JOSEPH SHERIDAN LE FANU: METAMORPHOSES AND INNOVATIONS IN GOTHIC FICTION

Jelena Brakovska, Daugavpils University, jelena.bsa@inbox.lv

Notwithstanding the fact that the Anglo-Irish writer Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was one of the most popular writers of the British Victorian era, his name and most of his works are not well-known to a common reader. The present research investigates how the author inventively modifies traditional Gothic elements and penetrates them into human's consciousness. Such Le Fanu's metamorphoses and innovations make the artistic world of his prose more realistic and psychological. As a result, the article presents a comparative literary study of Le Fanu's text manipulations which seem to lead to the creation of Le Fanu's own kind of "psychological" Gothic.

UDC Numbers: 821.111 (417), **DOI:** 10.12955/cbup.2013.32

Keywords: supernatural, psychological, Victorian Gothic

Introduction

When exploring the Gothic it is difficult to isolate psychological factors from social issues. As a rule, people become greatly interested in something infernal and mystical in the very crucial moments of the development of any society. This interest is considered to be a human's reaction on the dull and oppressive atmosphere which surrounds him. As well as producing the effects of fear in their readers, Gothic novels and its Victorian transformations might be said to be the forms which are produced by fears and anxieties shared by late eighteenth- and nineteenth- century writers and their readers: political, social and religious problems of their time. Traditionally, the nineteenth century in Britain is known as the Victorian period, named after the reigning Queen Victoria. In Victorian England, in the age of rapid material and scientific progress, the idea of haunted past able to reach and violate the present held an especial potential of terror. The rapid development of science started to exclude religion from people's minds, as well as the fast growth of periodicals and literary magazines caused the splash of interest in the Anglo-Irish society to rational and irrational terrifying phenomena. Gothic fiction with its use of intense emotions, evocation of terror and horror had the best potential for the purpose. Interest in mediums and spiritualistic séances as well as in literary sources behind them became an important factor which contributed greatly to the development of various forms of Gothic fiction. One of the forms of Gothic fiction which distinctively developed in the Victorian period was a ghost story. As Nalecz-Wojtczak (1987) writes, "it is this independent existence of a supernatural reality which seems to be the most essential feature which the Victorian ghost story contributed to the heritage of the literature of the supernatural" (p.99). Thus, the heart of the literary story of the supernatural lies in what Todorov (1987) calls the fantastic, "the hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event" (p. 25) when characters in the story, and the readers, have not yet decided between a natural and a supernatural explanation to the frightening events in the story.

Considered "the father of the English ghost story" (Purchase, 2006), an Anglo-Irish author Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873) is recognized for "combining Gothic literary conventions with realistic technique to create stories of psychological insight and supernatural terror" (79). As the author was a great revisionist, no idea, character or theme avoided constant changes in his works. That is why, Le Fanu's ghost stories are of particular interest to see their development and refashion. As it is suggested by its title, the aim of the present study is to analyze and comment on the innovations and metamorphoses to be found in the works of Sheridan Le Fanu, the master of fictional suspense and imagination.

Le Fanu's Creative Work: General Overview

As Hogle (2006) writes, Le Fanu (1824-1873) at different times was "a writer of ballads voicing the aspirations and romance of Irish national life; a journalist expressing High Tory views; a historical romance writer; a writer of squibs and satires; a fine poet; and a supreme author of ghost stories and novels of murder and mystery" (p.2). As it has been stated, "Le Fanu worked in many genres, but remains best known for his mystery and horror fiction" (Answers.com, 2011). As eNotes (2010) write, „in his earliest ghost stories, primarily those collected in "Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery" (1837-1852), Le Fanu only occasionally displayed the inventive use of the supernatural and psychological character studies that distinguish his most famous works". The ghosts in this collection narrate of frightening specters in haunted houses, of fairies, gnomes and leprechauns who live in forests and deserted villages and kidnap children, of spectral animals and mysterious creatures who lay traps for blamed people. From story to story with the help of Irish folklore Le Fanu tries to draw ghosts as a manifestation of satanic power ("Sir Dominick's Bargain", "The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh", "The Haunted Baronet", etc.).

As eNotes (2010) write, "of Le Fanu's fourteen novels, "The House by the Churchyard", "Wylder's Hand", "Uncle Silas" and "Guy Deverell" are generally considered his finest. These works are characterized by the clear construction and psychological insight that inform the stories of "In a Glass Darkly". While not a work of supernatural or even classically Gothic fiction, "The House by the Churchyard" is pervaded with a sense of chilling gloom, and is thought to represent an intermediate stage between Le Fanu's earlier historical novels and his later tales of mystery. The work also marks his first attempt at psychological analysis of character. The title figure of "Uncle Silas", perhaps, Le Fanu's best-known work (eNotes, 2010), is an ominous figure in the tradition of the murderous Gothic villains. Praised for its thrilling narrative, this novel is often regarded as the first psychological thriller. In it, Le Fanu deftly manipulates levels of suspense" and sense of horror while Silas gradually tries to murder his increasingly frightened niece and ward, Maud Ruthyn.

As eNotes.com (2010) point out: "The five longer stories in the later collection "In a Glass Darkly" (1872) are widely acknowledged as their best work in the genre. In these stories Le Fanu combined many of the themes and techniques of traditional Gothic literature with those of modern psychological fiction." As Ellis (2000) writes, "in these last stories Le Fanu is pre-eminent, and his success is almost entirely achieved by his art of suggesting evil presences and coming horrors" (p.188). The scholar suggests that visible, actual ghosts appear in these stories very rarely; this was not the old school of traditional apparitions, in white or grey, with blue fire, clanking chain, and wailing cry. Many of his fellow-writers supposed that it would be enough just to state that a house is haunted, and the plot is open for the unconditioned appearances of ghosts clinking their chains, for the heart-rending howls from nowhere, for the souls of the deceased attacking a brave hero or a fainting heroine. Le Fanu was the only writer of horror fiction who rejected these traditional horrors. In Ellis's opinion (2000), he

was the one who understood that supernatural beings do not appear on their own account and for no special reason; "a personality of the one who sees them is also very important and is often full of otherworldly horrors in not less degree than ghosts themselves" (p.189). The author was seriously concerned with an artistic side of mystique and realized that supernatural phenomena must be organically interwoven with the plot action.

In his best works Le Fanu acted as a psychologist; however, his understanding of this word differed from the modern one. According to Bleiler (1971), the editor of "Best Ghost Stories of Le Fanu", like the most philosophers of the early 19th century who divided human mind into two levels – conscious and unconscious, and saw dreams and visions as manifestations of supernatural, Le Fanu was also "keenly interested in a barrier between "ego" and "non-ego", between the subjective and the objective, and in the means how one side of consciousness passed into another" (xi). He also paid attention to the process under which the barrier became permeable. In such stories as "The Haunted Baronet", "Squire Toby's Will", "Shalken the Painter" the real and the supernatural are so closely combined that these stories become a synthesis of the outer world and human soul, where hidden moral principles do not allow evil to stay unpunished.

In his later works Le Fanu learnt to find such rational explanations to supernatural phenomena which would allow to breach not only into human consciousness, but also into the very essence of the surrounding reality. In stories from his collection "In a Glass Darkly", "Green Tea", "The Familiar", "Mr. Justice Harbottle", "The Room in the Dragon Volant" and "Carmilla" the supernatural appears as the unconscious element of mind that is capable to enter the real world if the barriers between consciousness and sub-consciousness are temporarily opened either under the influence of some chemical substances. In these stories (eNotes, 2010) „Le Fanu used the recurring character of Dr. Martin Hesselius, a German physician specializing in mental disorders, to introduce each narrative as a patient's history burden both with supernatural and psychological phenomena. This technique allowed Le Fanu to unite his stories and to explore the psychology of the characters."

Contrary to Gothic novels, which are often set in exotic places far removed from the reader and where ghosts appear at nighttime, Le Fanu's ghosts do not know such limitations; they may manifest themselves anywhere and at any time. Wagenkneght (1991) observes that it is the art of the ghost-story writer by the use of the common, prosaic details of every day, to convince us of the concrete reality of some horror outside common experience and concludes, "Le Fanu is an artist in the domestic insinuation of the supernatural" (p.21). Mighall (2003) also considers, "Le Fanu artistically proves that it is much more terrifying when the supernatural obtrudes into prosaic, everyday life" (p. 67).

It would be true to say that a new focus on psychology indicates that a predominantly secularized version of "monstrosity" began to appear. According to Punter (1996), "monsters are not, as they were with Walpole's animated giants, or Lewis's demons, externally manifested sources of danger. Instead, by the mid-nineteenth century such horrors had largely been internalized. The roots of this can be discerned in Shelley's "Frankenstein" in the doubling between Victor and his creature, but it is given fresh impetus in the mid-nineteenth century Gothic, as indicated by the emergence of the ghost story as a popular form from the 1840s onwards. Typically in the ghost story the "monster" lives with you, invading your domestic spaces, so that evil acquires a proximity to the self which it did not necessarily have in the earlier Gothic" (p. 175).

In this case, the first story "Green Tea" from the collection "In a Glass Darkly" is quite a vivid example. It concerns (Answers.com, 2011) "Reverend Robert Jennings, a clergyman suffering from a

nervous condition." After studying ancient religions (Answers.com, 2011), "Jennings reports that he has been haunted by a little black monkey and suggests that, perhaps, it is a hallucination brought on by drinking large amounts of green tea. The presence of the monkey begins to interfere with Jennings' duties and with his research, and the creature begins to urge evil actions on the increasingly distressed clergyman. Ultimately, Jennings commits a suicide."

Key to this story, as well as to other stories of this collection, is the avoidance of overt supernatural effects (Answers.com, 2011): "the supernatural is strongly implied but a possible "natural" explanation is left (barely) open – in this case, the demonic monkey in "Green Tea" could be a delusion of the story's protagonist, who is the only person to see it". Doctor Hesselius concludes that Jennings drank too much green tea, which unluckily opened his patient's inner eye. In this idea Dr. Hesselius is guided by Swedenborg, a Swedish theosophical scientist and writer of the 18th century and his theory of the spiritual and material parallel worlds and their interconnection. In Thomson's (2002) view, the infernal image of a monkey is ambiguous. On the one hand, the monkey's ability to imitate humans' behavior allows to use this image to ridicule humans' drawbacks; on the other hand, the saying "devil is God's monkey" is quite actual in the story, as the author passes over to the theme of forbidden knowledge. The reader could suppose, the interest of a clergyman to pagan worships provokes the ghost's appearance. The scholar suggests, "the horror Le Fanu's protagonist encounters is enough to destroy him, yet the finality of his destruction only heightens the uncertainty of the supernatural" (p. 452).

Le Fanu versus His Contemporaries

According to Milbank (1992), in his literary work Le Fanu followed the direction that was antithetical to that of his contemporaries. The writers – contemporaries of Le Fanu artificially introduced various odd supernatural phenomena into everyday life. The best works of the three women novelists were created on the model where real and unreal worlds were strictly separated. These are "The Uninhabited House" and "Weird Stories" of J.H. Riddell, "Tales for Christmas Eve" of Rhoda Broughton, and "Miss Carew" of Amelia Edwards. Milbank (1992) claims, it was not a level of excellence, however, that differed Le Fanu from his contemporaries; all aforementioned authors were recognized masters in their field. Personal attitude of a writer to the represented events, his point of view, and his level of emotionality played an important role here. According to Milbank (1992), "Le Fanu himself was the main explanation of the difference – his extraordinary personality that combined aristocratic fragility of an armchair dreamer, inclination to ominous dreams with a strong character of an energetic businessman" (p. 195). Moreover, singularity of his literary work was connected with his religious feelings. The supernatural always had a very important personal meaning for the author, as opposed to his more or less orthodox colleagues. Being a follower of Emmanuel Swedenborg, Le Fanu also engaged into the studies of the greatest achievements of a religious, theosophical, occult, and magic thought of the present and the past.

Finally, the attitude to the cultural roots was of great value as well in distinguishing Le Fanu from the other writers of horror literature. Bleiler (1964) concludes that out of the Irish writers mentioned above only Le Fanu had a clear presentiment about the collapse of Anglo-Irish unity. In her view, "he was born in a disintegrating society; society divided by the emerging nationalism and lived among the culture overcome with acute nostalgia for the past. He realized to what extent his own life was consonant to the dying world of his nation (xiii). Although he never expressed this thought in his works, the progression of his career through his stories and novels was a downward spiral; in his last

years spent in reclusive existence he was beset with nightmares, the most significant of which was a huge crumbling mansion that was in danger of collapse. When Le Fanu was found dead from heart attack, the doctor remarked that "the house must have fallen at last".

Conclusion

Le Fanu has been called the inventor of the modern tale of the supernatural, and it has even been claimed that he wrote the first ghost story of the supernatural; his accurate description of psychological details, especially the details of psychological abnormalities, and his own vision of the supernatural as inspired by the Swedish mystic Emmanuel Swedenborg (Custred, 2009). Moreover, as the scholar proclaims, "Le Fanu heightens the contrast between what we know, what we believe and what we have confidence in, on the one hand, and the mysterious and threatening other dimension, on the other hand" (p. 194).

Le Fanu's stories anticipated or directly influenced later writers such as M.R. James, Algernon Blackwood and Arthur Machen. He also introduced the infallible scientific detective later appearing in Bram Stoker's Dr. Van Helsing in "Dracula", and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "Sherlock Holmes Stories".

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