

# LAND PROPERTY, LAND DESTRUCTION: ECOGOTHIC VS. CAPITALISM IN BRAM STOKER'S *THE SNAKE'S PASS*

José Manuel Correoso Rodenas  
Universidad Complutense de Madrid

## ABSTRACT

In 1890, the future author of *Dracula*, Bram Stoker, published one of the most undervalued, yet innovative and interesting novels among his literary productions: *The Snake's Pass*. Beyond the narration of the love story between Arthur and Norah, the novel depicts a Western Ireland scenario in which the chrematistic aims of the characters coalesce with the destruction of the landscape and, in consequence, the destruction of the environment, for a treasure is said to be hidden in the bog. Thus, the conflict coming of the extemporaneous ownership of the land (Arthur is English) leads to a questioning of how the ambition based on capitalistic-industrialist impulses (the treasure-hunt is rational and machine-ridden) means the destruction of the environment and the perversion of the community that had traditionally been attached to that part of the country. The goal of this article is to explore how Stoker ciphered all these elements, creating an original literary product that announces some of the key conflicts in the British Isles (land property) when seen through the lens of modern criticism.

KEYWORDS: Land property, Environmental Destruction, Balance of Power, Progress, Irish Gothic.

PROPIEDAD DE LA TIERRA, DESTRUCCIÓN DE LA TIERRA:  
ECOGÓTICO VS. CAPITALISMO EN *THE SNAKE'S PASS* DE BRAM STOKER

## RESUMEN

En 1890, el futuro autor de *Dracula*, Bram Stoker, publicó una de sus novelas más minusvaloradas, aunque de lo más interesante e innovador de su producción literaria: *The Snake's Pass*. Más allá de narra la historia de amor entre Arthur y Norah, la novela muestra un escenario en el oeste de Irlanda en el que las aspiraciones monetarias de los personajes se coaligan con la destrucción del paisaje y, en consecuencia, con la destrucción del medio natural (puesto que hay un supuesto escondido en la turbera). Así, el conflicto derivado de una propiedad de la tierra por parte de un foráneo (Arthur es inglés) lleva a reflexionar cómo la ambición basada en el progreso capitalista e industrial (la búsqueda del tesoro se hace con máquinas) lleva a la destrucción de la naturaleza y a la pervisión de la comunidad que tradicionalmente había vivido en el lugar. El objetivo de este artículo es explorar cómo Stoker acrisoló todos estos elementos creando un original producto literario que anuncia algunos de los conflictos centrales que afectan a las Islas Británicas (la propiedad de la tierra) desde el punto de vista de la crítica moderna.

PALABRAS CLAVE: propiedad de la tierra, destrucción de la naturaleza, equilibrio de poderes, progreso, literatura gótica irlandesa.

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“When a man takes a farm from which another has been evicted, you must shun him on the roadside when you meet him, you must shun him in the streets of the town, you must shun him at the shop-counter, you must shun him in the fair and at the marketplace, and even in the house of worship... you must shun him your detestation of the crime he has committed... if the population of a county in Ireland carry out this doctrine, that there will be no man... [who would dare] to transgress your unwritten code of laws”

Charles Stewart Parnell, addressing a gathering at Ennis  
(September 19<sup>th</sup>, 1880) [Qtd Jordan 1994,286]

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The aforementioned quotation introduces some of the key conflicts and tragedies that are going to be explored in the following pages. As Charles Stewart Parnell (1846-1891) states, the reaction against the unfair situations provoked by capitalist impulses such as land concentration is to be considered an ethical duty. The eviction of a farmer means a cell within the (quasi-organic) community that then suffers the possibility of developing an infection that threatens to expand. Bram Stoker's (1847-1912) *The Snake's Pass* (1890) will revolve around many of these questions, depicting a scenario in which the historical trauma Parnell was addressing in 1880 aesthetically manifests. As seen below, all the elements included in Parnell's speech have a literary reflection in the novel that is going to be discussed. The law, the conundrum tradition-progress, or the moral conception of communality will be some of the ideas included in the different sections Stoker included in his novel.<sup>1</sup> In addition, as seen in the following paragraphs, the theoretical devices proposed by modern criticism will allow us to focus on other aspects that were covered with a lesser degree of interest during the transitional moment of late 19<sup>th</sup> century (e.g. environmental destruction).

Since its literary beginnings, gothic literature has showed a crucial concern towards the representation of land property, and the possible implications this may have for the aesthetic evolution of the characters, plots, narrative premises, etc. Horace Walpole's (1717-1797) *The Castle of Otranto* (1764)<sup>2</sup> expresses how the gothic curse that affects Manfred and his descendants is provoked by an illegitimate access to the property of the lordship of the castle. In consequence, the conflict between possession and dispossession has historically become central in order to understand how Gothicism has addressed secular problems such as those of power equilibrium and a (potential) balanced distribution of the means of production (in

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<sup>1</sup> Although we will refer to *The Snake's Pass* as a novel, the categorization of the text's genre has led to interesting discussion, such as Nicholas Daly's (1999).

<sup>2</sup> In the particular case of Ireland, scholars such as Jarlath Killeen have pinpointed that this “gothic” conflict has affected the country since even before the rise of literary Gothicism, tracing its roots back to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century (2005, 28-54).



gothic narratives, almost exclusively land). To this, the situations of a lack of balance caused by the colonial relations established during the 19<sup>th</sup> century can be added, of which Ireland was a victim.<sup>3</sup> In consequence, we have a territory whose land is being doubly vampirized (using a Marxist denomination) by an unequal distribution of land and by the forceful presence of a foreign authority aligned with alien elites. In *The Snake's Pass*, Arthur Severn (the main character and narrator) becomes the (English) landlord of a vast property in Co. Clare. In order to avoid an unnecessary expansion of the discussion, this article mostly analyzes the notions of land property and of destruction of the environment in the following pages. Other features, such as the ethical construction that leads to the climatic situation, or the constant presence of machinery, although mentioned, will not receive the detailed attention that a future, independent study can provide.

### 1.1. A (NOT ONLY) MARXIST THEORETICAL INTRODUCTION

As mentioned, the interrelations between the Gothic and capitalism root back to the mere origins of the genre in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, for the publication of the first novels coincided in time with the advent and the social ascension of capitalistic industrialists. Robert Adrian Herschbach, in the context of his doctoral dissertation (focused on the exploration of American 1980s-1990s Gothic), briefly discusses how the anxieties that would become proper of the Victorian Era (or even of his lifetime)

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<sup>3</sup> Something that scholars like Maureen O'Connor have highlighted in relation to other gothic classics authored by Irish (or Anglo-Irish) writers (i.e. Charles Robert Maturin [1780-1824] or Oscar Wilde [1854-1900]): "The use of gothic elements within the [Irish] national tale complements critical discussion of *Dorian Gray's* incorporation of gothic tropes and techniques, offering the basis for correspondences between Wilde's text and the gothic novel, *Melmoth the Wanderer*, written in 1820 by Charles Maturin. Interestingly, Maturin was Wilde's uncle by marriage. Certainly, the character of Melmoth, frozen in an unbearable immortality, driven by guilt across time and space, in search of an elusive expiation, figures significantly in the creation of *Dorian Gray*. Eagleton sees the embodiment of the paradox of Anglo-Irish relations in Melmoth, whose story functions 'as an allegory of this strange condition in which exploiter and victim are both strangers and comrades, and, indeed, in the person of Melmoth himself, inhabit the same personality'" (2004, 197-198). Eóin Flannery has also evaluated how Irish colonial past shows ecocritical implications: "A presiding concern of the British colonial polity was the need conclusively to assimilate all of its Celtic peripheries, including Ireland, Scotland, and Wales. The sustained colonization of Ireland began in the sixteenth century and continued into the early seventeenth century with a series of settler plantations in the south, east and north of the island. It was a period of conquest and settlement that, as Jane Ohlmeyer concludes, involved: 'strategies [which] though often couched in the rhetoric of civility, effectively amounted to a form of imperialism that sought to exploit Ireland for England's political and economic advantage and to Anglicise the native population' (28-29). However, when we reach the eighteenth century, the constitutional countenance of Ireland has altered. By this period Ireland had become a formal kingdom and was possessive of its own parliament –a fact that not only differentiated it from contemporary, and many subsequent, British colonies, but supplements the catalogue of contradictions that besets Irish colonial history. We shall see that the cosmetics of constitutional parity of esteem too often mask the endurance of colonial subjugation" (2015, 162).



had already been aroused decades before: “globalization also was not an entirely new concept; the idea of an increasingly networked, interconnected and business-driven world, one in which national boundaries would become increasingly supplanted, was in vogue around the turn of the previous century” (2002, 2).<sup>4</sup> The arrival of the 19<sup>th</sup> century meant a further degree of assimilation of what the postulates of both terms had in common, specially bearing in mind that this was the primal moment of the economic and geographic expansion of both gothic fiction and capitalism. In consequence, the new discussions that were incorporated to the social debate used the cultural panorama as a source for references.

Social (or political) theorists like Karl Marx (1818-1883) or Friedrich Engels (1820-1895) explored what the new liberal, industrial system had in common with some of the archetypes of the literary Gothic, such as vampires,<sup>5</sup> as Marx would develop in his *Das Kapital. Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (1867-1894). However, beyond this effective metaphor, Marxism had produced in 1848 an earlier mention that contributes to link the postulates of abusive consumption to the purposes of the present article. The *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei*, in the sections devoted to the exploration of the different vices that the bourgeoisie had brought to the modern world, states how capitalism had also provoked a “vampiric” approach to the environment, as it had done to proletarians:

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation, canalisation to rivers, whole populations conjured out of the ground<sup>6</sup> –what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour? (2012, 78)<sup>7</sup>

As the 19<sup>th</sup> century advanced, these “vampiric” features of capitalism were emphasized, for also the environment was seen as vulnerable for the first time (at least in some of its representations), shaping the direction and application of ecocritical languages, leading to much more contemporary revisions such as Andrew Smith and William Hughes’ seminal essay *Ecogothic* (2013), or more specific approaches

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<sup>4</sup> Something that Edith Wharton had already announced in the preface to her ghost stories (1997, 9).

<sup>5</sup> For a pedagogical application of the Marxist metaphor of the vampire, see Jess Morrisette (2019).

<sup>6</sup> This notion is completed by the idea Marx and Engels express in the previous paragraph and which is also related to the purposes of this article: “The bourgeoisie keeps more and more doing away with the scattered state of the population, of the means of production, and of property. It has agglomerated population, centralised the means of production, and has concentrated property in a few hands” (2012, 78).

<sup>7</sup> All the references to the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* have been obtained from the English version included in the critical edition published by Yale University Press in 2012. See works cited for the complete bibliographical note.

such as Elizabeth Parker's *The Forest and the EcoGothic. The Deep Dark Woods in the Popular Imagination* (2020).

In coalition with the aforementioned ecogothic postulates, some of the crucial theoretical assumptions that we need to bear in mind before approaching *The Snake's Pass* are those of the (recently developed) scholarship focused on the capitalistic implications of the Gothic (both literary and cultural). This tendency can be clearly appreciated in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries through the contribution of recent scholars such as Gail Turley Houston (2005) or Amy Bride (2023). Houston has mentioned that "With the rise of capitalism and the concomitant demise of the household as the center of the economy, the subject became fragmented and compartmentalized, a self haunted at home as well as at work" (3), which is what happens to the most relevant characters in *The Snake's Pass*: Arthur, the Joyces, Murdock, and Dick Sutherland. Gothic theorist Nick Groom, in his encyclopedic new history of the vampire (Yale University Press, 2018), establishes how blood and gold can be understood as partner matters. In consequence, the urge vampires traditionally experience to obtain blood from their victims can be comparable to the capitalistic impulse industrialists (and other patrons) feel toward proletarians.<sup>8</sup> In a Marxist-like metaphor, Groom parallels the blood of the worker with the blood of the vampiric victim: both of them are irreplaceable for the survival and the maintenance of the *status quo* of the "monster." As vampires' victims produce the vital support for revenants, workers' efforts produce the gold (monetary benefits) that are the foundation of the capitalist system. In order to conclude this summarized overview of the theoretical framework in which the present article is incardinated, we cannot obviate the forthcoming publication authored by Jon Greenway under the title *Capitalism, a Horror Story. Gothic Marxism and the Dark Side of the Radical Imagination* (2024). There, Greenway offers a review of the cultural history of capitalism, addressing the topic covering the different implications and manifestations it has historically had, from economy to philosophy. The sections devoted to analyzing how "capitalist culture" has influenced (and has been influenced by) the evolution of gothic literature and visual arts are especially relevant for the topics explored here, for the author states connections between (capitalist) economic growth and oppression-related violence, between the expansion of Western society and the destruction of the environment worldwide, ideas that will be revisited in the following paragraphs.

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<sup>8</sup> See Olga Hoyt (1984), who has also discussed the vampiric implications of consumerism, using Augustin Calmet's (1672-1757) *Traité sur les apparitions des esprits, et sur les vampires, ou les revenans de Hongrie, de Moravie, &c* (1751) as a source. As an introductory blood-sucking activity Calmet's vampires perform, prior to the development of industrialism, we can find that he mentions that several vampires in Hungary returned from their tombs to share their families' meals, their revenue (1751, 37-39).



## 1.2. THE SHAPING OF *THE SNAKE'S PASS*

Not as widely known and studied as *Dracula* (1897),<sup>9</sup> *The Snake's Pass* was originally published in 1890, simultaneously in the United States (Harper & Brothers) and in the United Kingdom (Sampson, Low, Marston, Searle & Rivingston), although the chapter entitled “The Gombeen Man” had appeared in 1889 in the magazine *The People*. Between 1890 and 1891, the novel was extensively reviewed in different periodicals, with approaches that vary from fierce criticism for an (unreal) excess of reliance on popular sources (*The Speaker: The Liberal Review*, 1890 [qtd. 2015, 267]) to the acclamation of the narrative homodiegetic technique that Stoker discloses (*Murray's Magazine: A Home and Colonial Periodical for the General Reader*, 1891 [qtd. 2015, 270]). As it will be emphasized later, the confusion of the folkloric (legendary) and the factual (historical) is one of the foundations to structure the narration,<sup>10</sup> for the legend of Saint Patrick and the King Serpent triggers the action towards the industrial exploration of the bog, conditioning the behavior of some of the characters, especially Phelim Joyce and Murdock. This legend, well-known since the early Middle Ages, has enjoyed many different versions, as Roy Flechner (2019) has recently outlined. However, bearing in mind Stoker's cultural context and his academic education at Trinity College, it is believable to think that he may have followed Lady Wilde's (1821-1896) version, included in her volume *Ancient Legends Mystic Charms & Superstitions of Ireland* (1887). Irish literature is deeply connected to the folkloric, and it has shaped many textual traditions within the Anglo-Irish literary context, as Anne Markey states:

Drawing attention to their shared association with superstition, transgression of rationality, fascination with the supernatural, and repetitive recourse to familiar tropes and formulaic narrative conventions, critics have repeatedly argued that folklore is a significant source for Gothic tropes and themes. (2014, 94)

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<sup>9</sup> Derek Gladwin complained in 2016 about the apparent lack of attention the novel had received: “Despite it being a substantial literary work about the Irish bog, *The Snake's Pass* had received relatively little critical attention until the mid-nineties” (59).

<sup>10</sup> Indeed, one of the villagers, Moynahan, narrates how his father had witnessed the French hiding a treasure near Carnacliff. In consequence, the legendary Saint Patrick, fighting against the snakes, meets the historical French and Irish revolutionaries fighting against the British Empire (arguably in events related to the Battle of Killala –1798– and the Irish Rebellion of 1798). Niall Gillespie, while analyzing the literary aftermath of Irish radicalism in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, offers a clear summary of the rebellion: “The 1798 rebellion began on 23 May. Lasting about 120 days, it ended in failure for the Jacobins. Ill-trained rebels armed with pikes and antiquated or defective arms stood little chance against the modern armaments and well-disciplined soldiers of the British Empire. Conservatively, it is estimated that at least 25,000 people died in the rebellion. The violence was overwhelmingly that of the state, with a least 90 per-cent of the casualties being rebels or perceived rebel sympathizers. To appreciate the scale of this, roughly the same amount of people were killed in absolute numbers, and in a shorter period of time than during the terror in France” (2014, 65).

Bram Stoker extensively relies on the conventions of gothic literature for the narration included in *The Snake's Pass*; thus, this assessment will become true to sustain the premise on which the novel relies.

Exploring the history of *The Snake's Pass* already shows many of the elements that will constitute the main topic of the following pages. For instance, it can be considered among Bram Stoker's pieces of imperial fiction,<sup>11</sup> paving the path for the concept of "reverse colonization" that will be structural in his best-known novel, *Dracula*, as Stephen D. Arata suggests:

A concern with questions of empire and colonization can be found in nearly all of Stoker's fiction. His quite extensive body of work shows how imperial issues can permeate and inform disparate types of fiction. Stoker's *oeuvre* apart from *Dracula* can be roughly divided into two categories in handling of imperial themes. First, there are works such as "Under the Sunset" (1882), *The Snake's Pass* (1890), *The Mystery of the Sea* (1902), and *The Man* (1905) in which narratives of invasion and colonization, while not central to the plot, intrude continually upon the main action of the story. Legends of French invasions of Ireland in *The Snake's Pass*; attacks by the Children of Death on the Land Under the Sunset in the fairy tales; accounts of the Spanish Armada, Sir Francis Drake, and, in a more contemporary vein, the 1898 Spanish-American War, in *The Mystery of the Sea*; allusions to the Norman invasion of Saxon England in *The Man* - in each work, seemingly unrelated narratives of imperial expansion and disruption themselves disrupt the primary story, as if Stoker were grappling with issues he could not wholly articulate through his main plot. And, as his references to the Armada and to Norman and French invasions suggest, Stoker is everywhere concerned with attacks directed specifically against the British. (1990, 625)<sup>12</sup>

Several of the main characters that compose the narratological universe of *The Snake's Pass* will have to confront the notion of "reverse colonization," from Arthur (who visits Clare as a foreign tourist/traveler: "I accepted the cordial invitation of some friends, made on my travels, to pay them a visit at their place in the County of Clare" [Stoker 2015, 9])<sup>13</sup> to the villagers around Carnacliff (who finally incorporate Arthur to their socio-economic landscape, via his marriage with Norah and his

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<sup>11</sup> After having published *The Duties of Clerks of Petty Sessions in Ireland* (1879) and *Under the Sunset* (1881). In this last collection of short stories, Stoker already relies on the narrative mixture of folklore and reality, something that will reappear in *The Snake's Pass* and *Dracula*. 1890, not in vain, would also be the year of publication of the original version of *The Picture of Dorian Gray* (see the aforementioned chapter authored by Maureen O'Connor).

<sup>12</sup> See also Lisabeth C. Buchelt (2012, 119-120).

<sup>13</sup> A visit that is never paid but whose mention also contributes to link the plot of *The Snake's Pass* with the aforementioned postulates related to land property. Assuming that Arthur had med these connections during the months he spent travelling across Europe, it can also be assumed that they belong to the same socio-economic class to which Arthur has accessed after being the beneficiary of Great Aunt's will (potentially, absentee owners): "When the will was read, it was found that I had been left heir to all her property, and that I would be called upon to take a place among the magnates of the country" (2015, 9).



acquisition of Murdock's land. Completing Arata's positions in the aforementioned quotation, Lisabeth C. Buchelt states that the "imperial" approach of *The Snake's Pass* should also be addressed in (mostly) plain colonial terms, following Arthur's point of view. As the early modern European colonists around the world felt they had to "decipher" the newly encountered territories,<sup>14</sup> Arthur feels he has acquired understanding of the new reality lying before him: "He [Arthur] is confident that he is able to 'decode' the Irish rural locations' meaning and the rural characters' intentions and desires in spite of the apparent lack of (British) sophistication and (British) education" (2015, xvi). Like the explorers of new worlds, Arthur uses his background and education (and his imperial superiority) in order to relate to western Ireland. However, as seen in Arata's 1990 essay, the power of the land, the mixture of the real and the folkloric will haunt him back, and he will become trapped in Clare to the extreme of becoming one with the Shleenanaher.

## 2. THE SNAKE'S PASS: ECO-GOTHIC AND CAPITALISM

Everything begins with a tourist vacationing through the west of Ireland: "As my time was my own, and as I had a week or two to spare, I had determined to improve my knowledge of Irish affairs by making a detour through some of the counties of the West on my way to Clare" (Stoker 2015, 9). This assessment, although banal at first sight, speaks to many of the concerns that are going to be explored in the following sections. Arthur, the "Occidental" tourist in *The Snake's Pass*, is enjoying a benefit (and a custom) that was nonexistent prior to the expansion of the social improvements the industrial revolution (and the workers' movements) brought: spending a period of time only devoted to leisure ("a real holiday" [Stoker 2015, 7], as Arthur would express). An economy-derived (and economy-driven) activity, tourism has had a transcendental reflection in the Arts (literature among them). On the one hand, in relation to the objectives of the present article, it has contributed to the negative modification of the environment, ciphered in the notion of "Gothic Tourism," which, in the words of Emma McEvoy, "has been integral to the Gothic aesthetic from the very beginning" (2016, 4). On the other hand, as Arthur Severn expresses at the beginning of the narration, the possibility of spending time only enjoying the surrounding environment led to positive reevaluations of, among other elements, the landscape:

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<sup>14</sup> Applicable to Ireland through scholarly analyses such as Jarlath Killeen's (2005, 29-36; 2014, 3). Mark Doyle has extensively contributed to assess the relations between the question of Irish colonization and the existence of *The Snake's Pass*. The "Irish Question" is a property issue, rooting back to the English conquest of the island and the plantation system: "It all comes down to the manner in which England conquered Ireland. Beginning in the 1550s, after centuries of trying to pacify their 'wild Irish' neighbors militarily, successive English rulers embarked on their nation's first major colonization scheme. The strategy was simple: the state would seize land from rebellious Irish lords, give or sell it to more trustworthy English and Scottish settlers, and then wait for civilization to take root (2015, 273-274).



The whole west was a gorgeous mass of violet and sulphur and gold –great masses of storm-cloud piling up and up till the very heavens seemed weighted with a burden too great to bear. Clouds of violet, whose centres were almost black and whose outer edges were tinged with living gold; great streaks and piled up clouds of palest yellow deepening into saffron and flame-colour which seemed to catch the coming sunset and to throw its radiance back to the eastern sky. (Stoker 2015, 5-6)<sup>15</sup>

However, the landscape to be found around Carnacliff, where Arthur is forced to seek refuge because of the storm mentioned in the quotation above, is not a derivation of the picturesque views he is enjoying on his journey (and the “grand-touristic” views the reader assumes Arthur has enjoyed in continental Europe). On the contrary, Stoker’s main character is going to be confronted with a situation of crisis derived from the conflict(s) about land property and the progressive degradation of the bog, the natural basis which sustains the Shleenanaher.<sup>16</sup> In the words of Derek Gladwin,

On the surface, a bog appears to be firm land [...], and yet, it does not provide solid footing [...]. Bogs also shift without warning, almost like avalanches, squashing and suffocating anyone or anything in their paths. Covered in mist, bogs produce a miasma effect, clouding reality and fiction. (2016, 1)

This introductory definition to Gladwin’s essay *Contentious Terrains. Boglands, Ireland, Postcolonial Gothic* perfectly summarizes the actual landscape (natural and social) to be found at Carnacliff. The shifting bog, threatening the existence of the villagers (specially Murdock and Phelim) constitute the natural scenario for a foggy, miasmatic, unsolid social structure, “[...] at the crossroads between civilization and ‘nature,’ where policies and inhabitants often pursue separate ends” (Gladwin 2016, 38), based on the prevalence of the gombeen man and the submission of the tenants. Thus, what Stoker builds around his fictional shifting bog is a narration in which the gothic conventions and language are used as a narrative device to set

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<sup>15</sup> The picturesque West that Stoker is displaying in this narration is deeply connected with the descriptive and setting narrative traditions that began in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and have lasted to the present day, becoming Ireland’s most distinctive and “searched for” scenario, with fiction being a remarkable reflection of an actual phenomenon (i.e. tourism, with Arthur being a pioneer). As notable examples, we can mention classical works such as John Ford’s (1894-1973) *The Quiet Man* (1952), John McGahern’s (1934-2006) *Amongst Women* (1990) or, more recently, Conor McPherson’s (born in 1971) dramas or Martin McDonagh’s (born in 1970) award-winning *The Banshees of Inisherin* (2022). In relation to *The Snake’s Pass*, Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch has stated that “From the start, *The Snake’s Pass* provides the reader with a powerful word image of the West of Ireland, the novel’s setting. Through his ‘focalizer,’ Arthur Severn, Bram Stoker vividly captures the typical geographical characteristics of the region and its distinctive characteristics of human habitation. [...], by the end of the nineteenth century it had transformed into a symbol of Irish authenticity that would become a cornerstone of national identity [...]” (2015, 311-312).

<sup>16</sup> The negative landscape addresses the notion that Sharon Rose Yang and Kathleen Healey express (2016, 5).



a social drama. Murdock, the villain, occupies his castle on top of the hill, while his power, based on the property of the land, is menaced by the possibility of this land to disappear. The shifting bog of *The Snake's Pass* also encompasses that halfway scenario between reality and fiction that Gladwin was mentioning, for it is home to the aforementioned legend of Saint Patrick and the King Serpent.

## 2.1. THE GOMBEEN MAN: ENVIRONMENTAL VAMPIRE / ENVIRONMENTAL TERRORIST

If there is a gothic character within *The Snake's Pass*, that is Black Murdock, the gombeen man.<sup>17</sup> This character is narrowly linked to the classical villains of the gothic novel, and it also works as a magnificent precedent for Count Dracula. In the same way the Transylvanian aristocrat has subjugated the surrounding populations through the threat to their lives, their descendants, and their souls, Murdock has performed his authority via setting an economic sword of Damocles over his neighbors. Both are vampires, for both are extracting the blood (literally or metaphorically, as seen below) from their victims, and both are extremely (and vitally) linked to their respective terrains: Dracula travelling within the actual land of Transylvania, Murdock fighting against the odds to find the treasure hidden in the bogland. Murdock is the Marxist vampire that has been described in the introductory paragraphs, for he has used the conventions of progress and of the modern world in order to impose his power over the rest of the characters. Unlike Dracula, Murdock is able to survive in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, for he is a product both of the capitalistic era and of the imperial dominion over the country. The aristocratic decadence of the Transylvanian is substituted by social and economic adaptability by the gombeen man. Also, unlike the forthcoming Dracula, Murdock fits in Marx's definition of the capitalist danger for nature, for his treasure thirst provokes the actual modification of the terrain in the vicinity, with his industrial-led actions the trigger for final destruction of the bog (Stoker 2015, 229-230).

After arriving at Carnacliff during the storm, Arthur is witness to the confrontation between Phelim and Murdock, a conflict that has money and land ownership as a background. The description offered by an old man is the first glimpse of Western Irish idiosyncrasy that Arthur receives:

He's the man that linds you a few shillin's or a few pounds whin ye want it bad, and then niver laves ye till he has tuk all ye've got –yer land an' yer shanty an' yer holdin' an' yer money an' yer craps; an' he would take the blood out of yer body if he could sell it or use it anyhow. (Stoker 2015, 27)

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<sup>17</sup> According to the explanatory notes introduced by Lisabeth C. Buchelt in her critical edition of *The Snake's Pass*, this term is an "Anglicization of the Irish *gaimbin* from the phrase *airgead a chur ar gaimbin*, 'to lend money at interest'" (2015, 27 footnote 15).

Thus, Murdock has become the “evil man in the castle” that everyone has to fear, but also the last resource to which everyone will be forced to turn sooner or later. It is in this dependence that the villagers have on Murdock where the first source of his power lies, with the second being the remoteness and the particular characteristics of Carnacliff. As the aforementioned old man continues explaining to Arthur, Murdock has all the power of a usurer and none of their responsibilities or obligations, for “a usurer lives in the city an’ has laws to hould him in. But the gombeen has nayther law nor fear iv law” (Stoker 2015, 27). So, Murdock is taking advantages of both the old and traditional and the new and regulated worlds. This alternative system, this legal bog in which Murdock lives is a reflection of an actual problem affecting Ireland during most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, as Heather Laird states:

Traces of alternative courts and other subversive legal practices that can be found in numerous official and non-official accounts of rural Ireland provide evidence that alternative law has functioned as a fundamental component of Irish agrarian agitation since at least the emergence of Whiteboyism in the 1760s. In “The Irish National League and the ‘unwritten law,’” Donald Jordan offers a brief overview of these traces, drawing our attention to Select Committee Reports from 1825, 1831-2, 1852 and 1871. The Select Committee of 1825, for example, was informed by the Cork administrator of the Insurrection Act of 1814 that previously there had been “committees sitting when there was some great work to be done, as the burning of a house, or the murder of a man; the matter was discussed and decided there.” The archives of the Department of Irish Folklore at UCO contain written records of oral testimony concerning agrarian violence that occurred during the same period. Much of the violence recounted in this testimony is interpreted as just retribution in response to obvious injustices or acts that transgress accepted norms of behavior. (2005, 25)

As seen, the “unwritten law” that Laird highlights was more strongly applied when land-based issues were under consideration. Consequently, those like Phelim Joyce had a double-edged source of distress: on the one hand they had to fear the state and the official laws<sup>18</sup> and, on the other, living in a remote area of western Ireland, they are also subject to the vicissitudes of gombeen man, a remnant of pre-state societies. As a result, as the encounter between Phelim and Murdock at the tavern proves, land- and money-based Gothic was a daily reality for villagers (both real and fictional) in many areas of the island.

As mentioned before, one of the main differences between the gombeen man and the classical vampire is his poisonous relation towards nature, an element he also aims to subjugate. Murdock and Phelim act as counterparts in their relation

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<sup>18</sup> An “official law,” to which Murdock pledges when convenient, like transferring his undesirable property to Arthur: “At Dublin Mr. Caicy met me, as agreed; and together we went to various courts, chambers, offices, and Banks –completing the purchase with all the endless official formalities and eccentricities habitual to a country whose administration has traditionally adopted and adapted every possible development of all belonging to red-tape” (Stoker 2015, 199).



to the environment and of what the environment can mean for the progress of the community. While Murdock is obsessed with the treasure (his only reason for occupying Phelim's land), Joyce, as a modern Robinson, aims to colonize the terrain, even if conditions are not initially positive for economic activities:

The fertile land is left unworked as the Gombeen searches it for a chest of gold reputedly secreted in the area [...]. The diligent farmer, Joyce [...], is left to survive on what has become perceived as an unreclaimable or unimprovable tract of land: the bog itself. (Hughes 2015, 289)

Murdock, through his capitalist absenteeism, is becoming the (eco)-gothic villain. His victims are not only his neighbors, but also his country. As Smith and Hughes state for their definition of the Ecogothic (2013, 5), the gombeen man becomes an agent of increasing concern about how the environment should be managed. Murdock's "environmental terrorism," as seen below, marks a no-return point for the narration, for the destruction he is causing will be permanent, and will also have a significance in the future life of the survivors, specially the newlywed Severns.

## 2.2. DICK SUTHERLAND: AGENT AND VICTIM

As mentioned before, the treasure-hunt that Murdock is organizing on his newly acquired property is conducted as a rationalistic expedition. In consequence, the gombeen man needs a product of the industrial era in order to be successful in his objectives: a technician, someone who can control the material conditions necessary for the treasure to be found, someone versed in science, technology, and modern procedures. Thus, again, *The Snake's Pass* depicts a scenario in which legend and reality coalesce, for this technician is hired (stablishing a formal commercial relationship between the master and the employee)<sup>19</sup> to find a treasure whose existence is, to a great extent, based on a legend. Science, then, is devoted to serve superstition.<sup>20</sup>

The necessary agent for this mission will be Arthur's friend Dick Sutherland ("a young engineer named Sutherland" [Stoker 2015, 52]), an Irish College of Science graduate.<sup>21</sup> As it will be disclosed in the following lines, Dick will play a double role within the narration. Along with his intervention as the necessary agent Murdock relies on in order to find the treasure (he knows how to manage the bog),<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Becoming the paid-wage labourer Marx and Engels announced.

<sup>20</sup> Something that, according to Derek Gladwin, was not exceptional or exclusive to Stoker's narration: "In nineteenth-century Gothic writing, for example, scientific theory and technological innovation were often used to validate various forms of excess and social decadence" (2016, 87).

<sup>21</sup> Presumably, the Royal College of Science for Ireland.

<sup>22</sup> And he can explain the nature of the bog, and understand the (possible) gothic implications it may have: "Only a matter of specific gravity! A body suddenly immersed would, when the air of the lungs had escaped and the *rigor mortis* had set in, probably sink a considerable distance; then it would



Dick will also become a metaphor for the conflicts that capitalism brought. As the *Manifest der Kommunistischen Partei* states, the rise of the bourgeoisie corrupted the sentimental relations that had been traditionally established among individuals (Marx and Engels 2012, 12), and this includes friendship; these relations have been turned into monetary relations, in which economic preeminence marks superiority in status. This is exactly what happens to Dick (in relation to Arthur). Formerly friends and classmates, now both men will become collaborators (over the treasure) and competitors (over Norah).<sup>23</sup> As mentioned before, when the narration opens, Arthur has recently inherited a vast fortune so, in capitalistic terms, he has acquired an upper social position over Dick, who is a decently-talented man of science and an industrious worker. This will be the main source for Dick's victimhood, for Arthur's monetary power will be used to move Norah's romantic interests towards himself:

Was it on my account that you, a rich man, purchased the home that she loved; whilst I, a poor one, had to stand by and see her father despoiled day by day, and, because of my poverty, had to go on with a hateful engagement, which placed me in a false position in her eyes? (Stoker 2015, 142)

Thus, the pre-existing camaraderie between Arthur and Dick is blown up (as the mountain will) due to a modification in the land property scheme existing at Carnacliff, a modification that has been undoubtedly propitiated by the monetary superiority of the main character and narrator. As seen, even the most banal conflict in *The Snake's Pass* is related to the central issue of the novel: property and, more specifically, land property.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, Dick represents the duality that the industrial revolution brought for western societies. On the one hand, his talent is necessary, as seen below, for the achievement of the industrial and monetary purposes of the novel and, on the other, his social class (origin-and economy-based) constitutes a barrier for the complete fulfilment of his vital needs. Love (Marx's sentimental relation) is interrupted due to the pernicious intervention of the bourgeois power. As for the objectives of this article, as the next section will explore in detail, Dick becomes an agent of land

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rise after nine days, when decomposition began to generate gases, and make an effort to reach the top. Not succeeding in this, it would ultimately waste away, and the bones would become incorporated with the existing vegetation somewhere about the roots, or would lie among the slime at the bottom” (Stoker 2015, 61).

<sup>23</sup> Being Norah more closely related (in class terms) to Dick than to Arthur, as Phelim states: “We're not gentlefolk, sir, and we don't understand their ways. If ye were of Norah's an me own kind, I mightn't have to say a name; but ye're not” (Stoker 2015, 153).

<sup>24</sup> A central problem to Irish culture discussed and highlighted as early as, at least, 1887 (see Morris). The aforementioned Derek Gladwin offers an interesting summary in his bog-related evaluation of *The Snake's Pass*: “Unequal distribution and ownership of land existed for several centuries under colonial administration. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the battle for land ownership, which equated to political legitimisation, reached its peak around the time of Prime Minister William Gladstone's second Land Act of 1881” (2016, 56).



destruction. Murdock's avarice, and his own monetary needs constantly push him to continue with the exploration of the bog, triggering its final shifting. So, in terms of gothic economic relations, Dick becomes an accomplice, even a scab. Property inequality leads him to betray the purest feelings he is able to experience, destroying the landscape that is (as seen) so dear to Norah, and collaborating with the gombeen man, who has caused the ruin of the Joyce family. However, the narrative conventions of *The Snake's Pass* do not adhere to the postulates of literary naturalism. In consequence, the character of Dick, resigned to the unenlightened destiny of being economically unable to pursue happiness, enjoys a redemption that also has a restoration of the environment surrounding Carnacliff at its center:

Then he went on to tell me of the various arrangements effected – how those who wished to emigrate were about to do so, and how others who wished to stay were to have better farms given them on what we called “the mainland”; and how he had devised a plan for building houses form them –good solid stone houses, with proper offices and farmyards (Stoker 2015, 210-211).

This paternalistic, pre-liberal improvement of the life conditions of peasants, provoking a lesser emigration, can also be analyzed through the eco-Gothic postulates that have been followed in the whole article. As Dick confesses in the following lines, these houses and farms are to be built relying on the existence of limestone in the vicinity (Stoker 2015, 211), thus provoking a new modification in the landscape (beyond simply the modification that the newly-built constructions would mean). According to William Hughes, this final action in which Dick Sutherland becomes an agent is provokingly capitalism-related: “In part this [the use of limestone] implies the replacement of irregular Irish methods (subsistence farming almost) by the regularities of English capitalism and a division of the productive from the commercial” (2015, 295). So, the imperial conflict Bram Stoker<sup>25</sup> also envisions in *The Snake's Pass* is solved through the preeminence of the Anglo-Irish over the properly Irish, being the bourgeoisie finally exultant after having taken emotion from their connections, after having re-valued the economic system of Carnacliff, and after having subjugated the industrial worker, for now the proletarian Dick has a mission, a new purpose for his life.

### 2.3. THE TREASURE, THE MOUNTAIN, AND THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

Finally, this section focuses on analyzing the main implications *The Snake's Pass* has towards the expansion of the notion of “ecogothic”: the treasure-hunt that leads to the destruction of the Shleenanaher. The recreation of Arthur and Dick's

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<sup>25</sup> In his own words: “[...] a philosophical Home-Ruler [...]” (1907, available at [https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/68779/pg68779-images.html#Page\\_8](https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/68779/pg68779-images.html#Page_8)). For more information, see Buchelt 2015, xiv-xv.

friendship, and of Arthur's access to land property is scattered with a rosary of details about how the treasure of the King Serpent is searched for. As mentioned in the introductory sections of this article, this aspect of the novel is the main source of "ecogothic" anxiety, for characters (and readers) have to confront how industrialization unrelentingly advances, and how modernity erases the most distinctive view of the traditional Western Irish landscape, the bog.<sup>26</sup> As also mentioned, Dick Sutherland's expertise in engineering will be used by Murdock (and later by Arthur) as a weapon to attack the mountain, to vampirize it, extracting the golden blood (or the bloody gold)<sup>27</sup> it contains.

Shortly after Arthur and Dick reunite, the latter explains how Murdock had reached and hired him in Dublin, and rapidly proceeds to explain the apparent simplicity of his strategy to find the treasure: "The simplest thing in the world; just carry about a strong magnet – only we have to do it systematically" (Stoker 2015, 64). This is the first mention on how science (progress) will be used in *The Snake's Pass* to intervene with Nature. Although the use of a magnet may seem a very non-invasive intervention (it is, if compared with later actions, beginning with the stakes that are hammered into the ground [Stoker 2015, 64-65]), the reader cannot obviate that here the gothic villain is using his minion to explore what he is going to take (i.e. remember classical gothic villains and their explorations of damsels in distress before the physical assault).

Shortly after Arthur decides to become Dick's companion at the mountain,<sup>28</sup> the language of this attack against Nature is heavily emphasized: "We had attacked the hill some two hundred feet lower down than the bog, where the land suddenly rose steeply from a wide sloping extent of wilderness of invincible barrenness" (Stoker 2015, 97). As mentioned above, the two men, under the auspices of Murdock, stab and rip the earth in order to find its precious bowels. This will be completed with the final explosion that Dick performs on the mountain: "The moment the cartridge exploded the whole of the small clay bank remaining was knocked to bits and was carried away by the first rush" (Stoker 2015, 127), which provokes a visible excitement in the engineer, the victorious imperial and industrial agent (Stoker 2015, 126).<sup>29</sup> The disturbing essence of this message highlights the sense of land-related "Gothicness." However, the confrontation between men and the environment is having an unforeseen counterattack, for their actions are already affecting the bog, which (in a similar, yet more disturbing way as Dick) is becoming the multidimensional character Derek Gladwin assesses (2016, 58): attacked (victimized) but not defeated, awaiting its violent redemption. The central trope of the narration, and what better exemplifies the social and economic, land-ownership derived conflicts of *The Snake's Pass* coalesce

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<sup>26</sup> Also seen as a marker of the imperial conflict. See Wynne (2005, 323).

<sup>27</sup> Remember Nick Groom (2018).

<sup>28</sup> Again, the social differences between these two appear: while Dick remains the paid wager, Arthur is performing his "assisting" task as an entertainment, as a complimentary activity during his holiday.

<sup>29</sup> Participating in Timothy Jones' "carnival" (or carnivalesque) Gothic (2015, 36).



in the physical destruction of the natural environment. Although Bram Stoker would be far from the present-day postulates of ecocriticism,<sup>30</sup> he sets a narration in which the earth, wounded by the capitalist and industrial urge of modernity, fades away (Stoker 2015, 237). The bog, representative of everything that is properly traditional or Irish literally disappears, opening the gate for the full anglicization of Carnacliff. The legend acquires a new sense through the destruction of the hill: the new Saint Patricks are finally exiling the serpent from the Shleenanaher.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, as seen in the previous paragraphs, *The Snake's Pass* is an outstanding example of an overview of the different approaches and questions that are currently addressed by ecocriticism, socio-criticism, and eco-Gothic. The context in which the novel was conceived was of a high social and imperial clash, leading to the confrontation (internal and international) that manifested during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We can see Stoker's narration showing a world that was rapidly changing, rapidly shifting (like the bog at the end of the story). In relation to the objectives that were planned at the beginning of this article, we have clearly proved how concepts such as land-property or social class are a structural component within the novel, and these (along with industrial progress, etc.) relate in a negative way to the construction of the landscape and the environment at and around Carnacliff. As seen, the connections between *The Snake's Pass* and the notions related eco-Gothic and "capitalist" Gothic are more than patent. An attentive reading, as offered above, contributes to the expansion of knowledge about this limitedly-discussed crucial narration to understand the rise of Anglo-Irish fiction, but also to foresee the portrayal of industrialism-related concerns in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The characters that populate *The Snake's Pass* are clear representatives of these perverted relations. Arthur is the modern, bourgeois traveler and tourist, an exponent of a higher social class which has partially risen thanks to the expansion of the industrial revolution, and who is using the postulates Marx and Engels denounced to increase his status and wealth (through a new property and a marriage with a local to socially sustain that property). Murdock is the gothic villain, a man taking advantage of the two worlds in which he lives (thus, announcing Dracula), halfway between the traditional Irish custom of the gombeen man and the modern and regulated British state. Finally, Dick Sutherland is the most clearly multisided character in *The Snake's Pass*: a commoner by birth, raised to a higher social position through science and education, while still subject to the (often invisible) impositions that the capitalistic era had brought.

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<sup>30</sup> The main evidence is his positive view of the future through the newly-built limestone houses. For an exhaustive reevaluation of Victorian ecocritical sense, see Dewey W. Hall (2017).



Ireland is host to a long-lasting tradition which is deeply connected to folklore, one that Bram Stoker knew beforehand; in consequence, Irish culture is rooted in a deep connection to the environment and the earth. The propositions of ecocritical notions that affect the cultural implications of the evolution of Irish representations is highly necessary and extensively contributes to a further understanding of the true reality of Irish cultural lore. *The Snake's Pass*, as seen, can be ciphered as a crucible for all of this, for it summarizes imperial anxiety, class relations, and the destruction of the land exemplified through the physical destruction of the bog, one of the most distinctive Irish scenarios. During Stoker's lifetime there was still a long road to Ireland's sovereignty, and this novel is a good marker of the different milestones/obstacles that had to be passed/overcome for Ireland to arrive at its desired destination. Although Stoker never had Marxist or ecocritical postulates in mind, he was able to create a narration in which the main questions that have excited these theoretical approaches are, if not totally addressed, beautifully presented.



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