'"Rats is bogies I tell you, and bogies is rats": Rats, Repression and the Gothic Mode'

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> Dirty Bloody London! For all its modernity, its high standard of living, it could still breed obnoxious, disease-carrying vermin. (Herbert, 1999, p.61)

This line from James Herbert's *The Rats* (1974) showcases the common ground between modern horror's use of rats as a device and the Victorian period's; both find fault with the state of London. *The Rats* is primarily known for its excesses of horror, with Alasdair Spark stating that 'the rhythm of Herbert's fiction is founded on such regular "gross-outs"' (1993, p.149). Herbert's graphic descriptions are not entirely gratuitous, however, as they emphasize the underlying message of the novel: that the dramatic events are exacerbated by society's failings. In Craig Cabell's biography, this is linked to Herbert's own experiences of growing up in London:

> *The Rats* is full of social commentary. Especially the state of suburban London after the quick fixes imposed by the government to ease overcrowding. (2004, p.47)

The novel criticizes the extremes of wealth and poverty across London, as well as a government that does not rectify the divide, with Spark identifying that 'a parallel horror exists, located […] in the refusal of the authorities to recognize the threat of [the rats]' (1993, p.149). One of the failings of the novel, according to Spark, is a 'lack of […] contemporaneity', and he further states that '*The Rats* is now a historical novel' (p.151). While its setting may be dated, *The Rats* in fact shares many traits with age-old discourses about rats that informs not only their Gothic character, but their utilisation in fiction. Rats in Gothic writing reveal the repressed, and act most often as signposts to deprivation wilfully ignored by society. Cabell further notes that *The Rats* succeeds 'on a moral level, exposing the dirt and grime of Britain's capital city to the world' (2004, p.48). The use of 'exposing' here is demonstrative: without the shocking scenes caused by rats, such neglect would not otherwise come to light. This has been recognized clearly through Herbert's sympathetic portrayal of the victims. In one instance, the rats' victim is a baby left unattended by its mother, but the text makes it plain that 'it is the poverty of the surroundings which makes her leave the room' (Spark, 1993, p.153). In another scene, homophobia is challenged when an outed homosexual is killed by rats 'as a result of the gossip and censure of his colleagues, which drives him from his job and his home, and condemns him to the vagrancy which then makes him vulnerable' (p.153). Such instances are indicative of the type of news story that was common throughout the Victorian period, and continue to be printed today;[i] sensational stories of rat attacks are written to horrify, but they also give a rare window into the extent of Victorian poverty.

The Rats' Victorian links began with its inception. Herbert not only lists Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) as one of his ten favourite books (1992, p.77), but the idea for the novel came to him 'late one Friday evening' as he watched Bela Lugosi's *Dracula* (Cabell, 2004, p.43). Such a connection seems a typical homage by a horror writer seeking to align his work to a canonical text, but Herbert picks up on a key scene that shows the intelligent use of rats in both Stoker's story and his: 'it was the part where the poor demented Renfield […] has a dream of rats' (p.44). In Stoker's novel, the madman, Renfield, utters the following speech:

> "Rats, rats, rats! Hundreds, thousands, millions of them, and every one a life. And dogs to eat them, and cats too. All lives! All red blood, with years of life in it, and not merely buzzing flies!" (2002, p.280)

The language here exemplifies how some writers align rats with the impoverished 'millions' whose lives were rarely considered – particularly in Victorian Britain. A key feature of rats as a species is that they pose a significant threat individually or in a pack – but like 'the masses', the popular imagination seems primarily to deal with them as a collective. Despite common attitudes, the volume of rats does not detract from the fact that each one holds a life of its own. It is this link between rats and the poorest echelons of society that this chapter examines. Through the treatment of rats in the Victorian popular press, and how their rhetoric is rearticulated into Gothic prose through writers like Stoker and Herbert, this chapter dissects the treatment of rats in both Gothic fiction and sensational news stories. Rats' role in exposing, not causing, the horrors of deprivation, has directly led to their characterisation as an inherently Gothic animal.

Rats Exposing Neglect and Destitution

It is, of course, not surprising to point out that rats have been linked with poverty. From the Black Death to contemporary tabloid headlines, rats and their associations to the most deprived in society are consistent. This idea was firmly cemented in the Victorian period where writers began to explore the inequality of the age. The paragon of popular fiction, Charles Dickens, frequently wrote about the working classes, and a comparison to rats was a metaphor he utilized several times. For instance, in *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841), Old Nell and her grandfather are described by the villainous Quilp as being 'in reality as poor as frozen rats' (p.465), indicating their complete destitution, while in *Little Dorrit* (1857), below the Bank near Mrs Gowan's residence is described as having 'a suite of three or four rooms with barred windows, which had the appearance of a jail for criminal rats' (p.409), specifically linking rats, poor people and criminals together in the popular imagination. Published the same year as *Little Dorrit,* Charlotte Maria Tucker's *The Rambles of a Rat* (1857), was a work of children's literature that linked rats and poor children together, didactically promoting kindness to

both. Victorian fiction was steeped in rhetoric that associated rats and the working classes together as the strata of society that needed most improving.

The linking of poverty and rats was not only found in fiction. Writing in the same decades as Dickens and Tucker, Henry Mayhew's exposé, *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851), recognized more broadly the realities of the London poor, revealing a symbiotic relationship between rats and the working classes. In a chapter entitled 'The Destroyers of Vermin', Mayhew describes the rat as 'small, weak, and contemptible in its appearance', though it 'possesses properties that render it a more formidable enemy to mankind' (Vol 3, p.3). Despite being an 'enemy to mankind', subsections of the London poor depended on rats to earn a decent living. Mayhew interviewed street-sellers of rat-poison, calculating that in London there must be 25 different sellers that touted their wares, each of whom had a daily earning of 1s (Vol 1, p.452, 489). Mayhew also interviewed Jack Black, 'Rat and mole destroyer to Her Majesty' (Vol 3, p.11), who describes the trade in rat baiting, noting rats were bred for the blood sport, which was a popular pastime for 'men of every grade of society' (Vol 3, p.5), as demonstrated in the illustration of the sport in Mayhew's text (Figure 1).

RATTING—"THE GRAHAM ARMS," GRAHAM STREET.

[*From a Photograph.*]

Figure 1: 'Rat Baiting', Henry Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851, repub. 1862), 3 Volumes (London: Griffin, Bohn and Company). p.8.

London Labour and the London Poor reveals that while rats on mass were being culled by poison-sellers and their customers, other rats were simultaneously being specifically bred as fuel for sport and 'rat fanciers' – people who bred rats as domestic pets. 'The rat', then, began to split over the nineteenth century into different classifications: rodent,[ii] pest and pet. Overall, rats were treated as

a commodity, much as the working class were themselves: to be captured, sold, groomed and killed as needed.

While it was the upper classes that mostly kept rats as pets, in reported cases it was the most vulnerable in society that were the victims of rat attacks. When such attacks made sensational news, it brought the deeper issues of a hypocritical society into sharp focus. A case that articulates a distinctly sensation-fiction tone is reported as 'A Child Eaten by Rats at Exeter. Atrocious Neglect' in *The York Herald* in December 1875. The article states:

> it was generally known that Mrs. Willis had taken the custody of her sister's illegitimate daughter, who was then a few weeks old. From that time until a few days since nothing has been seen of the child. (p.3)

The mystery of the child is solved one morning, when a basket is pulled out from under a table containing a child covered in blood. Though the child is injured, Mrs Willis' 'first anxiety' is to urge her neighbour to keep her secret; however, '[t]he child […] was so badly bitten by the rats that concealment was impossible, and she carried it off to the hospital' (p.3). Despite the bites to the child, the rats are not the direct threat. As in many Gothic stories, it is the act of cruelty and neglect of keeping the child secreted in a kitchen basement cupboard, perpetrated by the child's guardian, which does the most harm. The rats are the device that bring the crime to light and expose the secret.

The above is an extreme example; most other stories reveal the shocking living conditions of the Victorian poor. In 1857, *The Morning Post* reports that a mother 'was awakened by severe pain in her finger and forehead, and also by the screams of her infant child. On putting up her hand to her forehead it came in contact with a rat, which was fixed on her temple' ('Ferocious Rats', p.2). The only reason why *this* family should be privy to such an attack is that they lived near 'a common sewer' (p.2), which was an issue that blighted poor areas. In 1887, a report of a law suit in the *Aberdeen Weekly Journal* notes that '[t]he Sheriff, in giving his decision, stated that if a tenant was driven from his house by bad drains or vermin […] it was settled that he was not bound to pay rent for the time his house was uninhabitable' ('House Infested with Rats': 6). The story 'Sewage, Drain Rats, and Overcrowding', from an 1897 edition of *The Daily News*, reported on the inquest of a child who died of diphtheria:

> "The mother, continuing, said that there was a dreadful smell from the drains, which were out of repair. There were holes in the w.c., up which numbers of drain rats made their way". (p.6)

What marks this story out is its engagement with exposing the ultimate cause – the family were not in a position to move to a safer domicile and society at large was wilfully ignorant of the issues:

‘“Witness: You don’t know the trouble it is for poor people with big families to get a house. Landlords don’t want us”’ (p.6). The unfortunate state of affairs is summed up by a quotation from a juror:

> “A more shameful state of affairs never existed. Surely in a civilized country we can prevent these children from spreading diphtheria all over the place.” (p.6)

The juror demonstrates not only their ignorance with the problems facing many, but their belief that Victorian society is above the problems caused by low standards of living, such as being overrun with rats.

The working classes, even in death, were victims of rat attacks that literally stripped them of their identity. In the case of ‘A Man Devoured by Rats’, published in *The York Herald* in 1861, a skeleton is found in a ship mostly stripped by rats. The inquest concludes that ‘the deceased must have secreted himself in the pump-well in order to obtain a free passage to England’, ‘“but how or by what means the deceased came by his death they had no legal evidence to prove”’ (p.11). Later in the century, another story in *The York Herald* bares the same Gothic hallmarks. Firstly, a sensational heading: ‘A Man Eaten by Rats near Gainsborough’ (1889), and secondly, a skeleton is found stripped of flesh and described in lurid detail: ‘the flesh of the left arm and the whole left side of the face having been devoured to the bare bone by rats’ (p.8). The fact that the man’s ‘general appearance indicated that he had occupied a fairly good position’ emphasizes the precariousness of social rank and the shortage of assistance (p.8). Even someone reasonably well-off could fall to ‘such a shocking state of destitution’ that they die half-eaten in a Gainsborough shed (p.8).

This type of sensational news story directly informs Gothic fiction. The capacity of rats to act as a focus point of Victorian repression and hypocrisy is depicted by Stoker, not only in *Dracula*, but in his short fiction as well. In ‘The Burial of the Rats’ (1896) an upper class tourist also strives to avoid having his bones picked cleaned by rats in ‘the Kingdom of Dust’ (Stoker, 2006, p.98) – Paris’ waste district. This area’s residents are the city’s rag-pickers: ‘squalid, hungry-looking men and women’ (93). In an era of progress, the narrator explains that such areas are immune to social improvement:

> Dust is dust all the world over, in every age, and the family likeness of dust-heaps is perfect. The traveller, therefore, who visits the environs of Montrouge can go back in fancy without difficulty to the year 1850. (p.94)

Stoker’s narrative consistently compares the human inhabitants with rats – not necessarily in a derogatory way, but by highlighting them both as masses of desperate creatures referred to as ‘“sewer rats”’ (p.102). The rats are spotted by the unnamed narrator early on – like the humans, they are constantly watching him; he sees ‘everywhere, despite the gloom, the baleful glitter of the eyes of the rats’ (p.100). While he sits in a make-shift hut, he thinks he sees the eyes of the rats

surrounding him, only to realize that 'these latter eyes seemed more than usually large and bright and baleful!' (p.100) – they are the eyes of the rag-pickers watching his every move. The repeated adjective 'baleful' to describe both the rats' and the inhabitants' eyes not only serves to collapse the distinctions between them, but it also hides from the man that fact that he is surrounded by vagabonds – 'pursuers, who were more animals than men' (p.107) – waiting to murder him for his conspicuous signs of wealth. The inhabitants use the rats' associations of living in dirt and squalor, watching from a distance, to their advantage; they hide themselves amongst the rats, blending into the background; the rats unconsciously assist the inhabitants in their exploits.

The comparison between the inhabitants and the rats is also emphasized when an old woman recounts a story to distract the young man, telling him of her earliest experiences in the drains, helping to look for a lost man who they find not only dead, but completely stripped of his flesh by rats: '"They had even eaten their own dead ones and there were bones of rats as well as of the man"' (p.102). Like the inhabitants, the rats are so desperate and bloodthirsty as to attack their own kind – an act which foreshadows the story's conclusion. After finding the police, the young man returns, to arrest his attackers. Arriving back, the other assailants and the rats have already hidden all evidence:

> "No trace here now; nothing to prove that man was the one wounded by your soldiers' bullets! Probably they murdered him to cover up the trace. See!" again he stooped and placed his hands on the skeleton. "The rats work quickly and they are many. These bones are warm!" (p.117)

Here, the rats hide the evidence of the man's attack, therefore helping the inhabitants to cover up the traces of their misdeeds from the police. Stoker's gothic tale employs themes and facts his public would be familiar with. Overall, Stoker demonstrates shocking scenes of degradation most prefer to think of as in the past, highlighting the results of extreme want.

Rats as the Enemy and Invader

In the Victorian popular imagination, rats are an invading force. Like a plague, they are an external threat moving in to menace a 'civilized' Victorian society. In some instances the rats themselves are emphasized as being alien, segregating the Norwegian rat out from the domestic British rat.[iii] As one example, in 1848 *The Blackburn Standard* complained that Wakefield was overrun with rats 'of a new species being all of them black, most of them have white rings round their necks, *and all are without tails!'* ('Extraordinary Rats', p.1, emphasis in original). This is a prolonged process of 'othering' the rat problem as something new with specific causes. This is, of course, not the case, because rats have been an ever present aspect of agricultural and urban life in Britain. As the

harbingers of the Black Death their links to such a fundamentally *medieval* disease makes them repositories of the past. Given that rats are closely associated with a lack of civilization – the antithesis of modernity – it is hardly surprising that Victorian society wanted to perpetuate the myth that when rats caused problems it was not because of the unchallenged problems of poverty and substandard living conditions. This emphasizes one of the key uses as rats as a Gothic motif – rats often become signifiers of truth, bringing things to the surface that others would have kept buried.

Through nineteenth-century British newspaper reports, it becomes clear that to many an infestation of rats was a hostile invasion and the popular discourse about rats adopts the language of military conflict. For instance, an 1850 article in *Bell's Life in London and Sporting Chronicle,* entitled 'How to Kill Rats', gives an account of a man who had 'a whole aviary of prettily plumaged pets destroyed by rats in one night', 'and has now published an account of his recent *campaign* against the *enemy*' (p.8, emphasis added). He tells the reader that 'The *great field* was Friday last' and '"For the benefit of all who may hereafter fall *victims* to the rapacity of rats"' shares the details of his '*military tactics*' (p.8, emphasis added). Humans saw their relationship with rats as a war to be won, rather than a relationship to be managed.

This military semantic field linguistically persists throughout the rest of the century. *The Racing Times* in 1867 held an account of a 'March Of An Army of Rats' – whereby a man was surprised one night by a migration rats, describing his situation as being 'suddenly in the midst of a *legion* of rats' (p.5, emphasis added). When, in 1884, *The North-Eastern Daily Gazette* reported on 'A Plague of Rats in London' it was 'the fierce nature of the [rat's] *warfare* [that] testified to their extreme voracity' (p.1, emphasis added), while an 1895 article in *The Bristol Mercury* entitled 'Rats, Rats' discusses animals like conscripts: 'one license holder who has seen rats playing on the dining table has pressed no fewer than seven cats into his service' (p.1). The use of this military language for over a fifty year period, demonstrates how pervasive the 'war' on rats was, and how steeped in this rhetoric the Victorian public were.

Like all wars, the battle against rats was fought with weapons. There are a huge number of rat deterrents and poisons advertised in the newspapers, many using words like 'infallible' (Advert, 1860, *Hull* Packet, p.2). No mercy was to be shown, with advertisements frequently promising huge numbers of rats killed, such as one advert that offered rat genocide with the phrase: '[n]ow is the time to banish their present and succeeding generations' (Advert, 1899, *Horse and* Hound, p.695). During years when rats were a particular menace, especially to agriculture, there was much discussion of the best means of destroying rats in the newspapers. The efficacy of certain animals was a particular focus. As Jack Black elaborates in Mayhew's text: '"As rat-killing dogs, there's no

equal to that strain of black tan terriers"' (Vol 3, p.15). This was an internationally held belief, as an 1873 American book, entitled *Terrier Dogs*, features an entire section on rats and rat killing, referring to the dog as 'rat's greatest enemy' (James, p.34). Notably, terriers are similarly singled out in *Dracula*. Preparing for an incursion into one of Dracula's safe-houses, Arthur prepares to battle rats with: '"an antidote on call"' (Stoker, 2002, p.252). Arthur's rat-antidote is a whistle that 'was answered […] by the yelping of dogs, and after about a minute three terriers came dashing round the corner of the house' (p.255). The dogs proved effective, scattering the rats despite the Count's malign influence – Van Helsing even remarks upon their success noting how the rats '"run pell-mell from the so little dogs of my friend Arthur"' (p.257). Despite the rats being under Dracula's supernatural influence, their fear of dogs overrules his hold over them; the hierarchy within the animal kingdom remains paramount. Stoker's use of terriers therefore demonstrates his knowledge of the premier means of rat killing of his day.

One reason why there was so much discussion of how to kill rats was the uncanny intelligence they often displayed, especially in relation to escaping rat-traps. As *The Aberdeen Weekly Journal* in 1890 notes: 'the rat was endowed with such instincts that, however well conceived the device might be, it was not a game which could be played twice in the same quarter with an equal amount of success' ('Extermination of Rats', p.6). An advertisement for the poison 'Rough on Rats' also draws upon rats' intelligence and the war that needed to be waged by noting (Figure 2): 'Rats are smart, but "Rough on Rats" beats them' ('Rough on Rats', 1890, p.480). Stoker uses rats' uncanny intelligence in a more

Figure 2: © British Library Board 'Rough on Rats' Advertisement, *The Penny Illustrated Paper and Illustrated Times*, Saturday 4th October 1890, Issue 1531, p.223.

typical Victorian ghost story, 'The Judge's House' (1891), that still employs rats as signifiers of past crimes and repression. In this tale, a student is tormented by a rat that appears to be the malignant spirit of the house's previous occupant – a vindictive Judge who delighted in hanging. Due to the reputation of the Judge the house has gone unoccupied for 50-100 years, acquiring a reputation tantamount to being haunted. The student, Malcolmson, hires a servant for his stay – one who does not believe in the haunting, but cannot stay outside of the workhouse overnight as she will lose her bed there. Of the supposed haunting she states that it is just rats:

> "bogies is all kinds and sorts of things - except bogies! Rats and mice, and beetles and creaky doors, and loose slates, and broken panes, and stiff drawer handles, that stay out when you pull them and then fall down in the middle of the night." (p.21)

In theory, this is meant to explain away supernatural phenomenon, and so overrun with rats is the property that Malcolmson soon thinks little of their presence and works effectively with them running around: '[f]or a little while the rats disturbed him […] but he got accustomed to the noise' (p.23). In fact, it is the 'sudden cessation' of the rats' 'circus' that alerts him when all is not right (p.24, 25); the rats act as a supernatural detector, displaying an instinct for silence when there is a threat present.

Ironically, in opposition to the servant's comments that '"[r]ats is bogies, and bogies is rats"' (p.21), within the tale the supernatural entity itself takes the form of a rat that acts strangely: '"There was one wicked-looking old devil that sat up on my own chair by the fire, and wouldn't go till I took the poker to him, and then he ran up the rope of the alarm bell and got to somewhere up the wall or the ceiling"' (p.25). As the rat-catcher Black notes in Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor:* 'a large male rat, which usually lives by itself, is dreaded by those of its own species as their most formidable enemy' (Vol 3, p.3). The lone, large male rat is a threat to other rats because it kills and eats them when resources are scarce. Black's extensive knowledge of rat behaviour is echoed in Stoker's story here, as all of the 'normal' rats hide when this one malignant rat emerges. This rat in particular displays an uncanny intelligence, as it 'did not stir' when Malcomson pretends to throw a book at it (p.24); it only recedes when it Malcomsom deliberately intends it harm.

The local doctor, hearing Malcomsom's account of his experiences, draws his attention to the rope of the alarm bell that the uncanny rat ascends, revealing that this is '"the very rope which the hangman used for all the victims of the Judge's judicial rancour!"' (p.29). It quickly becomes apparent that the rat is an embodiment of the Judge's own vindictive spirit – another shameful, historic presence that returns to harm the present. For Malcomson, this harm takes the form of the Judge descending from his portrait in the house, and using the rope – which the rat has gnawed in

two – to hang him. As the Judge moves towards him, the other rats attempt to ring the bell to raise the alarm by 'running up and down [what is left of] the rope as though working against time' (p.36). These rats, which have previous given 'comfort' to Malcomson (p.35), try to come to his aid, demonstrating rats as saviour figures, but their efforts are to no avail. Either through supernatural means, or through his own psychological disintegration, Malcomson hangs himself.

Conclusion

The proliferation of rats making headlines, as well as the fervour and graphic detail with which they are reported, reveals the extent of society's horror of these rodents. The rat has been subjected to a protracted period of othering – made more convincing by rats' inherently Gothic traits. Be they real, manifestations of people's psyche, or symbols of societal decay, rats are never ending in their pervasive presence. Intelligent and adaptable, rats have an insatiable appetite and they live on human waste and themselves – they are cannibalistic. As individuals and as a pack, they are autonomous, sexually voracious and not easily contained – physically and metaphorically. Rats are timeless, as they are repositories of the past, they indicate the current state of the nation and they continually influence the direction of human culture. Their energy fuels our imagination and fears, feeding Gothic fact and fiction, and yet they refuse to let humans remain ignorant – of our surroundings, our failures and our own ruthlessness.

Both newspaper columns and Gothic authors have crafted tales in which rats are recognized as merely a symptom – not the primary cause – of suffering. In most cases, it is the rats' involvement and sensationalized description that allow the tales of the poor and desperate to reach print at all. Compounding this is the way the rat is characterized as an invader; a foreigner, an enemy combatant, or a new 'type' of rat – intended to distract the reader from the fact the 'rat problem' in deprived areas is age-old and rarely tackled. Ultimately there is much in Stoker's phrase that rats are 'bogies' and 'bogies' are rats – they act partly as scapegoats, but more broadly stand for a range of abjected phenomena that society seeks to divest itself of.

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[i] Twenty-first century news headlines on rats are uncannily similar to their Victorian equivalents, with stories such as 'Rat Attack on Sleeping Toddler Leaves Her Covered in Blood' (*Telegraph,* 2012, online) and 'Sleeping Swindon Dad is Scarred when Rat Bites His Nose in Broadgreen' (*Swindon Advertiser,* 2017, online). Both of these echo the nineteenth-century stories quoted in this chapter.

[ii] The term 'rodent' in reference to gnawing animals first appeared in the English language in 1830 (OED), demonstrating the start of the classification of rats.

[iii] There are two genus of 'rat': the first, the black rat, is native to Britain, is small and became almost extinct over the nineteenth century, while the second, the brown rat, is much larger, comes from Norway and is considerably more rapacious. Both types of rats were classified during the Victorian era, demonstrating that the scientific understanding of rats was becoming more complex and intricate. Rats were beginning to be seen as the 'heroes of science' for the medical advancements they were able to bring about via scientific experimentation (Burt, 2006, pp.89-114), but in the popular imagination, they remained merely vermin to be eradicated.