and patient. In addition to this, the texts engage with contemporary concerns about degeneration and contamination.

The connection between degeneracy and the urban environment and its denizens is one of the inaugural tropes of Machen’s “The Inmost Light”: it is the first sentence of the short story that creates the setting. The unnamed narrator depicts the setting as follows: “One evening in autumn, when the deformities of London were veiled in faint blue mist, and its vistas and far-reaching streets seemed splendid, Mr. Charles Salisbury was slowly pacing down Rupert Street, drawing nearer to his favorite restaurant by slow degrees” (Machen [1894] 2011: 1). That the narrator frames the story – its city environment and this first dweller – as “slow” and “deformed” sets the story squarely within the worried notions of degeneration and decay (even embedded in the downward movement) of *fin-de-siècle* Britain.⁹ Moreover, this city’s deformities, which suggest sickness, could work as a contagion to others merely through proximity, as implied later in the text when the writer Dyson, Salisbury’s old friend, likens the city, first, to a body – specifically, “the physiology of London” – and, then, to the unintelligibility of London neighbourhoods (Machen [1894] 2011: 3).¹⁰ Such a close proximity among individuals allows for contagion to pass easily, and this type of diseased contact is a metaphor Machen uses in other fictions, including *The Great God Pan*.¹¹ Describing distinctions between neighbourhoods, and thus definite boundaries that prevent intermingling (or even miscegenation), Dyson says,

I feel sometimes positively overwhelmed with the thought of the vastness and complexity of London London is always a mystery. In Paris you may say: “Here live the actresses, here the Bohemians, and the Ratés”; but it is different in London. You may point out a street, correctly enough, as the abode of washerwomen; but, in that second floor, a man may be studying Chaldee roots, and in the garret over the way a forgotten artist is dying by inches.

(3)

Whilst Dyson is fascinated by the closeness of different types of people in the same segment of the city, Salisbury, the more logical of the two, is less swayed. Salisbury even suggests Dyson has “a too fervid imagination” and that “the mystery of London exists only in your fancy” (3). Salisbury’s characterisation, like Dyson’s reaction to the intermingling, teeming city, upholds a reading of contamination, especially in the use of the adjective “fervid,” a word linguistically related to fevered. Machen’s interest in contamination demonstrates a nineteenth-century author’s use of another Gothic trope to examine the medical knowledge of the time. It seems as if Dyson himself has been affected – or even infected – by the city’s urban character.

⁹ Sage Leslie-McCarthy notes how Machen’s narrators are examples of the flâneur who was intimate with the city (2008: 37).

¹⁰ The subject of contagion figures in largely in Lovatt’s reading of Machen’s texts (2016).

¹¹ Adrian Eckersley suggests that the figure of Francis in Machen’s *The Novel of the White Powder* (1895) has the ability to infect Dr Haberdon merely through the doctor’s visits with Francis (281). Eckersley also suggests that, like Francis, Helen has the ability to infect men in *The Great God Pan*, for after the gentlemen meet Helen, known in the story at that point as Mrs Beaumont, the gentlemen turn up dead the next day, having committed suicide (1992: 283-84).

Degeneration and contamination play large roles in Machen's texts. Machen situates his female patients at the mercy of unethical doctors using degeneracy as an avenue for medical experimentation. Moreover, Machen combines the fears of medicine and doctors with the fears of degeneration and contamination in light of the occult-like searching for medical answers that happens in both stories.

Degenerate Medical Science

The doctors' primary drive in both "The Inmost Light" and *The Great God Pan* is to access learning beyond the scientific world and enter into "transcendental medicine" or "the knowledge of a peculiar kind" (Machen [1894] 2011: 25). This desire to know most assuredly mirrors the changing nature of medicine of the era, as well as Machen's personal study of the occult. Christine Ferguson, writing on what she calls the "epistemophilia" of the latter nineteenth century, suggests that Machen's immoral physicians reflected views held by prominent scientists in Great Britain and France. Claude Bernard, a French physiologist who was a common target for anti-vivisectionists, as well as, arguably, the inspirational figure for H.G. Wells's Dr Moreau, believed that "the human being is an organism bound by a series of determined laws and restrictions that superstition has hitherto prevented the active mind from discovering" (Ferguson 2002: 469). Bernard's approach to science also appeared in the work of Emanuel Klein, the father of microbiology, and Morell Mackenzie, a British physician and founder of a hospital devoted to laryngology, both practitioners who "prize[d] knowledge for its own sake" (470). Regarding science and, by extension, medical ethics, Mackenzie's ideas went as far as to encourage medicine to be immoral and "indifferen[t] to the sufferings of its experimental subjects" (470). Whilst Machen's fictions depict immoral ethical experimentation, they also draw a distinction between good and bad desires for knowledge. On the one hand, in "The Inmost Light," Black suffers the consequences of experimenting on his wife: when he attempts to learn the unknowable, he becomes destitute and lives in squalor. On the other hand, Dyson's investigations into Dr and Mrs Black require him to travel throughout the city where he eventually learns the limits of knowledge: when he finds Black's laboratory record log, he is unable to uncover Black's secret discoveries. Thus, Dyson's desire to learn about Black and his wife – what the newspapers call the Harlesden case – is contrasted against Black's desire for "knowledge of a peculiar kind" in a plot which ultimately suggests that Black's own specific deformed nature, and the learning he acquires, is harmful to the doctor himself and is something which needs to be hidden from society at large (Machen [1894] 2011: 25).¹² Indeed, Ferguson claims that this desire for knowledge without purpose demonstrates a "decadent" medicine (2002: 470). Black's work – his scientific experiments – cannot be contained by the doctor himself, for he can neither escape nor resist his urges.¹³

Whilst it is his wife who eventually deteriorates physically, Black and his science also become degenerate and destroy the pure and "uncommonly pretty wife" (Machen [1894] 2011: 4). Gabriel Lovatt might agree as he writes, "in depicting the experiments performed on Mary and Mrs Black, Machen localises larger themes, from modern anxieties about the consequences of scientific inquiry to emerging information about the connections between cognition and

¹² This too is indicative of the occult references Machen makes. Christine Ferguson explores Machen's occult interests in her article "Reading with Occultists" (2016).

¹³ Tabitha Sparks suggests, "Despite Black's responsibility in destroying his wife, her passive body is nevertheless criminalized in a way that correlates feminine sexuality with the lust for discovery that Black cannot help but pursue" (2009: 121).

embodiment” (2016: 26).¹⁴ If medical science can be thought of as the method by which one could diagnose degeneracy, what happens when the science itself becomes degenerate and the experimenter dishonourable? Machen’s text provides an answer, suggesting that such a science destroys itself and its promoter. Thus, Black kills his wife, hides his science in a tin box within a magical opal, and becomes a recluse before eventually committing suicide. His suicide functions as the erasure of his own degeneracy and his black science.

Though Black is clearly the disturbed individual of the story, his wife becomes the harbinger of evil after she survives his late-night experiment. Dyson sees the woman before her husband murders her. Describing the horrific scene to Salisbury in relation to the Harlesden case, Dyson tells,

It was the face of a woman, and yet it was not human ... for as I saw that face at the window ... I knew I had looked into another world – looked through the window of a commonplace, brand-new house, and seen hell open before me. When the first shock was over, I thought once or twice that I should have fainted; my face streamed with a cold sweat, and my breath came and went in sobs, as if I had been half drowned.

(Machen [1894] 2011: 6)

Whilst Dyson’s “lust” to discover the truth of the Blacks “cannot be satiated and ... is unquenchable,” a position which clearly aligns with Black’s epistemophilia, Dyson’s gaze is a passive look, and Agnes’s face actively haunts Dyson (6). This is the face of unethical science run amok, for it has actually expunged any of Mrs Black’s own personal attributes: she appears human but is not. Additionally, Dyson registers the horror in his body, literally feeling the sensation of this uncanny encounter. The threshold that she traverses imitates not simply the boundary her husband wants his experiment to bridge but the same lack of boundaries between the neighbourhoods of the city of London, to which Dyson gestured earlier. Darryl Jones, writing about *The Great God Pan*, though it equally applies to “The Inmost Light,” claims, “the boundaries between the two worlds, spirit and matter,” which were the barriers that both Drs Black and Raymond want to penetrate in their experiments, “break down completely as Helen herself, tied to a bed, dissolves into foul abjection ... it is precisely these borderlands, these interstices, which, in their violation of seemingly clear category distinctions, are the sites of revulsion and therefore of horror” (2009: 37). By straddling the “gulf between the world of consciousness and the world of matter,” Agnes symbolizes the edge at which science must halt (Machen [1894] 2011: 26). Dyson can meander the borders between London’s citizens and neighbourhoods, as Black is able to cross the border between ethical and unethical science; however, the latter must remain intact, for extreme consequences follow such an interruption.¹⁵

¹⁴ Goho writes, “the sacrifice of a woman is an attempt by men to open the doors of perception” (2014: 63).

¹⁵ Dyson as the aesthete, able to see (and be affected by) the city, works as an in-text mouthpiece for Machen’s own views of science, though Aidan Reynolds and William Charlton hold that the aesthetes had “scarcely affected Machen at all” (Joshi qtd. in Owens 1990: 117). However, the ideologies of the Decadents and Machen may line up. According to Joshi, “the battle against science and materialism is one that Machen never relinquished” (14), and even though Machen believed himself to be “not even a small part, but no part at all” of the Decadents (Joshi qtd. in Owens 1990: 117), Jill Tedford Owens argues that his fiction was most definitely aligned with decadence, specifically in his “fascination with evil,” though his “evil is of a different type from Wilde’s or Beardsley’s” (119), as well as his “delight in London byways and obscure quarters” (125). In some ways, Dyson has been contaminated by the city’s deformities as Machen had been tainted and affected by the literary, poetic milieu of 1880s and

“The Inmost Light” seems only to indict the unethical machinations of the one doctor, Black, whose “old desire, the former longing” for the “curious and obscure branches of knowledge” ultimately leads to his wife Agnes’s transformation into a “devil” before he murders her (25-6; 16). The collateral damage of Black’s experiments is minimal when compared to the havoc wrought by Raymond in *The Great God Pan*. *The Great God Pan* presents readers with not simply a condemnation of unethical medical science but with the consequences of such a science: Raymond’s thirst for “transcendental medicine” eventually causes the deaths – another set of erasures – of several West End gentlemen as well as Mary, his experimental subject, and her demonic offspring, Helen. The victims in this story are numerous.¹⁶

The same contentions that Machen fosters in “The Inmost Light” occur in *The Great God Pan*. However, unlike “The Inmost Light,” *The Great God Pan* begins in a pastoral environment at Raymond’s house in the Welsh countryside.¹⁷ Like the indication of the deformities of London, the setting of the location and its dweller signals a portentous darkness. There is “a faint mist, pure white [that] began to rise from the hills” (Machen 1894: 7) that is reminiscent of the blue mist of the London streets in “The Inmost Light.” There is also Dr Raymond, “a middle-aged man, gaunt and thin, of a pale yellow complexion ... [with] a flush on his cheek” (8). This man, who only appears at the beginning and end of the text, is immediately coded as a sickly man. Discussing another of Machen’s characters in a different text, Adrian Eckersley notes that “Machen has inserted in the earlier part of the tale clues to a latent degeneracy” (1992: 281). This description is equally applicable to Raymond, whose gaunt, yellow figure clearly distinguishes him as suspect, especially in light of the amount of focus on science and medicine in *The Great God Pan*. Moreover, Kostas Boyiopoulos, writing about Machen’s attraction to esotericism and occultism, identifies Raymond’s name as a rhyme of the word “daemon” (2010: 364). Alongside his appearance, then, Raymond’s very name, like the much more obvious Black, points to this science and its practitioner as being questionable and arguably degenerate. The relationship between the doctor and his patient is also suspect, for the treatment of Mary and Mrs Black mimics the normal doctor-patient interaction; yet the medicine practiced is valuable to the doctor for his own malicious scheme rather than being beneficial to the patient herself.

The Gendered Doctor-Patient Relationship

Raymond’s test subject is his ward, Mary, over whom, he believes, he has complete control. Before she enters the room for the experiment in which he will attempt to make “Mary ... see the god Pan!” by having her broach “the unthinkable gulf that yawns profound between two worlds, the world of matter and the world of spirit,” he tells his visitor, Clarke, that he “rescued

1890s London, notwithstanding his protestation of it. Machen’s interest in the city and its evil, which runs through several of his works, is ostensibly in line with the flâneur’s impetus, a “desire to know, to understand and interpret [the] environment” (Leslie-McCarthy 2008: 38).

¹⁶ Daniel Renshaw argues that although Machen was not “explicitly anti-Semitic” in his writing, his “work drew from a prevalent and underlying [cultural] angst” and reflected “fears of demographic change brought on by large-scale Jewish migration to the East End of London”; Renshaw consequently sees Helen as representative of a “mass Jewish migration” (2020: 149-50).

¹⁷ According to Salis and Mauro, “in the novella, this alien and alienating territory is recreated in both urban and rural contexts that become places of Panic possession, where Machen’s Great God manifests himself—London’s Whitechapel area, the West End, the Welsh fields and the forest where Helen encounters her victims” (2021: 175).

Mary from the gutter, and from almost certain starvation, when she was a child,” and so believes that “her life is mine, to use as I see fit” (Machen 1894: 8). This aligns with some aspects of contemporary medical practice, and also a prominent cultural attitude that categorised the lowest classes as degenerate.¹⁸ Alison Winter notes that Victorian doctors often gathered the patients they studied from charity groups who were considered “possibly not as individuals at all” (1998: 61). Similarly, according to Samantha Morse’s exploration of patient consent in relation to *The Great God Pan*, Raymond’s view of Mary as his to use “as he sees fit” (Machen 1894: 8) would mean that, in Raymond’s logic, if he “accidentally killed Mary during the operation, it would not be a problem because she would have died anyway had he not rescued her” (Morse 2018: 489). Tabitha Sparks also notes that Mary’s “working-class status appears to justify” the doctor’s treatment of her (2009: 129). At the same time, as Rebry argues, “Raymond’s treatment of his young ward Mary and Black’s sacrifice of his wife’s soul in the pursuit of knowledge raise questions regarding the ethics of experimental neurology” (2016: 16). As Mary enters, her appearance is reminiscent of a virginal bride, she is “a girl of about seventeen, dressed all in white. She was so beautiful She was blushing now over face and neck and arms, but Raymond seemed unmoved” (Machen 1894: 13).¹⁹ After her verbal assent to the experiment, she lays herself in the operating chair, and Raymond, still indifferent, “stooped and kissed her mouth, kindly enough” (13).²⁰ Morse argues that Mary’s age and consent would have been noteworthy:

Machen and his reading public would certainly have been attuned to the change in the age of consent due to the recently passed Criminal Law Amendment Act (14 August 1885), which raised the age from thirteen to sixteen years old. Although the law primarily discusses agreement in sexual scenarios, it is also evident that the age of consent applies to medical procedures as well.

(2018: 490)

As well as her youthfulness being striking, the coldness of the doctor, remarked upon twice, is in stark contrast to the patient’s demeanour. Once Mary is under anaesthesia and the experiment has commenced, she “struggled faintly, and then with the feeling of submission strong within her, crossed her arms upon her breast as a little child about to say her prayers” (14). This doctor, who evidently believes Mary a degenerate as well as his chattel, considers the care that he has provided her permits him to treat her as an object of study, an owned commodity. The misogyny of Raymond’s medicine cannot be more overstated than in his view of, and practice on, Mary.²¹

Raymond’s actions with regard to Mary and the experiment go against much of what was discussed by Jukes Styrap’s *Code of Medical Ethics* (1878), the first attempted codification of medical ethics in Britain (Bartrip 1995: 145). The *Code* discourages doctors ministering to members of their household. “A doctor suffering from serious disease is, in general, an incompetent judge of his own case,” Styrap claims, “and the natural anxiety and solicitude

¹⁸ For example, Hurley, citing James Cantlie in 1885, writes, “the original cause of urban degeneration was the lack of ‘ozone’ in the London air: and subsequent generations born to city-bred parents starved of sunlight and fresh air were launched upon a downward spiral of degradation” (2004: 69).

¹⁹ For a fuller exposition on the Judeo-Christian aspects of *The Great God Pan*, specifically Mary as a direct reference to the Virgin Mary, see Boyiopoulos (2010) in full.

²⁰ Coral Lansbury directly links women in the nineteenth-century gynaecologist’s stirrups to the animal on the vivisection’s table (1985: x).

²¹ Rebry also notes that “some Victorians still feared that scientists might conduct dangerous experiments on humans” (2016: 15).

which he experiences at the sickness of a wife, child, or others ... tend to obscure his judgment” (Styrap [1895] 1995: 156). Thus, a doctor may neither treat himself nor the members of his household. When practicing on his ward, Raymond certainly shows no solicitude, and his “judgment” is skewed for his nefarious purpose. Furthermore, Clarke’s attendance in Raymond’s experiment is also prohibited in the *Code*: “it is degrading to the true science of medicine ... to invite laymen to be present at operations” (155). The *Code* also specifically addresses female patients in a time when “male doctors were unable to deal adequately with female disease” (Vertinsky 1990: 116). Styrap writes,

A patient ... should never be afraid of ... making the doctor his friend and confidant, but should always bear in mind that a medical man is under the strongest ethical obligations of reticence and secrecy; nor should any undue feeling of shame or delicacy deter even females from disclosing to him the seat, symptoms, and suspected causes of any ailment peculiar to their sex.
(Styrap [1895] 1995: 152)

Although Raymond’s experiment on the virginal Mary goes against Styrap’s *Code*, his views of Mary reflect real nineteenth-century physicians’ views of women and rape. Historian M. Anne Crowther provides a coherent and chilling distillation of noteworthy eighteenth- and nineteenth-century physicians’ perspectives on rape. She writes about lectures delivered by Scottish physician Andrew Duncan in 1800, from which “students learned that rape could not be committed on an able-bodied woman, unless she had fainted or was overcome by drink” (Crowther 1995: 187). Robert Christison, who served as the president of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, in 1831 concurred with Duncan, as did Alfred Swaine Taylor, the father of British forensic medicine, in 1844. Alexander Ogston, a surgeon who discovered staphylococcus, declared in 1878 that “false charges of rape” were frequently brought about by “immoral women ... or ... those who regretted having given their consent” (qtd. in Crowther 1995: 187). However, the most disturbing example Crowther provides comes from John Dixon Mann, a Manchester toxicologist, in 1893:

Women of the lower classes are accustomed to rough play with individuals both of their own and of the opposite sex, and thus acquire the habit of defending themselves against sportive violence. In the majority of cases such a capacity for defence would enable a desperate woman to frustrate the attempts of her intentioned ravisher. A delicately nurtured woman, on the other hand, is so appalled by the unwonted violence that her faculties may be partially benumbed, and her powers of resistance correspondingly enfeebled.

(qtd. in Crowther 1995: 187)

These distinguished members of the medical community inculcated their pupils into upholding such views on rape and women. Consequently, their beliefs about rape and working-class women became orthodoxy for much of the century, and thus doctors’ sense of ethics had little room for the realities of rape. For example, an unnamed doctor providing a report to the *British Medical Journal* in 1887 indicates a reserved wariness toward a supposed victim of rape: “we have nothing to go by except the woman’s own statements, and there does not seem any good reason for disbelieving her” (“Medico-Legal” 1887: 486). The double negative the doctor expresses in his ethical judgment is noteworthy. No student between 1803 and 1850 had a book on medical ethics (Burns 1995: 141), so medical ethics were either something one learned from mentors or from public lectures. At this time, there was no standardised, uniform manner (Crowther 1995: 173). Later in the century, Styrap’s *Code* and other texts would become

helpful for understanding medical etiquette and the responsibilities of the doctor toward the patient. It is important to note that the *Code* was never universally accepted.

Machen's story engages, in a number of ways, with late nineteenth-century medical attitudes towards what the body could reveal about the non-physical or non-visible. During the last few decades of the nineteenth century, the *British Medical Journal* came out with a slew of what historian Joanne Bourke calls "ludicrous" signs of the "violating and violated body" (2005: 289, emphasis in original). For example, someone who recently engaged in intercourse could be detected "merely through smelling his or her breath The physician insisted that ... he had 'been able to bring home a case of rape by this method of examination'" (290). Physical, measurable signs were used to indicate medical discoveries, and this was equally applied to visible indicators of the patient's mind. Raymond's experiment characteristically takes a lower-class woman and marks her brain with a lesion; prior to the experiment, it is merely her class that marks her as degenerate, according to the scientism of the time, but Raymond adds to her degeneration. The notion that a degenerate mind had a physical expression remained intact through the end of the nineteenth and even into the early twentieth centuries.²² Mary, whose working-class roots position her as degenerate, offers an opportunity for scientific experimentation. When Raymond tells Clarke how he will conduct the experiment upon Mary, he says he will make "a slight lesion in the grey matter, that is all; a trifling rearrangement of certain cells, a microscopical alteration that would escape the attention of ninety-nine brain specialists out of a hundred" (Machen 1894: 11). Physical signs of degeneracy could be indicators of a disturbed mind, and Raymond's decision to practice on Mary, physically marking her already degenerate brain, at least in his mind, relates to nineteenth-century fears over medical science.

Though Mary in *The Great God Pan* is coded as degenerate (because of her lower-class status), her virginity and innocence are meant to elicit sympathy from readers. Raymond's treatment of her before, during, and after the experiment marks her as a degenerate commodity according to contemporary perspectives. Moreover, the scene of her experiment is, as Boyiopoulos calls it, "a procedure of exploitation akin to rape" (2010: 364). Through this "emphatic metaphor for sexual penetration" (364), Raymond implicates himself through his own actions and behaviour that would have clearly been prohibited by any code of medical ethics. In fact, he has become the degenerate who infects Mary with his unethical "transcendental" science. After the procedure, her reaction is described as follows: "The muscles of her face were hideously convulsed, she shook from head to foot; the soul seemed struggling and shuddering within the house of flesh. It was a horrible sight, and Clarke rushed forward, as she fell shrieking to the floor" (Machen 1894: 15). Mary's bodily reactions relate the horror of the situation, which elicits sympathy from Clarke (and readers), but Raymond cares little for the girl. He says, "it is a great pity; she is a hopeless idiot. However, it could not be helped; and, after all, she has seen the Great God Pan" (15).

Conclusion

Whilst Machen's stories are decadent Gothic horror stories, the actions of Drs Black and Raymond not only exploit the public's fears of doctors but also critique relationships between men and women in a period of the nineteenth century when there were ongoing debates about women's rights. The doctors' methods take trusted relationships – those of doctor-patient,

²² According to Hurley, "Morel's theory focused particularly on lesions of the brain, which he argued were degenerate and transmissible" (2004: 67).

husband-wife, protector-ward – and completely betray them. With regard to the doctor-patient relationship, Styrap's *Code* instructs physicians against the very actions Drs Black and Raymond commit, Styrap insisting that it is "incumbent upon them [physicians] from their skilled knowledge, and position in life, steadily to ... inculcate the true principle upon which curative medicine is founded" (Styrap [1895] 1995: 155). Drs Black and Raymond do not practice "curative medicine." Instead, they explore experimental medicine and induce illness. Machen's portrayals of sinister doctors are, collectively, a critique on the perceived lack of ethics and what the general public saw as unethical medical practices, such as "physiology" which was often aligned with vivisection. As S.T. Joshi asserts, "Machen felt compelled to undertake as systematic a rearguard opposition to the course of modern civilization as it is possible to imagine" (1990: 14).²³ In "The Inmost Light" and *The Great God Pan* Machen implies his critique of medical ethics through employing conventions drawn from the Gothic in order to engage with the popular scientific themes of degeneration and contamination and highlight the anxieties of the time.

Machen's two stories, then, may be read as texts which engage with what Ferguson calls "scientific decadence," when she proposes "if the ultimate objective of scientific decadence is the source and simultaneous antithesis of meaning and knowledge then the self-destruction that frequently accompanies decadent narratives must be seen as homage to rather than retreat from this object" (2002: 476). Whilst Ferguson acknowledges nineteenth-century scientists who desired pursuits of further knowledge regardless of morality and the subject's wellbeing (à la Klein, Bernard, and Mackenzie), this essay has taken into account the history of an emergent yet fleeting medical ethics in Great Britain. The medical ethics and etiquette that were discussed, though never enforced, during the nineteenth century relate directly to the lapses in medical judgment of Machen's doctors. The doctors and their specific forms of "transcendental medicine" (Machen 1894: 2) and "knowledge of a peculiar kind" (Machen [1894] 2011: 25) indicate the doctors' "curious and obscure branches of knowledge" (16), that is, their access to "arcane knowledge" (Sparks 2009: 87). The settings (the London streets, for instance) and the women used in the doctors' experiments are described in the language of degeneration. The women in these stories could arguably, according to the dominant scientism of the time, warrant poor treatment (as Raymond shows), especially in light of the anti-feminist and New Woman debates as well as the views on rape held by prominent medical professionals throughout the century.

Machen's gothic exploration of medical experimentation thus calls attention to some of the nineteenth century's reductive, polemical views of women. Helen, who avenges her mother, the woman on whom Raymond experiments, is coded as an evil woman which suggests the consequences to women of the actions of the male-dominated, Victorian realm of science and medicine. These texts occur in the latter part of the nineteenth century, a time when so much was in flux, specifically in relation to women's rights and with regard to the development of medical science. One specific feature of the Gothic is its appearance in times of distress (Hurley 2002: 193). Pamela Gilbert writes, "Gothic was related to sensation, but its use of the supernatural and exotic settings became more pronounced as the century went on.... [G]othic literature also became increasingly reflective of Victorians' interest in physiology" (2015: 144). The genre of these texts relates directly to how literary scholars should read "The Inmost Light" and *The Great God Pan* texts that allow a nineteenth-century author to interrogate contemporary views of medicine, ethics, and rape.

²³ Goho agrees with Joshi in his book *Journeys into Darkness*. He writes, "Machen's work is a constant interrogation of the collision between the modern and an exploration of them moral effects of the collision between the modern and the past" (Goho 2014: 58).

Works Cited

- Bartrip, Peter. 1995. "An Introduction to Jukes Styrap's *A Code of Medical Ethics* (1878)". In *The Codification of Medical Morality: Historical and Philosophical Studies of the Formalization of Western Medical Morality in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Vol. 2: Anglo-American Medical Ethics and Medical Jurisprudence in the Nineteenth Century, edited by Robert Baker, 145-48. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Bourke, Joanna. 2005. "Unwanted Intimacy Violent Sexual Transfers in British and American Societies 1870s to 1970s." *European Journal of English Studies*, 9.3: 287-99. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825570500363534>
- Boyiopoulos, Kostas. 2010. "'Esoteric Elements': The Judeo-Christian Scheme in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*." *Neophilologus*, 94.2: 363-74. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11061-009-9186-4>
- Burns, Chester. 1995. "Reciprocity in the Development of Anglo-American Medical Ethics, 1765-1865." In *The Codification of Medical Morality: Historical and Philosophical Studies of the Formalization of Western Medical Morality in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Vol. 2: Anglo-American Medical Ethics and Medical Jurisprudence in the Nineteenth Century, edited by Robert Baker, 135-143. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Carpenter, Mary Wilson. 2010. *Health, Medicine, and Society in Victorian England*. Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger.
- Crowther, M. Anne. 1995. "Forensic Medicine and Medical Ethics in Nineteenth-century Britain." In *The Codification of Medical Morality: Historical and Philosophical Studies of the Formalization of Western Medical Morality in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Vol.2: Anglo-American Medical Ethics and Medical Jurisprudence in the Nineteenth Century, edited by Robert Baker, 173-90. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Durey, Jill Felicity. 2020. "Vivisection Through the Eyes of Wilkie Collins, H.G. Wells and John Galsworthy." *Medical Humanities*, 47: 333-43. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2020-011868>
- Eckersley, Adrian. 1992. "A Theme in the Early Work of Arthur Machen: 'Degeneration'." *English Literature in Transition 1880-1920*, 35.3: 277-87.
- Ferguson, Christine. 2002. "Decadence as Scientific Fulfillment." *PMLA*, 117.3 (May): 456-78. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1632/003081202X60413>
- Ferguson, Christine. 2016. "Reading with the Occultists: Arthur Machen, A.E. Waite, and the Ecstasies of Popular Fiction." *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 21.1 (March): 40-55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13555502.2015.1123170>
- Geckle, William F. 1949. *Arthur Machen: Weaver of Fantasy*. Millbrook, NY: Round Table Press.
- Gilbert, Pamela K. 2015. "Genre Fiction and Sensation." In *Victorian Literature: Criticism and Debates*, edited by Anne Longmuir and Lee Behlman, 140-48. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Goho, James. 2014. *Journeys into Darkness: Critical Essays on Gothic Horror*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Hurley, Kelly. 2002. "British Gothic Fiction, 1885-1930." In *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*, edited by Jerrold E. Hogle, 189-207. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hurley, Kelly. 2004. *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism, and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jones, Darryl. 2009. "Borderlands: Spiritualism and the Occult in *Fin-de-Siècle* and Edwardian Welsh and Irish Horror." *Irish Studies Review*, 17.1 (February): 31-44.
- Joshi, S.T. 1990. *The Weird Tale: Arthur Machen, Lord Dunsany, Algernon Blackwood, M.R. James, Ambrose Bierce, H.P. Lovecraft*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Lansbury, Coral. 1985. *The Old Brown Dog: Women, Workers, and Vivisection in Edwardian England*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.
- Leslie-McCarthy, Sage. 2008. "Chance Encounters: The Detective as 'Expert' in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*." *Australasian Journal of Victorian Studies*, 13.1: 35-45.

- Lovatt, Gabriel. 2016. "From Experiment to Epidemic: Embodiment in the Decadent Modernism of Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan* and 'The Inmost Light.'" *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal*, 49.1: 19-35. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mos.2016.0010>
- Luckhurst, Roger. 2002. *The Invention of Telepathy, 1870-1901*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Machen, Arthur. 1894. *The Great God Pan*. London: John Lane.
- Machen, Arthur. [1894] 2011. "The Inmost Light." In *The White People and Other Weird Stories*, edited by S.T. Joshi, 1-28. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Machen, Arthur. 2018. *Decadent and Occult Works by Arthur Machen*, edited by Dennis Denisoff, vol. 4, Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association.
- "Medico-Legal and Medico-Ethical." 1887. *British Medical Journal*, 1 :486 DOI: <https://doi.org/doi:10.1136/bmj.1.1365.486>
- Morse, Samantha. 2018. "'Her life is mine, to use as I see fit': The Terror of Consent in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*." *Studies in the Novel*, 50.4 (Winter): 486-500. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/sdn.2018.0039>
- Owens, Jill Tedford. 1990. "Arthur Machen's Supernaturalism: The Decadent Variety." *The University of Mississippi Studies in English*, 8: 117-26.
- Page, Tony. 2015. "From Morality to Medical Danger: Anti-Vivisectionism in the Novels of Three Late-Victorian/Early 20th-Century Writers." *MANYUS: Journal of Humanities*, 18.1: 91-114. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1163/26659077-01801005>
- Pagnoni Berns, Fernando Gabriel, and Emiliano Aguilar. 2021. "Dead Matter: Posthumanism and Stones." In *Arthur Machen: Critical Essays*, edited by Antonio Sanna, 95-112. London: Lexington Books.
- Punter, David. 1996. *The Literature of Terror: A History of Gothic Fictions from 1765 to the Present Day*. Vol. 1, 2nd edn. New York: Longman.
- Rebry, Natasha. 2016. "'A slight lesion in the grey matter': The Gothic Brain in Arthur Machen's *The Great God Pan*." *Horror Studies*, 7.1: 9-24. DOI: https://doi.org/10.1386/host.7.1.9_1
- Renshaw, Daniel. 2020. "Monsters in the Capital: Helen Vaughan, Count Dracula and Demographic Fears in *Fin-de-Siècle* London." *Gothic Studies*, 22.2: 148-64. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3366/gothic.2020.0046>
- Salis, Loredana, and Laura Mauro. 2021. "'A substance as jelly': Helen Vaughan as Pathogen and Femme Fatale in *The Great God Pan*." In *Arthur Machen: Critical Essays*, edited by Antonio Sanna, 171-90. London: Lexington Books.
- Sanna, Antonio. 2021. "Heterotopic Spaces in Machen's Fiction." In *Arthur Machen: Critical Essays*, edited by Antonio Sanna, 72-94. London: Lexington Books.
- Sparks, Tabitha. 2009. *The Doctor in the Victorian Novel*. Farnham: Ashgate Publishing.
- Styrap, Jukes. [1895] 1995. "A Code of Medical Ethics." In *The Codification of Medical Morality: Historical and Philosophical Studies of the Formalization of Western Medical Morality in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*. Vol. 2: Anglo-American Medical Ethics and Medical Jurisprudence in the Nineteenth Century, edited by Robert Baker, 149-71. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.
- Tait, Adrian. 2021. "'[A] mystic, ineffable force and energy': Arthur Machen and Theories of New Materialism." In *Arthur Machen: Critical Essays*, edited by Antonio Sanna, 193-208. London: Lexington Books.
- Vertinsky, Patricia A. 1990. *The Eternally Wounded Woman: Women, Doctors, and Exercise in the Late Nineteenth Century*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Winter, Alison. 1998. *Mesmerized: Powers of the Mind in Victorian Britain*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.