View metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
brought to you by CORE
provided by Danubius University, Romania: Danubius Journals

The Living Dead: the Uncanny and Nineteenth-Century Moral Panic over Premature Burial

Natalia Wójcicka, ***PhD student***
University of Wrocław, Poland
natalia.wojcicka@wp.pl

Abstract: The fear of premature burial during the nineteenth century escalated to a phenomenon of moral panic. Fueled by the imperfections of the cardiorespiratory standard of death, which allowed for mistakes in pronouncing a person dead, and by the feeling of the uncanny connected to doubts whether an object – a corpse – is animate or inanimate, the moral panic surfaced in a number of forms, including literature, journalism, but also science and legislation. The present study shows how these forms were both an effect of the panic and, simultaneously, a factor which served to uphold and shape it further.

Keywords: body, medical technology, cardiorespiratory standard of death, press coverage.

The doctor sat back.

"Fairly straightforward," he said, thinking quickly. "A case of mortis portalis tackulatum with complications."

"What's that mean?" said Chidder.

"In layman's terms," the doctor sniffed, "he's as dead as a doornail."

"What are the complications?"

The doctor looked shifty. "He's still breathing," he said. "Look, his pulse is nearly humming and he's got a temperature you could fry eggs on […]."

(Pratchett 2001: 115)

In his 1906 essay "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," Ernst Jentsch identifies "doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate" as the psychological

uncertainty that generates the feeling of the uncanny (Jentsch [1906:198] 2009: 8). This effect is perhaps strongest when it arises in connection with the human body: when animate, the human body is a subject, a person possessed of an identity and a consciousness; it is a "he" or "she." When inanimate, the human body becomes an "it," an object that is to be handled and disposed of by others. This peculiar status, alternating between the two states, may be viewed in terms of what Julia Kristeva refers to as the abject: the body becomes "*excluded* but in a strange fashion: not radically enough to allow for a secure differentiation between subject and object, and yet clearly enough for a defensive position to be established – one that implies a refusal but also a sublimating elaboration" (Kristeva [1980] 1982: 7). A body that is alive but appears to be dead, or *vice versa*, is therefore both subject and object, the self and the threatening Other. A clear distinction between a living person and a dead body, with the rites of passage that mark the transition from one to the other, does not give rise to the abject. However, such a clear-cut division is not always possible. In present times, thanks to contemporary medicine, the borderline may become blurred, for instance, in the cases of brain death. A body connected to a respirator appears to be alive: the chest moves with every artificially induced breath, the skin is warm to the touch – but such a body lacking brain activity is in reality a corpse, a lifeless object with a semblance of animation.

In the nineteenth century, the medical technology that makes it possible today to mistake a dead body for a living one was not yet available. It was far easier to fall into a reverse fallacy: to mistake a living person for a corpse. Tales of premature burial, of bodies laid out in coffins in peaceful poses only to be found days later with their features animated with emotion and their limbs twisted through hectic movement, give rise to an especially strong effect of the uncanny which, as Jentsch ([1906:198] 2009: 8) would have it, stemmed from the "doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate." Extremely popular in the nineteenth century (Taylor 2001), the theme of premature burial was present not only in Gothic literature, though it may be considered its natural *milieu*. It permeated the culture of the era, finding its reflection in press releases, social movements and organisations, and legislation; the fear it produced was countered by the devices meant for a consumer market which indeed was acutely aware of the problem. The reasons for such a pronounced presence of the subject of premature burial in the nineteenth century may be traced to the imperfect procedures of ascertaining death in the nineteenth century, and the growing feeling that professional physicians, while being the only ones qualified to proclaim it, are far too incompetent to be entrusted with such a responsibility. As George Behlmer (2003: 224) notes, "the ordinary British

doctor was not only ill-prepared to distinguish between life and death but also, it emerged in the mid-1890s, often too busy to notice".

Traditionally, pronouncing a person dead was neither medically nor legally a complicated or much-discussed issue: "For ages, people considered life to exist as long as an individual was breathing. It was later realized that respiration was a means of maintaining the heart, which circulated the blood. The focus then turned to cardio-respiratory function" (Machado 2004). As Whetsine (2008: 65) notes, during the nineteenth century,

(...) despite the fact that death could not be assessed with precision instruments, the moment when an individual was considered dead was simple and absent substantial disagreement. From the 18th through mid-20th centuries, a person was declared dead when her heart stopped beating and her lungs ceased to function; this was also known as the cardiorespiratory definition of death.

The procedure for ensuring that death had occurred included such practices as feeling the pulse, listening for the heartbeat, or putting a mirror next to the person's mouth to certify that its surface does not cloud. It is worth noting that such criteria are, in essence, not without value in the light of more recent knowledge: even if imprecise, they are bound to be verified by later events, as "destruction of the brain, including the brain stem, ensured respiratory failure leading quickly to terminal cardiac arrest. Conversely, prolonged cardiopulmonary failure inevitably led to permanent, complete loss of brain function" (DeGrazia 2007). In other words, even if persons pronounced dead solely on the basis of the cardiorespiratory standard had not yet ceased to live, they would inevitably do so in time. The period between death being pronounced and actually occurring, the time when an apparently dead body is in fact still alive, accounts for the uncanny phenomenon of premature burial.

Since the nineteenth century, the development of medical sciences has provided an adequate explanation for the cases in which the pronouncement of death on the basis of the cardiorespiratory standard may be invalid. However, the cardiorespiratory criterion is insufficient in the cases in which the patient develops symptoms very similar to those accompanying death. According to contemporary forensics, the state known as *apparent death*, while not resulting in a person's actual decease, may lead to such indicators of death as "lack of pulse and heartbeat, lack of respiration, lack of reflexes, a passive position of the body, pupil dilation, tissue paleness, low temperature of the limbs" (Medycyna sądowa 2005, translated into English by N.W.). These baffling symptoms may stem from a wide range of medical conditions: poisoning, drug overdose and electrocution, but also blood loss (which would often

occur through the medical procedure of blood-letting), anoxaemia, serious alcohol poisoning, epilepsy, head injuries, hypothermia or uraemia (Medycyna sądowa 2005, translated into English by N.W.). In practical terms, this means that almost any illness, accident, or injury may (although does not necessarily have to) lead to apparent death. It is easy to see how the combination of the two factors – the cardiorespiratory legal and medical definition of death and the danger of confusing its criteria with the state of apparent death – must have inevitably led to a number of mistakes on the part of the physicians who pronounced death, mistakes that resulted in premature burials.

George Behlmer (2003: 224) claims that "Late-Victorian fears about premature burial constituted a 'moral panic' in the sociological sense of that term" as they contained the three traits characteristic for this sociological phenomenon which "involves popular overreaction to a perceived threat," has a "tendency to occur when ethical boundaries seem blurred," and becomes a "process by which disciplinary agents – police, prosecutors and judges – help vilify the socially marginal." In the case of the moral panic over premature burial, as noted by Behlmer, the perceived threat was unconfirmed by any actual evidence and was mostly based on hearsay; the ethical boundaries of medical responsibility became blurred as "British physicians often issued death certificates without having seen the deceased in life" (Behlmer 2003: 226); and the disciplinary agents became substituted by "a coterie of middle-class activists who led the charge against what they took to be a dangerous legal defect" in the procedure of pronouncing death (Behlmer 2003: 225).

In some instances, attempts were made to rectify this legal defect and to clear the confusion of life and death it entailed. A bill introduced before the US Senate by Assemblyman Redington in 1899 proposed a formidable list of actions to be undertaken in order to ensure that a body is indeed dead before it is buried: the corpse was to be deposited in a morgue (constructed for that purpose) for at least twelve hours prior to the funeral. Furthermore, the room in which it was to be laid out should be supplied with a window, an open transom to allow inspection of the interior, and a door that was to be kept unlocked at all times, presumably so that the "deceased" would find no obstruction in leaving should they prove to be alive after all. Going even further, the bill stated that:

[n]o body shall be received [into the morgue] unless a statement on the part of an attending physician or Coroner, whether he has found the following signs of death or not, is with it: First – Permanent cessation of respiration and circulation. Second – Purple discoloration of the dependent parts of the body. Third – Appearance of

blistering around a part of the skin touched with a redhot iron. Fourth – The characteristic stiffness known as rigor mortis. Fifth – Signs of decomposition. ("To Stop Premature Burial" 1899: 3)

Of all the precautions proposed in the bill, the reference to the administration of a hot iron to a dead body is perhaps the most striking: that such desperate and morbid measures should be called for to prove a death in the eyes of the law is perhaps the most telling evidence of the unsuitability of the cardio-respiratory criterion of death, and of the fear of possible mistake.

While Behlmer uses the term 'moral panic' with regard to Late Victorianism only, it would seem that the germs of this phenomenon were present in popular culture and in popular consciousness long before that. The theme of premature burial is reiterated throughout the century. Several organizations were founded to take up the issue, including The Society for the Prevention of People Being Buried Alive and the London Society for the Prevention of Premature Burial. In the spirit of the Industrial Revolution, innumerable plans for vaults allowing proper ventilation, with their own food and water supplies and the means of communicating with the outside, were drawn. Blueprints of so-called "alarm" or "safety" coffins, equipped with mechanisms that would set off an alarm signal in response to the slightest movement of the body within, were created, patented and sold.[1]

[1] The industry proved very profitable, and continued to function throughout the next century: one of the numerous innovations to these plans was patented in the US as late as 1983. The justification given for the usefulness of this last patent was that "The exhumation of American soldiers following recent wars furnished indications that a certain percentage of bodies had been interred living. Also, an inquest into this problem in Great Britain has revealed that the number of living burials was approximately 2700 per year" (USPTO, patent number 4,367,461).

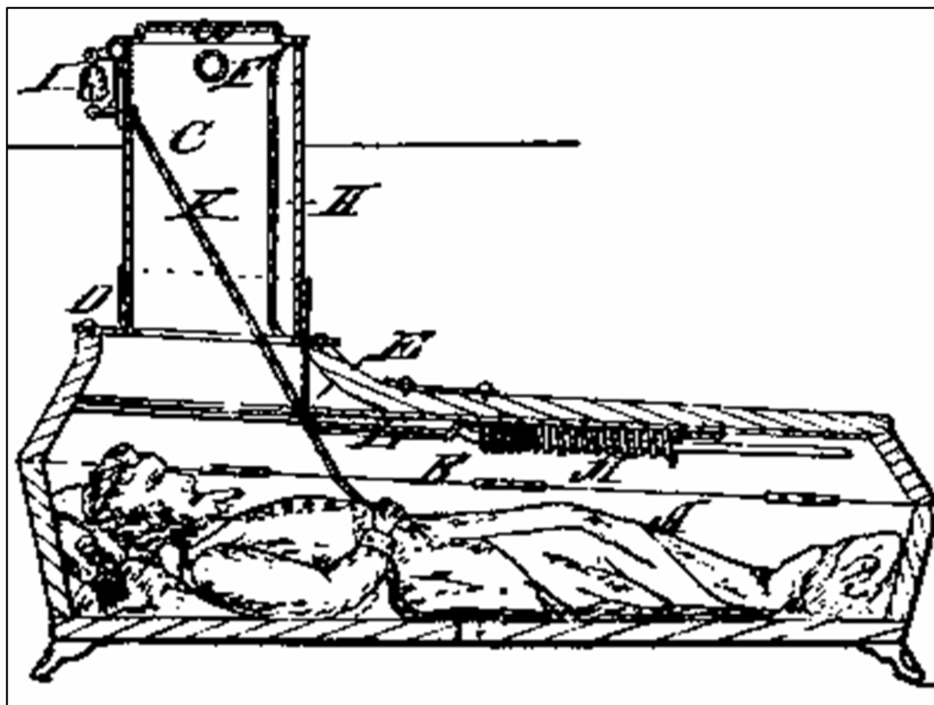

Fig. 1. US Patent No. 81,437, Issued: August 25, 1868, Inventor: Franz Vester, Newark NJ. The construction allows a person lying inside the coffin to pull a rope attached to a bell situated above the ground, and thereby signal for attention. Upon receiving such a signal, help would arrive to dig the "deceased" up. (USPTO Home Page)

The theme was also very much present in the press. An 1823 edition of *The Mirror* mentions a number of stories dealing with near escapes from premature burial:

A young girl in the service of the Princess of -----, who had for some time kept her bed with a nervous affection, at length to all appearance was deprived of life. Her face had all the character of death —her body was perfectly cold, and every other symptom of death was manifested. She was removed into another room, and placed in a coffin. On the day fixed for her funeral, hymns, according to the custom of the country, were sung before the door; but at the very moment when they were going to nail down the coffin, a perspiration was seen upon her skin, and in a few minutes it was succeeded by a convulsive motion in the hands and feet. In a few moments she opened her eyes, and uttered a piercing scream. The faculty were instantly called in,

and in the space of a few days her health was completely re-established. (“On Premature Interment” 2008)

While the article is overtly aimed at criticising the French for their “unnatural custom […] to inter twenty-four hours after the apparent decease,” which “sends many innocent victims prematurely to the grave” (“On Premature Interment” 2008), the covert effect of recounting a number of such stories of resurrection over an awaiting grave must have been to create an impression that premature burials occur on an all but daily basis.

The moral panic over premature burial is also evidenced by the recurrence of this motif in Gothic literature, where it takes on two forms: the tale of the premature burial and the vampire story. Two authors of such stories are perhaps especially salient for a discussion of the analysed period. Because of their popularity and wide readership, texts by Edgar Allan Poe and Bram Stoker may have had a far greater impact upon the emergence of the phenomenon of moral panic than other works of the genre. Edgar Allan Poe’s famous short story “The Premature Burial” is seemingly aimed against the mania, introducing a character so prepossessed with the threat of being buried alive that he finally finds himself screaming with terror when he wakes up in a rather narrow berth on a ship. Because of all the time he had spent dwelling on his fear of premature burial, in the first moments of awareness, he panics, automatically assuming that he has been buried alive. However, before reaching this enlightening ending, the story recounts an even greater number of tales of premature interment than *The Mirror* does. True to the Gothic genre, “The Premature Burial” depicts its subject matter in far more gruesome tone than the press article does:

alas! How fearful a shock awaited the husband, who, personally, threw open the door! As its portals swung outwardly back, some white-appareled object fell rattling within his arms. It was the skeleton of his wife in her yet unmouldered shroud (Poe 1982: 245).

Compared to the rather uninspiring punch line, the whole story seems more suited to fueling the moral panic with its descriptions of the uncanny than to mitigating it.

This impression seems justified inasmuch as the interment of the living is a recurring motif in Edgar Allan Poe’s tales of terror. Present in “The Black Cat” and “The Tell-Tale heart,” threateningly lurking in “The Pendulum and the Pit,” it is further developed in “The Cask of Amontillado,” finally to culminate in the description of lady Madeline’s fate in “The Fall of the House of Usher:”

"Not hear it? -- yes, I hear it, and have heard it. Long -- long -- long -- many minutes, many hours, many days, have I heard it -- yet I dared not -- oh, pity me, miserable wretch that I am! -- I dared not -- I dared not speak! We have put her living in the tomb! Said I not that my senses were acute? I now tell you that I heard her first feeble movements in the hollow coffin. I heard them -- many, many days ago -- yet I dared not -- I dared not speak! And now -- to-night -- Ethelred -- ha! ha! -- the breaking of the hermit's door, and the death-cry of the dragon, and the clangour of the shield! -- say, rather, the rending of her coffin, and the grating of the iron hinges of her prison, and her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault! [...] Without those doors there did stand the lofty and enshrouded figure of the lady Madeline of Usher. There was blood upon her white robes, and the evidence of some bitter struggle upon every portion of her emaciated frame. For a moment she remained trembling and reeling to and fro upon the threshold -- then, with a low moaning cry, fell heavily inward upon the person of her brother, and in her violent and now final death-agonies, bore him to the floor a corpse, and a victim to the terrors he had anticipated. (Poe 1982: 245)

The description of Roderick Usher's mental torment as he anticipates the revelation of his sister's premature burial may be viewed as the epitome of the moral panic connected with the problem: upon the slightest of evidence, such as the sounds so faint that no other person can detect them, Usher pictures to himself his sister's struggles within her grave and is troubled by this image for days. The morbid and elaborate beauty with which he describes her "feeble movements," "her struggles within the coppered archway of the vault" and "the grating of the iron hinges of her prison" mirrors the pattern of the premature burial mania. While it is difficult to ascertain the number of actual cases of interment alive – if, indeed, there were any such cases at all – the accounts of such occurrences have tended to grow enormously in the telling, increasing in numbers and gaining embellishments with every reiteration, thereby becoming much more fetching than the truth. It is interesting to note that Lady Madeleine's brother, like the nameless protagonist of "The Premature Burial," is referred to as a victim of his own fears. However, while the latter's panic is shown to have been ungrounded, Roderick Usher is shown to have been right in his predictions.

The uncanny confusion of life and death in the nineteenth century is prominent in another literary genre – that of the vampire tale. Significantly labeled "the undead," the vampire may be seen as the exact embodiment of the doubtful state in which the inanimate becomes the animate that Jentsch describes. At the same time, its link

with the idea of premature burial is evident: the vampire is a body that has been pronounced dead, has been entombed, and yet it wakes up within its coffin, rises from the grave and re-enters the world of the living. The theory of a connection between the vampire myth and the fear of premature interment, of mistakes resulting from the legal and medical definition of death that relied so heavily on subjective observations on the part of the physician, is supported by Bram Stoker's view on the matter. As Miller (2003: 4-5) relates,

In an interview with a reporter from the British Weekly shortly after Dracula was published, Stoker was asked the question "Is there any the historical basis for the [vampire] legend?" This was his reply: It rested, I imagine, on some such case as this. A person may have fallen into a death-like trance and been buried before the time. Afterwards the body may have been dug up and found alive, and from this a horror seized upon the people, and in their ignorance they imagined that a vampire was about (...).

Stoker's belief that the myth of the vampire originated from the cases of bodies being found in their graves in positions proving they had moved in the casket, or of "corpses" that failed to decompose, is reflected in his descriptions of vampires. A week after her funeral, Lucy Westenra exhibits no signs of tissue disintegration: "There [she] lay, seemingly just as we had seen her the night before her funeral. She was, if possible, more radiantly beautiful than ever, and I could not believe that she was dead. The lips were red, nay redder than before, and on the cheeks was a delicate bloom" (Stoker 2000: 171). And indeed, the first reaction of the characters in the novel is to suppose that a body in such a state will commonly be attributed to a case of live burial. As Van Helsing immediately notes, "[Lucy's fiancé] may think that in some more mistaken idea this woman was buried alive, and that in most mistake of all we have killed her. And he will sometimes think that she he loved was buried alive, and that will paint his dreams with horrors of what she must have suffered" (Stoker 2000: 173). It is, perhaps, indicative of the prevalence of the subject of premature burial in the social debate when Stoker was writing his novel, that such is the first explanation proposed at the sight of Lucy's unblemished body.

What distinguishes Bram Stoker's novel – and the vampire tale in general – from the other renditions of the theme of premature burial in the nineteenth century is the covert way in which it deals with the problem. No longer stated clearly, the fear of the uncanny blurring of the distinction between life and death seems to undergo the process of "sublimating elaboration" Kristeva ascribes to the abject ([1980] 1982: 7). It is this process that allows the division into animate and inanimate to be

symbolically reinstated in a way that is rarely possible in narratives that deal with premature burial openly. While stories of "narrow escapes" resolve the problem by safely bringing the protagonist into the realm of the living, tales of actual interment alive are bereft of such a solution. Even after their death finally does occur, those buried alive retain in their very physical forms the evidence of their double status: a skeleton found leaning against the vault door, its fingers clenched around the bars in a mimicry of life, remains a source of the uncanny effect. If the terror connected with premature burial is projected onto a vampire, it is possible to remedy it: a stake driven through the vampire ends its transgressive existence as the undead.

There, in the coffin lay no longer the foul Thing that we had so dreaded and grown to hate that the work of her destruction was yielded as a privilege to the one best entitled to it, but Lucy as we had seen her in life, with her face of unequalled sweetness and purity. True that there were there, as we had seen them in life, the traces of care and pain and waste. But these were all dear to us, for they marked her truth to what we knew. […] Van Helsing said to him, "And now, my child, you may kiss her. Kiss her dead lips if you will, as she would have you to, if for her to choose. For she is not a grinning devil now, not any more a foul Thing for all eternity. No longer she is the devil's UnDead. She is God's true dead, whose soul is with Him!" (Stoker 2000: 186)

A dead object shorn of its appearance of life, a vampire restored to its rightful status becomes a corpse. No longer uncanny or Other, it is simply a dead body that may once again be mourned rather than feared and loathed. In Jentsch's words, "the [uncanny] mood lasts until these doubts [whether an apparently living being really is animate and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate] are resolved and then usually makes way for another kind of feeling" (Jentsch 2009: 8). By sublimating the feelings of the uncanny, connected with the victims of premature burial, and projecting them onto the less ambiguous, more clearly Other figure of the vampire, literature makes it possible to reinstate the division between life and death, subject and object, the animate and the inanimate. In this respect, literature may be seen to function as the most successful mechanism for mitigating the moral panic concerning premature burial in the nineteenth century.

References

Behlmer, George K. (2003) "Grave Doubts: Victorian Medicine, Moral Panic, and the Signs of Death". [In:] *The Journal of British Studies*. 42 (2); 206-235.

Kristeva, Julia ([1980] 1982) [*Pouvoirs de l'horreur,* Paris: Seuil]. *Powers of Horror. An Essay on Abjection.* Translated by Leon Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press.

Miller, Elizabeth (2003) "Getting to know the Un-Dead: Bram Stoker, Vampires and 'Dracula'". [In:] Carla Kungl (ed.), *Vampires: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil.* Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press; 3-7.

Poe, Edgar A. (1982) *The Complete Tales and Poems of Edgar Allan Poe*. London: Penguin Books.

Pratchett, Terry (2001) *Pyramids*: *A Novel of Discworld*. London: HarperTorch.

Stoker, Bram (2000) *Dracula.* New York: Courier Dover Publications.

"To Stop Premature Burial" (1899, January 19) *New York Times;* 3.

Whetsine, Leslie M. (2008) "The History of the Definition(s) of Death: From the 18th Century to the 20th Century". [In:] David W. Crippen (ed.), *End-of-Life Communication in the ICU - A Global Perspective*. Springer; 65-78.

Internet sources

Jentsch, Ernst ["Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen." *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* 8.22 (25 Aug. 1906): 195-98 and 8.23 (1 Sept. 1906): 203-05] "On the Psychology of the Uncanny." Translated by Roy Sellars. Accessed 19.12.2009 from:
http://www.cpmg.org.br/artigos/on_the_psychology_of_the_uncanny.pdf

Machado, Calixto (2004) "Address of invitation to the 5th International Symposium of the Definition of Death Network" . Retrieved 23.11.2008 from: http://www.death.alrustravel.com/index2.html.

Medycyna Sądowa [Pol. *Forensic Medicine*] at: www.kryminalistyka.pl (2005). Retrieved 12.11.2008 from: http://www.kryminalistyka.fr.pl/forensic_autopsja.php.

"On Premature Interment" (1823, March 22) *The Mirror*. Retrieved 1.12.2008 from: The Gatherer's Newspaper Clipping Archive webpage,
http://www.thegatherer.co.uk/html/On_Premature_Internment_The_Mirror_1823.html.

Taylor, Troy (2001) *From Beyond the Grave*. Accessed 3.11.2008 from: http://www.prairieghosts.com/grave_horror.html.

United States Patent and Trademark Office Home Page, http://www.uspto.gov/. Accessed 28.11.2008.