

Christine Ferguson, 'Eugenics and the Afterlife: Lombroso, Doyle, and the Spiritualist Purification of the Race.' *Journal of Victorian Culture* 12.1 (2007): 64-85

Scholarly interest in nineteenth-century theories of degeneration has flourished over the last two decades and much has been published on the prominent theorists, Cesare Lombroso and Max Nordau. Indeed, Daniel Pick's influential *Faces of Degeneration: A European Disorder, 1848 – 1914* (1993) has led the research on the theory of degeneration in the Victorian period to a large extent. Christine Ferguson's exploration of the relationship between science and spiritualism is ambitious; however, through her apt choice of prominent Victorian scientific writers Arthur Conan Doyle and Lombroso, she has made an original contribution to the field. She presents a refreshing approach to the study of Victorian popular culture when she unites these much-discussed figures of literary science in their quest for spiritual meaning.

In this article, Ferguson does not attempt to reject or refute recent assessments of spiritualism's political and ideological commitments, but rather to develop them towards a greater understanding of the role of eugenics in Western scientific history. The contemporary implications of such a study are clear: we live in a society that strives to live longer, to cheat death, to evade the inevitable through quasi-scientific procedures such as cryonics. The pursuit of biological perfection through artificial natural selection that flourished towards the end of the nineteenth century, like spiritualism, sought to eliminate death altogether. In a useful discussion of the biological implications of eugenics on the Victorian concept of the spiritual afterlife, Ferguson demonstrates that, while the Victorians had not yet discovered advanced technological methods to deal with the biological imperative of death, spiritualism incorporated terminology belonging to the theory of eugenics to show that, with death, came perfection. For Conan Doyle, she argues, there was consolation in a eugenic afterlife; in his fiction, he strongly advocated the idea that death brings (meta)physical and moral perfection. The value of life in this sense, according to Ferguson, becomes ambivalent, while death proffers a curative, restorative power. Lombroso's interpretation of the afterlife presents an alternative view. For Lombroso, she points out, the loss of man's corporeal frame through death was debilitating rather than liberating. Lombroso argued conversely that the dead required a psychic through which to communicate with the living world, and he celebrated openly the fact that many such mediums were fraudulent. No higher spirits could be sought, he claimed, without the corrupted mediums to lend them their bodies.

Ferguson's article successfully provides a new context through which to understand Conan Doyle's and Lombroso's conversion to spiritualism. However, her most convincing argument lies in her analogy between the eugenic ideal (a society in which sickness and suffering have been eliminated) and the spiritualist conception of the afterlife. Both movements, she argues, encapsulate the desire for physical, moral, and mental respectability that justified Victorian mores. Furthermore, moving from social considerations of the presence of eugenics in Victorian scientific culture to fictional representations of the eugenic ideal in the spiritualist romance, Ferguson presents her reader with a fully evolved argument. In her assessment of spiritualist eugenics in literature, she shows how the spiritualist breeding experiment fails in Hugh Conway's 'The Daughter of the Stars' (1884), yet proves more successful in

George Du Maurier's 1898 text, *The Martian*. She argues that the sense of evolutionary achievement central to *The Martian* may derive from its engagement with a late century scientific culture driven by issues concerning declining national fitness and the hereditary transmission of crime.

'Eugenics and the Afterlife' adds considerably to the published literature on Victorian science, but it is also an important document for historians interested in nineteenth-century popular culture. What Ferguson does not exploit fully, and must be mentioned here, is that her work in this area has significant implications for current research in the history of science. While we may consider the University of Edinburgh's feat in creating the clone Dolly an innovative achievement, what Ferguson's superb research shows, is that the concept that underpins such technological advancement (the struggle and desire for biological perfection) had begun during one what was arguably the most exciting epoch in scientific history: the late Victorian period.

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