

## Predatory Neo-Victorian Novels

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**Ho, Tammy Lai-Ming. *Neo-Victorian Cannibalism: A Theory of Contemporary Adaptations*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 150 pages. ISBN 978-3-030-02558-8. Hb. €58.84.**

Until the mid-1990s, the sheer quantity of neo-Victorian fiction was hardly matched by the amount of academic work aiming to understand this new mode of literature. Since then, however, this mode, diverse in terms of genre, topics, and devices, has started to attract scholarly attention on a large scale. A recent contribution to this rapidly growing body of work is Tammy Lai-Ming Ho's monograph, *Neo-Victorian Cannibalism*—the result of her doctoral research at King's College, London. Her book focuses on canonical Victorian novels and literary personae, and their recent adaptations in neo-Victorian novels. She applies the metaphor of cannibalism to describe and emphasize the aggressive, devouring nature of these adaptations feeding on their Victorian predecessors.

In the Introduction, Ho elucidates the notion of literary cannibalism, the “aggressive appropriation of pre-existing texts” (2), and applies it to neo-Victorian fiction and criticism, claiming that cannibalism is a defining characteristic of both. In the subsequent three chapters, she analyzes the forms of literary “cannibalism” of Victorian texts and authors of neo-Victorian works. The second and fourth chapters investigate already extensive discourses regarding *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), as well as *Dracula* (1897) and its adaptations, the neo-*Draculas*. Although Ho's application of the cannibalism theory could be seen as a novel addition to the reading of these literary classics, she fails to offer a groundbreaking understanding either of Victorian texts or of their rewritings.

“Contesting (Post-)Colonialism” offers a complicated and many-layered argument on how *Jane Eyre* and Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* are cannibalistic of each other: “[h]ere we see that postcolonial neo-Victorian writing is both cannibalised and cannibalising; *Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* are engaged in a simultaneous communion” (29). She argues that *Wide Sargasso Sea* is cannibalistic of *Jane Eyre* for various reasons, including the incorporation of characters, plot elements, and locations (27-28), making the rather obvious point that Rhys’s novel could not have been written without *Jane Eyre* (28). She also contends, however, that *Wide Sargasso Sea*, having been fully canonized, has altered the interpretation of *Jane Eyre* (30), a Victorian colonial novel, so *Jane Eyre* is also cannibalistic of Rhys’s novel: “*Jane Eyre* and *Wide Sargasso Sea*: they are inside one another, sharing one body, nourishing and completing the other” (29). Ho also discusses three other rewritings of *Jane Eyre*: Lin Haire-Sargeant’s *H: The Story of Heathcliff’s Journey Back to Wuthering Heights* (1992), D. M. Thomas’s *Charlotte: The Final Journey of Jane Eyre* (2000), and Emma Tennant’s *Adèle: The Hidden Story of Jane Eyre* (2002), and examines how they are cannibalizing the original Victorian text rather than Rhys’s neo-Victorian work. Here, Ho’s main point is that although *Wide Sargasso Sea* has established a certain way of rereading *Jane Eyre*, more recent neo-Victorian novels do not follow Rhys’s path in empowering Bertha Mason, but rather return to Brontë’s work. Ho rejects the three *Jane Eyre* rewritings based upon their dismissive treatment of Bertha Mason, and claims that the authors of these novels “implicitly deny, parody and subvert Rhys’ achievements, and situate their works more comfortably with the Victorian author’s version” (44). However, if all *Jane Eyre* rewritings followed this restrictive reinterpretation of Brontë’s work, as well as Bertha Mason’s character, the result would be one-sided novels that have nothing on their agenda but the presentation of postcolonial Caribbean people in a politically correct fashion. Furthermore, this simplifying and prescriptive judgment of neo-Victorian fiction makes its pivotal purpose

futile, since neo-Victorian literature examines nineteenth-century works from all possible points of view, each text expressing its own unique reading of Victoriana.

The book's most significant contribution to neo-Victorian criticism is the third chapter, which, as a researcher in the field of neo-Dickensian fiction, I find most useful. Not only does this chapter contain an impressive conceptual groundwork for neo-Dickensian literature—clearly the result of thorough research—but it also provides a new angle for evaluating the neo-Victorian obsession with Charles Dickens. “The neo-Victorian is characterized by an urge to treat history in a revisionist mode, evident in the feminist and postcolonial perspectives many novels bring to their recreations of the Victorian era. Dickens' own life and interests provide material for the exploration of these themes” (60). Analyzing Gaynor Arnold's novel, *Girl in a Blue Dress* (2008), Ho addresses a very popular, if academically mostly overlooked segment of neo-Victorian fiction, that of biofiction. This genre is thriving nowadays, with quite a few recent fictional biographies focusing on Dickens's life. “[T]he negative portrayal and debunking of their [neo-Victorian novelists'] literary predecessors takes on oedipal connotations and may be seen as an attempt to destroy, or triumph over literary influence” (58). When Ho uses Harold Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* (1997), she only does so to understand the phenomenon of pre-dating neo-Victorian plots before their Victorian originals, and the intention of neo-Victorian authors to gain dominance, the power to control fictional time and thus originality (106, 126). Consequently, she fails to reflect on the implications of Bloom's Oedipal understanding of literary history, or to comment on their relevance, or irrelevance, for the study of neo-Dickensian literature.

Because of the complexity of the analysis resulting from Ho's attempts to explain the connection between Dickens, Gaynor, and cannibalism (theoretical or fictional), her exploration constructs a literary *ouroboros*, yet it fails to conclude in a breakthrough. Ho merely states that Dickens as an author was preoccupied with cannibalism in his works (66),

that Gaynor, a neo-Dickensian novelist, is cannibalistic of Dickens, and that Alfred, alias Dickens, a character in the novel, is sexually cannibalistic of the women in his life (69). She also suggests that the fictional Alfred becomes a metaphorical victim of cannibalism, since his readers and family eat his creativity and money up (74), restaging Dickens's own real life experience. Although Ho's intermingling of adaptation theory and plot analysis fails to reveal new aspects of either Dickens's or Gaynor's fiction, this unorthodox approach to understanding neo-Victorian literature is fresh and thought-provoking, which is somehow reminiscent of neo-Victorian literature itself. This kind of fiction, together with the critical work it has inspired, is on the way to crystallization and canonization, and at the moment all contributions to this field are welcome and worthy of attention.

The fourth chapter is mainly concerned with the power and originality of Victorian authors who often transfigure into characters in neo-Victorian novels, only to get deprived of their authorial power. Ho examines how Stoker's authorial power diminishes through later adaptations of *Dracula*. In a not too original critical move, she introduces vampirism as a near-synonym of cannibalism, claiming that authorial power and ingenuity are understood as the "life-blood" of Victorian writers: "if books carry their authors' life-blood, neo-Victorian novels can be said to suck the life-blood of their Victorian predecessors for their own existence" (109). This argument is not much different from the original argument of the Introduction, only the metaphor changes, while the consequences of the change of metaphor as to the neo-Victorian strategies under scrutiny are not really addressed. She analyzes three neo-*Dracula* novels to elaborate on "vampirism": "I see blood as a signification of Stoker's originary power. Neo-Victorian writers are akin to vampires who drain Stoker of his authorial vitality and suck their literary ancestor's life-blood to maintain their own existence" (96). This idea—once more—confuses fiction with adaptation theory, the metaphorical images from *Dracula* employed to elaborate on the main idea in Ho's book without providing any new

aspects to it. All three novels—Tom Holland’s *Supping with Panthers* (1996), Leslie S. Klinger’s *The New Annotated Dracula* (2008), and Dacre Stoker and Ian Holt’s *Dracula the Un-Dead* (2009)—rob Stoker of his authorial control by resorting to what Ho calls a dual cannibalism (92). She uses the term in reference for the tendency of the original authors appearing as characters in neo-Victorian rewritings, while arguing that it is beneficial for contemporary writers to incorporate the vitality of Victorian works and writers, and to identify with them (96). In the three neo-*Dracula* novels examined, Stoker becomes a character, a part of fiction, thus the authors of these novels can override Stoker as the “real” creators of *Dracula*. She contends that various factors have played a role in weakening Stoker as the writer of *Dracula* in neo-Victorian texts: many of these works portray Stoker as only a reporter of the “real-life” story of Dracula. They are critical of Stoker’s association with the theater, as he could have impersonated an author (97), of his deliberately assumed role in *Dracula* as the editor of the documents (98), as well as of Stoker’s factual errors. These errors, such as misquoting Shakespeare, misunderstanding the Bible, and employing incorrect French grammar, are played upon by neo-Victorian authors, to undermine Stoker’s authority (98-99).

Ho, however, in the Conclusion, makes a crucial point, according to which canonical texts are especially difficult to rewrite, and she also introduces the term “ideology exhaustion,” referring to the difficulty “for writers to add new interpretations to a canonical text” (120) to highlight a potential drawback of neo-Victorian fiction.

At certain points, Ho’s book diverts from its main analytical focus, the reading of neo-Victorian novels as incorporating original Victorian works in a metaphorically cannibalistic way, to explore vaguely connected ideas and clarify the problems under discussion, while elsewhere it combines theoretical and fictional cannibalism. For all its flaws, *Neo-Victorian Cannibalism* is still an appreciated and extremely well-researched new take on neo-Victorian

literature, which might be of use for anyone studying neo-Victorian fiction, adaptation theory, or any of the novels analyzed in the book.

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