Abnormality and the Abnormal in the Nineteenth Century

One-Day Conference | Thursday 7 May 2015

Kenworthy Hall, St Mary’s College, Durham University
Welcome

The Centre for Nineteenth-Century Studies is delighted to welcome you to Durham University for this one-day postgraduate conference, ‘Abnormality and the Abnormal in the Nineteenth Century’.

The words ‘abnormal’ and ‘abnormality’ first emerged in the nineteenth century; contemporary usage reflects their pejorative connotations. The first recorded use, in 1817, contrasts ‘abnormal’ with ‘healthy,’ suggesting that ‘abnormality’ was initially a medical term. However, the term eventually came to mean an aberration from any kind of ‘normal’ concept, behaviour, expectation, or way of being: indeed, the construction of ‘normal,’ and the values associated with normality, is itself implicated in nineteenth century constructions of the abnormal. At this conference, we will explore categorisations, explanations, and implications of abnormality in the long nineteenth century, asking what the abnormal can tell us about long nineteenth century constructions of aberration, deviancy, and normality.

We are privileged to welcome Professor Martin Willis (Chair in Science, Literature and Communication, University of Westminster, Director of the Centre for the Study of Science and the Imagination, and Editor of the Journal of Literature and Science,) to deliver the keynote address. Professor Willis is a leading scholar in the field of literature and science, with research interests in the medical humanities in the nineteenth-century and, in particular, the nature of illness.

We are also fortunate to welcome postgraduates and early-career researchers from a wide range of disciplines, and from universities across and beyond the UK. Through this diverse program of talks, we hope to identify new continuities in, and methods for, interdisciplinary research into nineteenth-century conceptions of abnormality.
Schedule

09.30 – 09.50 | Registration

09.50 – 10.00 | Welcome and Opening Remarks

10.00 – 11.00 | Keynote Address

Professor Martin Willis (University of Westminster)

‘The Case of the Soho Sleeper: Catalepsy, Care, and the Politics of Seizures’

Over the Easter period in 1887 British newspapers reported daily on a man in extended sleep in a room over a restaurant in the Soho area of London. The Soho Sleeper, as the press dubbed him, may have been forgotten in the historical record, but during his brief tenure as the most talked about cataleptic in Europe his condition and the responses to it give us a real insight into medical normality and abnormality in Victorian Britain. Using the case of the Soho Sleeper as a starting point my aim in this lecture is to discuss the complex cultural politics of abnormalities that have temporal limitations: conditions such as catalepsy and epilepsy which arrive and depart suddenly. Medical conditions like this help us to think about the abnormal in relation to the normal because they produce, in a single body, both configurations. To read such conditions, I will suggest, we need to see how ideas of (ab)normality circulate through different genres of narrative – medical, journalistic, fictional, mythological, and photographic – and ask, too, in what ethical relation we might stand to them. This will prompt a final question and set of reflections: in what ways should we care about such histories and afflictions?

11.00 – 11.20 | Tea and Coffee Break
11.20 – 12.40 | Panel One –

*Social and Political Function of Abnormality*

Jennifer Duggan (Sør-Trøndelag University College, Trondheim)
‘Screw Loose: The Evolution of a Maddening Idiom’

Lara Green (Northumbria University)
‘Sergei Stepniak and his Exceptional Terrorists: Subverting Dominant Representations of Russian Terrorists for the English Reading Public 1883-1895’

Daniel Simpson (Royal Holloway, University of London)
“‘Abnormal Enthusiasms”: The Religious Politics of Madness in Nineteenth-Century Cornwall’

12.40 – 13.40 | Lunch

13.40 – 15.00 | Panel Two – *Abnormality and the Body*

William Abberley (Exeter University)
‘Forged Bodies: Hidden Ancestry and Invisible Degeneracy in Grant Allen's Fiction’

Sophie Newman (Durham University)
‘Life in the Shadows: Accessing Evidence of Rickets and Nineteenth-Century Society through Bio-archaeology’
Aleksandra Traykova (Durham University)

‘Quantifying Abnormality Then and Now: Nineteenth-Century Scientific Theories and their Ongoing Influence on Contemporary Philosophical Discussions of Disease’

15.00 – 15.20 | Tea and Coffee Break

15.20 – 16.40 | Panel Three – Gender and Sexuality

Sreemoyee Roy Chowdhury (Durham University)

“The abnormalism consists in disproportion: not in inversion”: Sue Bridehead’s Scandalous Sexuality

Rebecka Klette (Birkbeck, University of London)

The Mythological Other: Degeneration Theory, Female Abnormality, and Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Representations of Medea

Fraser Riddell (Durham University)

“Spellbound by that soft music, which sharpened every sense”: Singing Queer Schubert in Oscar Wilde’s Teleny

16.40 – 17.00 | Closing Remarks and Prize Giving

17.00 – 18.00 | Wine Reception

18.30 | Conference Dinner at Zizzi’s Restaurant
Abstracts

Panel One – *Social and Political Function of Abnormality*

(i) Jennifer Duggan, Sør-Trøndelag University College, Trondheim

**Screw Loose: The Evolution of a Maddening Idiom**

How did literary, sociocultural, and scientific understandings of the brain and machines influence each other during the nineteenth century, and how did this interplay shape the understanding of the brain as a mechanical, localized entity?

What role did written texts play in this?

This paper seeks to begin to answer these questions by examining the evolution of the meaning of “to have a screw loose” from having “something [generally] wrong in the condition of things” to “be[ing] eccentric, insane, or mentally retarded” (“Screw”).

In Industrial England, humans were “not … discrete actors and workers but … inseparable organic—and mechanical—links of a greater system” (Ketabgian 16). As industrialization intensified, humans began to be subsumed by and conflated with machines within the social imaginary, and questions developed about what made us different from automatons (Coll). Science sought to examine reason to prove or disprove that we were simply machines ourselves.

“To have a screw loose” originated in the late eighteenth century. The idiom is not included in Francis Grose’s original A Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue (1785), but it is in later editions, such as Pierce Egan’s Grose’s Classical Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue, Revised and Corrected (1823). And in magazines published from the early nineteenth century
forward, the phrase began to be associated with mental abnormality. In the
OED, the first listed example of the use of “screw loose” to connote mental
abnormality is from an 1810 edition of Sporting Magazine, which states,
“the others (to use a fashionable term … ) had got a screw loose” (“Lord
Eardley’s Dejeune”; emphasis in original).

This paper explores the evolution of the idiom and discusses how its
evolution reflected and was influenced by a developing understanding of the
body as a mechanical entity that could break down.

(ii) Lara Green, Northumbria University

**Sergei Stepniak and his Exceptional Terrorists:**
**Subverting Dominant Representations of Russian Terrorists for the English Reading Public 1883-1895**

This paper will explore how Sergei Stepniak (the pseudonym of the Russian
terrorist émigré Kravchinskii) mobilised stereotypes of Russian Nihilists’
abnormality, in terms of their psychology, behaviour, and dress, to
monumentalise his terrorist subjects. Stepniak lived in London from 1883
until his death in 1885 and wrote extensively on the subject of contemporary
Russia and its revolutionaries. While the majority of his work was never
particularly popular, his book *Underground Russia*, containing profiles of
terrorists, was a great commercial success. This paper will show how
Stepniak’s work shaped contemporary English perceptions of Russia, in a
period in which the cause of “Russian freedom” was coming to English
attention and the translation into English of the great works of Russian
literature was beginning, spreading these stereotypes of abnormality.
Stepniak’s work also influenced English popular literature, and I will show
why Stepniak’s networks in England are key to understanding the
development of aspects of abnormality in terrorists’ characterisation in the
popular fiction of the period. Finally, I will demonstrate how Stepniak’s
mobilisation of terrorists’ abnormality enabled him to establish large,
transnational networks supporting the cause of Russian freedom, expressing solidarity and donating money to the cause.

(iii) Daniel Simpson, Royal Holloway, University of London

‘Abnormal Enthusiasms’: The Religious Politics of Madness in Nineteenth-Century Cornwall

The early nineteenth century was a trying time to be a Methodist in Cornwall. Shunned by the dominant church, chased out of town by angry mobs, and exposed to near-constant ridicule in the right-wing press, the Methodists’s predilection to sudden, frenetic, and at times hysterical ‘revivals of religion’ earned many the ultimate indignity of being considered genuinely, and diagnostically, mad.

In this paper, I explore the construction of ‘abnormality’ in early nineteenth-century Cornwall, as it applied not only as a dialectical means to bolster normative perceptions of acceptable religious practice, but as a medical argument for theories concerning mental contagion; in the context of a still-early understanding of physiology and epidemiology, those sympathetic to the Anglican Church conspired to diagnose the Cornish Methodists’s ‘abnormal enthusiasms’ as a pathological derangement resulting from their contraction of an infectious disease of the nervous system. It did not help the nonconformist Methodists’s case that many attendants at scenes of religious revivals exhibited the symptoms of what is now popularly considered mass hysteria: shrieking, dancing, the uncontrollable movement of limbs, and even violent illness. This was, to one commentator, an instance of ‘religious insanity’, being ‘an abnormal, spasmodic development of muscular force’.

This medically-imbued concept of ‘abnormality’, I argue, became a highly efficacious means of ameliorating both the competitive and the foundational threat that Cornish Methodism posed to the Church of England. The
medicalisation of deviancy in this period confirmed the normative prestige of conventional, ‘respectable’ religious worship, while giving Anglicanism a dialectical platform upon which to reconcile itself with the basic principles of Enlightenment rationality. By looking in turn at the response of the Methodists to such attacks, however, I expose how their ability to confound and contradict accusations of abnormality itself exposed the fascinatingly subjective nature of enlightenment rationality in the contemporary period.

Panel Two – Abnormality and the Body

(i) William Abberley, Exeter University

Forged Bodies: Hidden Ancestry and Invisible Degeneracy in Grant Allen's Fiction

The physical body had an ambiguous status in Victorian theories of heredity. On the one hand, eugenists and criminologists such as Francis Galton and Cesare Lombroso were obsessed with measuring the body as a gauge of hereditary fitness or degeneracy. Through measuring instruments and composite photography, hereditarians sought to identify 'stigmata' of criminality, atavism and insanity. Yet, at the same time, medical knowledge increasingly pointed towards the unreliability of surface appearances, and the tendency of bodies to conceal hereditary tendencies. Charles Darwin's theory of sexual selection further complicated the issue, suggesting that beauty was not simply a transparent index of health but a sign system that was constantly evolving and acquiring new significations. This paper will explore late-Victorian ideas about the unreliability of the body as an index of biological fitness through the scientific essays and fiction of Grant Allen. I will focus particularly on Allen's debates with the eugenist Sir George Campbell, who argued that humans should be paired together through biometrical analysis of their bodies rather than the less reliable, natural
process of sexual attraction. Allen disagreed, arguing that the complex, mysterious instincts involved in falling in love were probably more trustworthy than any mechanistic comparison of people's physiques. Allen's belief that bodies concealed as much as they revealed shaped much of his fiction, as his stories explored themes such as racial 'passing', invisible hereditary diseases and forgotten ancestry. My paper will trace the trope of the unreliability of the body as an index of evolutionary worth in the tales of 'The Curate of Churnside' and The Devil's Die. Both depict publically respectable and visually pleasing men who are secretly sociopaths. Allen's stories suggest that murderous moral insanity can lurk invisibly behind physical bodies which seem to display all the features of health and normality.

(ii) Sophie Newman, Durham University

**Life in the Shadows: Accessing Evidence of Rickets and Nineteenth-Century Society through Bio-archaeology**

Rickets is a condition that occurs in children due to deficiencies in vitamin D. This arises principally from insufficient sunlight exposure and can have detrimental consequences for the immune system generally. However, the most evident and well-known effects associated with this condition are the skeletal malformations (e.g. bowing of the limbs). Rickets existed among past populations long before the rise of industrialisation, however the highly polluted urban environment, combined with a multitude of adverse social factors during the 18th and 19th centuries led to a dramatic increase in the prevalence. Therefore rickets has come to be recognised as one of the most notorious industrial diseases.

The bending deformities of the limbs were often described by social commentators of the time concerned with the welfare of the working classes. Attention was commonly directed to the “bandy legs” of young child labourers, and references in popular literature of this era frequently draw on
such descriptions to emphasise the pitiful condition of the lower classes. This, combined with the Victorian belief that disease and poor health were linked to deficiencies in the moral character of the afflicted, suggests that such a visually striking condition may have attracted some degree of social stigma.

However, rickets was not just a disease of the poor, and bioarchaeological evidence suggests a high prevalence within children of the upper classes. This not only reveals a wealth of information regarding child-care practices across the social strata, but also warns against the association of this condition primarily with poverty. This paper will describe how we can access evidence of rickets through bioarchaeological analysis, and will discuss what this may signify in terms of social class, environmental conditions, and childcare practices in the 19th century.

(iii) Aleksandra Traykova, Durham University

Quantifying Abnormality Then and Now: Nineteenth-Century Scientific Theories and their Ongoing Influence on Contemporary Philosophical Discussions of Disease

The biostatistical theory developed by contemporary philosopher of medicine Christopher Boorse suggests that disease could be understood as an individual organism’s deviation from a biological species’ statistically typical organ functioning. This objectified view of abnormality as a quantifiable biological parameter was anticipated over a hundred years beforehand by the French scientist Claude Bernard. The nineteenth-century physiologist – equally famous for his medical discoveries and his prolific work on scientific methodology – came up with a theory which heavily implied that physiology and pathology were merely quantitative variations of the same state, and viewed abnormality as a measurable property rather than a value-laden term for an undesirable physical trait. The introduction of this paper will present brief outlines of the two theories and draw parallels
between them. After that the results of this comparison will be combined with an analysis of nineteenth-century science’s constructions of the abnormal in order to demonstrate how the latter have influenced the way we think about health, disease and disability today. The conclusion will be that the ongoing influence of nineteenth-century science’s construction of abnormality has not only paved the way for naturalistic accounts of disease in contemporary philosophy of medicine, but also may have contributed to the medical breakthroughs associated with this historical period through small yet significant changes in the patterns of medical thinking.

Panel Three – *Gender and Sexuality*

(i) Sreemoyee Roy Chowdhury, Durham University

“The abnormalism consists in disproportion: not in inversion”: Sue Bridehead’s Scandalous Sexuality

The latter part of the 19th century witnessed a problematic intersection of biological theories on determinism and the cultural anxieties symptomatic of the changing times that marked the end of the Victorian era and the beginning of the Modern. Theories of evolutionary progress and worries about degeneration were frequently deployed to rationalize the existing gender, class, racial and imperial hierarchies. Darwinian evolutionary theory and Eugenics significantly affected women’s social reality as reproduction and maternity became the dual prongs of the “woman question” determining and confining its scope to gradations of biological difference.

The portrayal of a nervous, intellectual and non-conforming woman like Sue Bridehead, the female protagonist of *Jude the Obscure* (1895), posed a threat to the picture of conventional notions of femininity and motherhood. Sue is described by Hardy as “…the ethereal, fine-nerved, sensitive girl, quite unfitted by temperament and instinct to fulfil the conditions of the matrimonial relation with Phillotson, possibly with scarce any man…” Sue
makes her preference for sexless co-habitation very clear, but fails to enter into a peaceful platonic partnership because the men she gets involved with find it impossible to get over the “sense of her sex”.

In this paper, I will explore how Sue’s body is constantly de-sexualized and re-sexualized through the course of the novel by the male gaze of Jude and Phillotson, as well as the male authorial voice, creating the grounds for Sue to be perceived by a Victorian critic as “a strange and unnatural creature. A highly strung, nervous, hysterical woman, who...is distinctly abnormal.”

The focus will be on Sue’s presumed sexual abnormality as her disdain for societally approved sexual behaviour creates the grounds for her to be perceived as frigid, asexual or homosexual, which I argue is in direct contradiction to the clear sexual interest she displays for Jude. Her sexual choices and actions are motivated by complex, multifaceted factors and not easily slotted under any defined category, creating a cloud of obscurity around her characterization.

(ii) Rebecka Klette, Birkbeck, University of London

**The Mythological Other: Degeneration Theory, Female Abnormality, and Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Representations of Medea**

During the second half of the nineteenth century, Euripides’ *Medea* was one of the most popular of the Greek tragedies, presented in ten versions at London stages between 1845 and 1907. Medea encompassed every forbidden female transgression: she betrayed her father, murdered her brothers, abandoned her country, poisoned the woman her beloved Jason had left her for, and finally committed infanticide by taking the lives of her own children as her last act of revenge towards her husband, while ultimately escaping justice through the help of her grandfather Helios, the god of the sun. To the Victorian audience, Medea was the Foreigner, the Hysteric, and
the Criminal woman, embodying public anxieties regarding the perceived instability of gender boundaries, the notion of an untamed and abnormal female sexuality, and the emergence of the New Woman, the female Aesthete, and the Suffragette during the fin-de-siècle. I will utilise texts such as Max Nordau’s *Degeneration* (1892), Cesare Lombroso’s *Criminal woman, the prostitute, and the normal woman* (1893), and Eliza Lynn Linton’s “The Wild Women as Social Insurgents” (1891) to show how the narrative of Medea (alongside mythological characters like Medusa and the Maenads) was used to mould contemporary scientific theories of degeneration, race, madness, and criminality into the construction of the pathological female Other, in stark contrast with the perceived ideal of femininity of the Victorian era. Medea came to represent the inevitable consequence of female hereditary degeneration and hysteria, and constituted an apocalyptic vision of the future if this deviancy were not contained and subdued. Furthermore, I will discuss how the Past was used to visualise and narrate the Present, by combining mythological iconography with Victorian scientific ideas.

(iii) Fraser Riddell, Durham University

“Spellbound by that soft music, which sharpened every sense”: Singing Queer Schubert in Oscar Wilde’s Teleny

Music plays a central role in the homoerotic pornographic novel *Teleny* (1893) – a text which is frequently (though not without some controversy) attributed to Oscar Wilde and his circle. *Teleny* presents the story of a love affair between the titular concert pianist and a young Dandy, Des Grieux, and can be seen as typical of many *fin-de-siècle* texts in drawing an association between music and “abnormal” modes of sexual identity.

This paper explores several allusions in the text to lieder by Franz Schubert, and seeks to suggest that such references can be read in the light of late-Victorian notions of Schubert’s “effeminacy”. Particular reference is made to the dynamics of erotic expression in *Ungeduld* (from *Die Schöne Mullerin*
(1823)) and to the depiction of psychological crisis inherent in Der Doppelgänger (from Schwanengesang (1828)).

By contextualising the musical performances in the novel through reference to contemporary performance practice, it is possible to better understand the manner in which homosexual audiences may have perceived a “queer” subtext to these songs. For example, extant programme notes from fin-de-siècle London suggest that Ungeduld was frequently mistranslated into English to refer to “secret thoughts” that “fain would speak”. Through a combination of textual and musical analysis, the paper suggests that close attention to references to Schubert’s lieder can usefully be used to illuminate the text’s engagement with “abnormal” sexuality.

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Conference organising committee

Siobhan Harper, Durham University  Jennifer Kain, Northumbria University
David Lowther, Newcastle University  Roisín McCloskey, Durham University
Andrew Moss, Durham University  Jonathan Quayle, Newcastle University
Lyndsey Skinner, Northumbria University

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