

## Victoria's Secrets: Secrecy in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Society

To know a secret is not to tell someone something: but the pleasure we get from keeping secrets is often only realized when we tell. All narratives are acts of telling that defer the revelations of secrets to keep readers in suspense. All literary works then, embody secrecy in their form. Yet secrets also have a wider value in society. As withheld information, they ensure some people know more than others. Depending on the secret, this might give someone the edge over a rival in business or love, allow scandal to be concealed, or create the opportunity for blackmail. This course examines the role of secrecy in nineteenth-century literature and society.

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Each week consists of one small-group seminar and a plenary workshop. The seminars will be devoted to close discussion of the texts; in the plenaries, we will explore some of the more theoretical issues associated with the study of secrecy.

The plenary sessions will also be used to read and discuss a key nineteenth-century novel, *The Moonstone*, in the Dickens's weekly magazine, *All the Year Round*, in which it was first published.

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### Week 1:

#### 1.1 Victoria's Secrets: Introduction

This week's class explores the overall theme of the course. We will discuss secrecy as widely as possible, situating within a range of contexts. These will include the role of secrecy in the exchange of information (can you own knowledge?); the relationship between secrets and desire (why do we want to know?); the link between secrecy and the past (is the past always concealed?); the way secrecy interacts with power (who gets to tell them?); and the importance of the telling of secrets (all will be revealed). We will consider how we view secrecy today and, using one of the first Sherlock Holmes stories, compare these with how they were considered in the nineteenth century.

#### Required reading:

- There is no required reading for this class. Instead, I want you to find some examples of secrets being told. These might be in literature you have read, in the media, or in your life more generally. Be prepared to talk about them!

#### 1.2 A Case of Identity

#### Required reading:

- Instalments 1-3 of *The Moonstone*.
- Arthur Conan Doyle, 'A Case of Identity' and 'The Copper Beeches', *Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*, edited by Richard Lancelyn Green (Oxford: Oxford)

University Press 1998).

## Week 2:

### 2.1 Secrets in Verse: Secrecy, Meaning and Desire

This seminar looks at a selection of nineteenth-century poetry in order to see some of the uses of secrecy discussed in week one appear in literature. We will look at secrecy as part of poetic technique, as well as an important part of nineteenth-century culture.

#### Required reading:

The following from the *Norton Anthology*:

- Robert Browning: 'Porphyria's Lover' and 'My Last Duchess' (Greenblatt and Abrams, II, 2006, 1252-1253 and 1255-6).
- Christina Rossetti 'In an Artist's Studio' and 'Winter: My Secret' (Greenblatt and Abrams, II, 2006, 1463 and 1464-5)
- Lewis Carroll 'Jabberwocky' and Humpty Dumpty's explanation of it from *Through the Looking Glass* (Greenblatt and Abrams, II, 1530-1531). Try and at least have a look at *Through the Looking Glass* to get a sense of its context.

### 2.2 Sex and Secrecy

In this plenary session we will begin to look at nineteenth-century constructions of sexuality, paying particular attention to modes of sexual expression and how these have been understood by scholars.

#### Required reading:

- Instalments 4-6 of *The Moonstone*
- Chapter one, 'Mr Acton of Queen Anne Street, or, the Wisdom of Our Ancestors' in Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians: A Study of Sexuality and Pornography in Mid-Nineteenth-Century England* (Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1966), pp. 1-33.
- Holly Furneaux, 'Sexuality' in *Charles Dickens in Context*, edited by Sally Ledger and Holly Furneaux (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 358-364.

## Week 3:

### 3.1 Revealing the Truth about Sexuality: the 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon'

The 'Maiden Tribute of Modern Babylon' was a sensational piece of journalism that exposed the existence of child prostitution to the nineteenth-century reading public. In this class we will consider what the editor and author of the articles, W.T. Stead exposed, the way in which he did so, as well as questions of gender and sexuality more widely.

Required reading:

Readings from the *Pall Mall Gazette* (available via the Library).

**3.2 Seductions of Investigation**

This plenary will link detective fever with other forms of investigation in order to explore why there is pleasure in finding things out.

Required reading:

- Instalments 7-9 of *The Moonstone*
- Nathaniel Hawthorne, 'The Birth-Mark' (1846).

**Week 4:****4.1 Science**

Nineteenth-century scientists often described their working as revealing the secret's of nature: we will discuss whether this is true (or even possible) and consider whether it is actually the scientists who are responsible for keeping secrets.

Required reading:

- Darwin's account of how he conceived of the theory of natural selection as reprinted in his son's edition of *The Life and Letters of Charles Darwin* (1887), pp. 82-89. This is available from the *Complete Works of Charles Darwin Online* <<http://darwin-online.org.uk/content/frameset?viewtype=side&itemID=F1452.1&pageseq=100>>.
- And the letters concerning his priority against the claims of Wallace from the *Darwin Correspondence Project* <<http://darwinproject.ac.uk>>.

**4.2 Secrecy, Repression and the Uncanny**

This plenary session explores Freud's notion of 'Das Unheimlich' ('the uncanny') as a way to describe repression. Although this concept has a wide application, it provides an explanation as to why things are concealed.

Required reading:

- Instalments 10-12 of *The Moonstone*.
- Sigmund Freud, 'The Uncanny' in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McClintock (London: Penguin, 2003), pp. 123-162.

**Week 5:**

## 5.1 Secrecy and the Occult

The word ‘occult’ means to conceal and so occult knowledge is concealed knowledge. This seminar considers the relationship between the search for knowledge and the occult.

### Required reading:

- M.R. James, ‘Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You My Lad’ and ‘Casting the Runes’, *Count Magnus and Other Ghost Stories*, edited by S.T. Joshi (London: Penguin Classics, 2005).

## 5.2 Science and Spiritualism (plenary, 25 October 2012)

The relationships between science and spiritualism were tense throughout the century. Although the scientific establishment repudiated spiritualism, well-regarded scientists such as William Crookes and Oliver Lodge (the first Principal of the University of Birmingham) were professed spiritualists and the Society for Psychical Research (1882-) placed paranormal research on a scientific footing. Spiritualism, then, not only represented an attempt to look ‘beyond the veil’ but its practice could also be a guilty secret in its own right.

### Required reading:

- Instalments 13-15 of *The Moonstone*
- ‘Amberley’, ‘Experiences of Spiritualism’, *Fortnightly Review*, 15 (1874), pp. 82-91.
- ‘Phantoms to the Test’ and ‘Touching the Unknown’ from Marina Warner, *Phantasmagoria* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 237-249, 287-297.

## **Week 6. Private study week – no class**

### **Week 7:**

## 7.1 Blackmail 1

This seminar begins a series of sessions on one of the most common plot techniques of nineteenth-century prose fiction, blackmail. Blackmail is a curious use of secrecy, in which one person threatens to reveal the secrets of another.

### Required reading

- Edgar Allan Poe, ‘Purloined Letter’ (1845).

## 7.2 Blackmail 2

This plenary explores how the emergence of the blackmail plot is connected to the information economy of the nineteenth century.

Required reading:

- Instalments 16-18 of *The Moonstone*.
- Alexander Welsh, 'More and More Knowledge' and 'Threatening Publicity' in *George Eliot and Blackmail* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1985), pp. 33-84.

**Week 8:****8.1 Narrative 1: Knowing it All**

Published the same year as Darwin's *Origin of Species*, George Eliot's 'The Lifted Veil' is a gothic fantasy whose protagonist is cursed with both telepathy and clairvoyance. In this seminar, we will explore what problems this poses for narrative, introducing some of the links between secrecy and narrative that will be pursued over the next two weeks.

Required reading:

- George Eliot, 'The Lifted Veil', in *The Lifted Veil, and Brother Jacob*, edited by Helen Small (London: Penguin Classics, 1999), pp. 1-43.

**8.2 Narrative 2: Intentionality (plenary, 15 November 2012)**

This plenary session begins a series that focus on the relationship between secrecy and narrative. In this first class, we will begin to explore the difference between narrative and plot.

Required reading:

- Instalments 19-21 of *The Moonstone*.
- Peter Brooks, 'Reading for the Plot', *Reading for the Plot* (1984; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 3-36.

**Week 9:****9.1 Narrative 3: Indeterminacy**

All narratives depend on secrecy (what happens next?). This seminar will investigate what happens when the desire for an ending is thwarted.

Required reading:

- Rudyard Kipling, 'Mrs Bathurst' in *Traffics and Discoveries* (1904).
- David Lodge, 'Indeterminacy in Modern Narrative: Reading Off "Mrs Bathurst"', in *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism* (London and New York: Routledge), pp. 143-153.

## 9.2 Narrative 4: Desire

In this plenary session we will explore the relationship between narrative and desire. Using the ideas in Brooks's essay, we will consider what happens when narrative is arrested or delayed through the operation of secrecy.

### Required reading:

- Instalments 22-24 of *The Moonstone*.
- Peter Brooks, 'Narrative Desire Reading for the Plot', *Reading for the Plot* (1984; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 37-61.

## Week 10:

### 10.1 Narrative 5: *Bleak House* (1)

This seminar focuses on Dickens's classic examination of the importance of information, *Bleak House*. We will discuss the novel in terms of how the narrative is told, as well as who is responsible for hoarding and / or revealing information.

### Required reading:

- Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996).

### 10.2 Narrative 6: *Bleak House* (2)

In this plenary we will continue our discussions of *Bleak House*, comparing it to that other novel of detection, *The Moonstone*.

### Required reading:

- Instalments 25-27 of *The Moonstone*.
- Charles Dickens, *Bleak House*, ed. by Stephen Gill (Oxford: Oxford University Press 1996).

## Week 11:

### 11.1 Narrative 7: *Lady Audley's Secret*

This class will consider a different genre of novel, sensation fiction. This narrative mode was characterized by its exciting plots. We will consider whether, despite the novel's title, Lady Audley really has much of a secret. You might want to reread the chapter by Alexander Welsh, discussed in week 3.

### Required reading:

- Mary Elizabeth Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, edited by Jenny Bourne Taylor (London: Penguin Classics, 1998).

## 11.2 Conclusion: 'Victoria's Secrets'

In this plenary session we will discuss the *Moonstone*, both as serial and novel in volume form. We will consider how these different publishing modes affect the structured revelation upon which this genre of fiction (and all types of narrative) depend.

### Required reading:

- Instalments 28-32 of *The Moonstone*.