

Call for Papers

Victorian Darknesses

15-18 February 2024, University of Vechta

Keynote Speakers:

Christine Ferguson (University of Stirling), **Pamela Gilbert** (University of Florida), **Andrew Mangham** (University of Reading) and **Kevin A. Morrison** (Henan University)

“There are darknesses in life, and there are lights” declares Van Helsing in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1890). While he is complimenting Mina and characterising her as one of the noble characters in life, this quote also suggests a plurality of darknesses that goes beyond the literal interpretation of darkness as the mere absence of physical light and includes its metaphorical usages, for instance, in a psychological, ontological, religious, social and economic sense. On an individual level, darkness can refer to negative experiences, dark emotions (e.g., sadness, fear and anger) and mental states including melancholy and madness as well as personality traits. Being in the dark as an idiom refers to a lack of knowledge and hints at well-kept secrets that eventually come to light. Concealment and obscurity often drive the plot of sensation novels or Gothic fiction, where the story usually plays out at night time or liminal times in haunted houses, decaying castles or other dark places, featuring monstrous and supernatural characters. The belief in ghosts and otherworldly communication are at the centre of Victorian Spiritualism and Occultism, giving darkness also a (pseudo-)religious dimension. Referring to religious, moral, and socio-economic darkness, William Booth described the Victorian slum in *In Darkest England and the Way Out* (1890) as a “dark and dismal jungle of pauperism, vice and despair”, where prostitutes and other dubious characters plied their dreadful trade in narrow alleys that all too frequently became the scene for darker deeds, and later places of interest in dark tourism, and where the smoking chimneys of neighbouring factories covered the city in dust and dirt. Focussing also on the squalor, deprivation and wretchedness experienced by the Victorian working class, Gustave Doré’s *London* illustrations (1872) aimed to capture the “shadows and sunlight” of urban life.

In this four-day conference at the University of Vechta, Germany, we aim to explore the theme of darkness in Victorian literature and culture in its various guises. We welcome submissions for 20-minute papers that address topics relating to darkness broadly conceived. Possible topics may include, but are not limited to:

- Physical darkness (night, twilight, dark places)
- Ontological darkness
- Dark colours
- Dark emotions (sadness, emptiness, despair, shame, fear, hatred)
- Representations of melancholy, madness and insanity
- The lack of knowledge (secrets, concealment, obscurity)
- Monsters and monstrosities
- Victorian Spiritualism and Occultism
- Dark deeds (e.g., murder and moral corruption)
- Urbanisation (slums and poverty)
- Industrialisation (factories and working conditions)

Please send us your **250-word** proposal for a **20-minute** talk and a brief bio note to victorian.darknesses@uni-vechta.de by **12 March 2023**.

Organisers:

Jacqueline Kolditz (jacqueline.kolditz@uni-vechta.de)

Norbert Lennartz (norbert.lennartz@uni-vechta.de)

Carolin Sternberg (carolin.sternberg@uni-vechta.de)