

Victorian Popular Fiction Association Study Day  
*The Threatened Child in Nineteenth-Century  
Popular Fiction and Culture*

Friday, 20<sup>th</sup> September 2019  
Humanities Institute, University College Dublin

**Keynote:** Professor Kathryn Hughes (University of East Anglia)

**Walking Tour:** Victorian Gothic Dublin, followed by dinner

**VPFJ Special Issue:** Following the Study Day, we will be inviting delegates to submit journal articles based on their respective papers for publication in a special issue of the VPFA journal, *Victorian Popular Fictions*.

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**Call for Papers:**

Owing to rapid population growth coupled with high mortality rates, nineteenth-century Britain was a young society, with those under fourteen constituting from between a third to forty percent of the population. While the romantic conception of childhood as an ideal, innocent state gained widespread acceptance during the nineteenth century, at the same time the realities of child neglect, exploitation, physical and sexual abuse were well known. Across the century, legislation was enacted to address child maltreatment – improving working conditions, ensuring primary education, raising the age of consent for girls, and producing the Prevention of Cruelty to Children Act in 1889. But the lived reality for many

children remained grim and the resulting social issues were frequently taken up in the era's popular fiction and culture.

Depictions of beaten, neglected, and exploited children are copious in Victorian popular fiction and culture, across a range of genres from social realism to the Gothic. They are famously present in the works of popular authors such as Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, and J. M. Barrie, and characteristic of writing by social reform journalists such as Henry Mayhew, James Greenwood, and W. T. Stead. The prevalent literary figure of the orphan was one used by many of these writers to broach society's less palatable issues without bringing them too close to home. Popular Penny Blood authors such as Malcolm Rymer, in *The String of Pearls*, and George W. M. Reynolds, in *The Mysteries of London*, addressed the topic of children's exposure to callous and murderous adults and the criminal world in general. And throughout the late-Victorian gothic, depictions of the threatened, murdered, and even ritually sacrificed child recur frequently in the works of Florence Marryat, L. T. Meade, Bram Stoker, and Arthur Conan Doyle.

This interdisciplinary study day seeks twenty-minute papers that engage with any aspect of the topic of the threatened child and his/her world in Victorian popular fiction and culture. The study day hopes to showcase new approaches to this important figure and to address some gaps in Victorian studies, such as the treatment of child sexual abuse in popular fiction and culture, the figure of the child in the Penny Dreadful/Blood, and the adaptation of this figure in neo-Victorian and Steampunk culture. The intersection of the medical and the literary is a growing area in Victorian studies, and the threatened child provides a useful figure through which to approach it, while a medical humanities framework can help to update traditional readings of the threatened child. The study day welcomes speakers from across disciplines, including literary and cultural studies, history, history of art, and medical humanities. Topics may include, but are not limited to:

- popular representations of child neglect, exploitation and physical abuse, child sexual abuse and prostitution
- the figure of the orphan
- social reform/purity discourse – fiction and journalism
- genre treatments of threatened children: crime, the Gothic, catastrophe, and cheap serialised fiction (Penny Bloods/Dreadfuls)
- racialised treatments of threatened children – colonial stereotypes and myths of child sacrifice (e.g. Obeah, Thuggee)
- differing perceptions of threats to children in British imperial territories
- medical discourse on threatened children: Victorian child development theory and children's mental health; psychiatry, sexology, and sexual crimes against children
- challenging physical threats: dedicated medical care, vaccine movement, etc.
- sensational journalism (e.g. the Fanny Adams murder, the Maiden Tribute scandal)
- paintings, illustrations, poetry, plays, and other media/creative works treating the figure of the threatened child
- the threatening child: the street child, vagrant, prostitute and thief
- imagined threats: middle-class anxieties about youth "pollution" (e.g. from "dangerous" fiction or pastimes, from proximity to undesirable environments/people/ideas, etc.)
- threatening institutions: the treatment of the child in the medical, legal, and education systems

- the threatened child as a didactic device in children's fictional and educational literature
- the religious codification of the threatened child (e.g. as a prophetic figure)
- the threatened child as a polemical device in political fiction (e.g. invasion fiction representations of child war casualties)
- representations of the child in Victorian pornography
- the neo-Victorian threatened/threatening child: novels, movies, TV series; Steampunk adaptation of the Victorian threatened child in literature, music, and movies/TV series

Please send proposals of no more than 300 words and a biography of no more than 100 words to the organisers Dr Ailise Bulfin ([ailise.bulfin@ucd.ie](mailto:ailise.bulfin@ucd.ie)) and Dr Leanne Waters ([leanne.waters@ucd.ie](mailto:leanne.waters@ucd.ie)) by the deadline of **Friday 14<sup>th</sup> June 2019**. For more information please visit: [www.victorianchildren.home.blog](http://www.victorianchildren.home.blog) or email the organisers.

**With special thanks to the Victorian Popular Fiction Association, the UCD School of English, Drama and Film, the UCD Humanities Institute, and the UCD Seed Funding Scheme.**