

Agnieszka Łowczanin

TRAVELLERS FROM THE UNDISCOVERED COUNTRY RETURN –  
THE SUPERNATURAL IN J. S. LE FANU'S *IN A GLASS DARKLY*

From among the great number of Victorian ghost story writers, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was the first to use successfully a new method of treating the supernatural; that is, building the story on doubt and leaving it unresolved. According to many critics he is also the best. M. R. James says that "he stands absolutely in the first rank as a writer of ghost stories",<sup>1</sup> V. S. Pritchett speaks of his "individual accent and a flawless virtuosity", which, because produced during the part of the Victorian era most overflowing with writers of fiction, was "pushed into limbo by the great novelists".<sup>2</sup> M. Summers adds: "in my opinion he has seldom, if ever, been approached, and most assuredly never excelled."<sup>3</sup>

Since his works provide us with the necessary "hesitation" experienced when faced with the supernatural, and, since the explanation of the supernatural in his works teeters between the uncanny and the marvellous, leaving the reader hesitating over which resolution to opt for, J. S. Le Fanu deserves the term of a writer of the "fantastic", in keeping with Todorov's structuralist formula:

In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, a world without devils, sylphides, or vampires, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. Either the devil is an illusion, an imaginary being; or else he really exists, precisely like other living beings – with this reservation that we encounter him infrequently.

<sup>1</sup> M. R. James, after: J. Briggs, *Night Visitors. The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (London: Faber, 1977), p. 44.

<sup>2</sup> V. S. Pritchett, *The Living Novel* (London: Arrow Books, 1960), p. 102.

<sup>3</sup> M. Summers, Introduction, *The Supernatural Omnibus* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), vol. 2, p. 32.

The fantastic occupies the duration of this uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous. The fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event.<sup>4</sup>

At the end of the nineteenth century M. R. James formulated a similar idea, saying that it is necessary to leave a "loophole" for a natural explanation, but "this hole should be small enough to be unusable."<sup>5</sup>

Of the fourteen novels written by Le Fanu only *The Wyvern Mystery* makes use of the supernatural.<sup>6</sup> Thus, the fact that he is credited for being "a good deal more than a ghost among the ghosts",<sup>7</sup> rests entirely upon his short stories, of which the best collection is *In A Glass Darkly* (1872).<sup>8</sup> The stories collected in this volume include this narrow "loophole" M. R. James speaks of; it is provided even by the narrator himself, as the stories are a set of "cases" investigated by "a medical philosopher", Dr Martin Hesselius, whose "scientific" explanations of the disturbances experienced by the characters draw considerably on Swedenborg's theories about the relation of mind to body.

To the Gothic, or, more precisely, Radcliffian tradition, Le Fanu is indebted for ascribing importance to the "preparation stage" in the introduction of the supernatural – for introducing an enhanced background against which the supernatural emerges and thanks to which its appearance becomes even more terrifying and overwhelming.

One of the important elements in the preparation stage, or background, for the supernatural is the appropriate setting, which in Le Fanu's stories demonstrates close affinities with the Terror school of Mrs Radcliffe. To her achievement Le Fanu added an important innovation – the apparitions in his stories are not confined to one particular abode and they can be discerned at any time, not only at night, looming indistinctly out of the darkness of a murky castle. His improvement lies also in making the image of his edifices more concrete and detailed; where Mrs Radcliffe achieves awesomeness through insinuation, Le Fanu provides us with accurate details.

Together with the setting go the suggestions of the narrator, either indirect or else very direct, which give the impression that something out of this world is going to take place. In "Mr Justice Harbottle" an

<sup>4</sup> T. Todorov, *The Fantastic. A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1975), p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> M. R. James, after: T. Todorov, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. J. Nałęcz-Wojtczak, *Picture and Meaning: The Visual Dimension of Sheridan Le Fanu's Fiction* (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 1991), p. 85.

<sup>7</sup> V. S. Pritchett, *op. cit.*, p. 107.

<sup>8</sup> The collection includes the following stories: "Green Tea", "The Familiar", "Mr Justice Harbottle", "The Room in the Dragon Volant", "Carmilla".

introduction to the proper story is an account of the apparitions encountered by the tenant of a haunted house. However, before we find out what actually happened to the unfortunate inhabitant, we learn that he was

... a dry, sad quiet man, who had known better days, and had always maintained an unexceptionable character. No better authority could be imagined for a ghost story.<sup>9</sup>

In "Green Tea", before we are allowed to discover the nature of the disturbances Jennings is plagued with, Hesselius notices that people "remark something odd" in his behaviour. It is his way of "looking sidelong upon the carpet, as if his eye followed the movements of something there" and his "glance travelling along the floor ... both shy and anxious" (p. 8) that first intrigue us.

In "Carmilla" this stage of preparation is achieved by means of the setting, as well as by the direct comments of the narrator. This is the only story which is narrated directly by the person who experienced the supernatural disturbances herself, and who is also the only one that survived. The story's incredibility is stressed from the very beginning:

Listen and wonder! (p. 245)

I am now going to tell you something so strange that it will require all your faith in my veracity to believe my story. (p. 248)

While the background against which Le Fanu's weird creatures are presented is easy to grasp due to its artistic forcefulness and univocal function in the story, the understanding of the supernatural confronts the reader with many questions and ambiguities. One of the possible interpretations is suggested by the fact that in some of the stories the supernatural disturbs the sinister characters, those with a murky past, thus coming as a punishment for the deeds for which they have not yet repented. This could certainly be the case in "Mr Justice Harbottle" and "The Familiar". This function of the supernatural draws a great deal from the use to which Walpole put it; the statue of Alfonso torments the castle because evil had been committed in the past. Once the wrongdoer is punished, the supernatural vanishes never to plague Otranto again. These two stories seem to yield such an interpretation.

Whereas Barton in "The Familiar" at first does not seem to deserve any supernatural affliction, in the case of Harbottle we are convinced from the very start that he deserves it. The very description of the judge has many Lewis-like images of the Horror Gothic: he has the most dreadful,

<sup>9</sup> J. S. Le Fanu's, *In A Glass Darkly* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 84. The following stories from the collection have been analysed: "Green Tea", "The Familiar", "Mr Justice Harbottle", "Carmilla". All subsequent quotations refer to this edition.

mulberry-coloured face, a carbuncled nose, and a brutal mouth, like the sinister characters in Hogarth's engravings. His external features seem to be a projection of his depravity; he is the organiser of "dubious jollifications", delights in revelry, in which he is "the roaring king, and in some sort the tyrant also, of his company" (p. 90). He is an "old reprobate in scarlet and ermine" (p. 99). He lives with a lecherous woman, who, after a scandal, had left her husband, Lewis Pyneweck, who had been tried by Harbottle for forgery and sentenced by him to death. As a result of many supernatural persecutions, Harbottle is finally found dead, hanging from a banister at the top of a staircase. The cruel judge gets what he deserves; the punishment fits perfectly the crimes he had committed. He is an arch villain, who, although warned, does not change his conduct, and this is why he has to commit suicide and, by doing so, to sentence himself to eternal damnation.

The same pattern of revenge exacted by supernatural means seems to organise the plot in "The Familiar". However, while in "Mr Justice Harbottle" the initial mystery is solved after a few pages, in "The Familiar" the secret of Barton's persecutions is sustained till the very end of the narration. The story relates the case of Sir James Barton, a British naval captain, who, after the American Revolution, returns to Dublin. Having decided to marry a Miss Montague, he often visits her and her aunt in a remote part of the city. During these night walks Barton is persecuted by strange footsteps which are later accompanied by even more disquieting disturbances – mysterious letters of warning and a dwarfish demonic creature. As the persecutions increase, the once rational, self-possessed sceptic becomes a nervous wreck, desperately looking for solace in bizarre forms of mysticism as well as in orthodox religion.

It is very characteristic of Le Fanu's stories that his supernatural tormenting can be divided into stages, in which its intensification is accompanied by a progressive deterioration of the physical and mental state of the haunted person. In "The Familiar" the supernatural evolves from mere footsteps into dwarfish, malignant figure, which at first follows Barton, and then begins to pursue him with blasphemies and cries of appalling hatred. Barton, on the other hand, first perceives it as an illusion, then becomes "unusually absent and out of spirits" (p. 49), and seems fatigued and overworked. In the next stage he decides to consult a doctor, who diagnoses his sufferings as "some slight derangement of the digestion" (p. 53). Finally, in his despair to combat the demon, Barton even consults a "celebrated preacher".

Page by page, the reader is given more and more details about Barton's past. His seduction of a girl and cruel treatment of her father are finally disclosed – the deeds from the past throw a shadow on his life and the interpretation of the narrative as a revenge story is suggested by the main

character himself. The supernatural comes, or is sent, by "the Justice of heaven" which has permitted "the Evil one to carry out a scheme of vengeance" (pp. 74-5). Having an indelible mark on his past, Barton cannot change his fate – the sin, once committed, cannot be erased.

As has already been remarked, we can detect some early Gothic, Walpolian affinities in the revenge pattern – in disturbing the wrongdoers after years and in restoring the natural equilibrium between Good and Evil by means of the supernatural. We can also trace the author's indebtedness to the Terror Gothic in his enhancing the supernatural by means of imagery, mainly by the descriptions of houses. But as far as the ingenious malignity of the supernatural and the way it influences the characters' lives are concerned, the more likely tradition seems to be rather that of the Horror Gothic school. Heightened with the touches of Horror, the overall atmosphere of the Terror school is an important heritage, which, nevertheless, seems to constitute only the background – the foundations upon which something entirely new has been built.

Although in the above detailed stories we can perceive the supernatural as the executor of revenge, not all Le Fanu's supernatural manifestations can yield such an interpretation. In fact, even the attempt – suggested above – to categorize the supernatural as a means of administering justice covers only one dimension of Le Fanu's weird reality, because with the problems verging on the borderline between the real and the unreal, the natural and the supernatural, the answers are never straightforward or univocal.

As has been previously agreed, we can either accept the supernatural reality – that is, believe in the objective existence of its visitations – or else try to squeeze it into M. R. James's "loophole"; that is, attribute these occurrences to the mental instability of their witnesses, and, by doing so, "make for an open sea" of the psychological ghost story. J. Briggs points out that it is in the nineteenth century that apparitions, which for centuries had been regarded as types of demonic possessions, came to be considered as symptomatic of mental disturbances, and that the later theories of Freud can be seen as an important step in "de-mystifying magical states".<sup>10</sup> Consequently, the psychological ghost story is seen as encompassing two possible interpretations, since rooted in it is the existence of two realities: the reality of the "sane" and the reality of the "insane", in which the latter supernatural has its place. The supernatural reality of the afflicted person can be treated by science and explained away by doctors, who interpret it as a pathological creation of a sick mind, but in the case of J. S. Le Fanu the existence of this reality is never questioned. As W. Allen has points out, the supernatural and the purely natural can never exist side

---

<sup>10</sup> J. Briggs, *op. cit.*, p. 143.



by side for they are irreconcilable, "[t]he rational must prove the supernatural an illusion; I do not think Le Fanu was convinced the supernatural was an illusion."<sup>11</sup>

"Green Tea" is a story about a possessed man. The Reverend Mr Jennings is at first possessed by his studies on the metaphysics of the ancients. As he believes, when man sets about doing something in earnest, there occurs a "material waste" that should be hourly supplied, because the mind can "pass out of the body, unless it were reminded often of the connection by actual sensation" (p. 22). Consequently, he supplies the want by indulging in green tea. After some time, this otherwise modest and benevolent preacher, becomes molested by a dark hairy monkey. At first "jaded and sulky" (p. 25), "dazed and languid" (p. 26), the monkey from the very beginning evokes the atmosphere of an "unfathomable malignity". Later on the sullenness of the spirit is replaced by vivacity and aggression. Wearied by the visitations, Jennings consults a physician, who treats the monkey as a "spectral illusion". However, very gradually the spirit begins to exert an even stronger influence over the oppressed Priest, finally urging him to commit suicide.

Desperately trying to find some explanation of his suffering, Jennings turns to Swedenborg's teachings, to his theory of opening the "interior sight". Swedenborg's theory does not propose any solution, but at least it suggests something like the reason Jennings expects – an explanation different from the materialistic rationalization suggested by Dr Harley. Jennings has to realize that the monkey is not a mere illusion, caused by overwork, indigestion, or problems of sight. His visit to Dr Hesselius, a "philosophic physician, who gives spirit its proper rank" (p. 28), however, takes place too late – after three years of demonic persecutions Jennings is driven to take his own life.

"Green Tea" is a story with a "loophole", which Le Fanu leaves for a possible natural, or rational explanation. This loophole is used on the level of the plot by Dr Hesselius, who gives many "scientific" explanations for Jennings's case, one of them being that his affliction is a "spectral illusion", which is "no less simply curable than a cold in the head or a trifling dyspepsia" (p. 38). Another one is that it is Jennings's indulgence in green tea that affected the equilibrium of the fluids circulating through the nerves. The abundance of fluids, which accumulate on the brain, forms a "mass" upon which "disembodied spirits may operate". Having produced the above diagnosis, Hesselius adds that Jennings additionally succumbed to a hereditary suicidal mania.

<sup>11</sup> W. Allen, *The English Novel. A Short Critical History* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), p. 213.

Hesselius's scientific approach is only a very apparent utilization of the "loophole" for the natural explanation, because, although supplying "scientifically"-based causes, he never denies the existence of supernatural reality. His rational explanations are based on the assumption that the world of spirits does exist and that, accordingly, it can interfere with the "real" world. Accepting Hesselius's theory that the monkey is just "a disembodied spirit", the reader accepts the existence of supernatural reality.

Leaving aside Hesselius's explanations, the monkey may be also seen as a product of Jennings's twisted mind, his disordered imagination, which, by subordinating the sensual organs, makes the eyes see what it wants to be seen, be it even a hairy monkey. But does anything in the short story suggest that Jennings is a man with mental problems so serious that he begins to imagine things? In the very beginning he may, indeed, be overworked after poring over the materials on pagan mythology, and an excess of stimulants coming from the green tea, in which he indulges, may have caused some temporary instability. But even if this was the case the symptoms would not last as long as three years and more; they would abate after the "change of air" which Jennings in fact often had, travelling from his country parish to London.

Is it then that Jennings is punished for researching the non-Christian religious beliefs? This interpretation is encouraged by the Vicar himself, by the way he talks about his own studies. He admits that they "thoroughly infected" him and that "all the material ideas connected with it were more or less of the beautiful, the subject itself *delightfully* interesting, and I, then, *without a care*" (pp. 21-2). When relating the events to Hesselius he cries: "God forgive me!" (p. 21). R. Tracy suggests:

His studies have led him into pagan mythology, to half-realize that the gods and goddesses of Greece and Rome are metaphors for a sensuality he can neither accommodate nor confront ... His unintended invasion of the world of spirits causes him to see or imagine a metaphor for his own suppressed erotic self, his animal nature. ... Jennings's haunting monkey is an aspect of himself, from whom there is no escape.<sup>12</sup>

Seen in this light the monkey becomes "a very Freudian animal".<sup>13</sup> W. Allen also agrees that, although Hesselius explains away Jennings's diabolic possession, "for the reader today the monkey will probably seem a striking projection of the unconscious".<sup>14</sup> This explanation, however, also seems to ignore another question. Namely: why should Jennings in particular be haunted by the supernatural, whereas Hesselius also admits that the subject

<sup>12</sup> R. Tracy, "Introduction", in J. S. Le Fanu, *op. cit.*, p. xiv.

<sup>13</sup> V. S. Pritchett, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

<sup>14</sup> W. Allen, *op. cit.*, p. 213.

of "the actual religion of educated and thinking paganism" is "a wide and very interesting field" (p. 21)? And, coming back to "The Familiar", why should Barton be haunted to his grave by the supernatural when he was only an indirect cause of the sailor's death? The foremast-man himself committed a crime a thousand times more cruel: the crime of infanticide.

J. Nałęcz-Wojtczak points out that

... the explanation concerning the ghost in a typical ghost story accounts for only a superficial aspect of the supernatural which, in contrast to the early Gothic novel, becomes here an independent reality whose depth and complexity far exceed the scope of the answer. ... Presenting [the] hauntings, J. S. Le Fanu with the subtlety of a great master, confronts the reader with some elusive and yet irresistibly present reality of condensed evil, hatred and cruelty ...

The real meaning of the supernatural presented in Le Fanu's stories

... can be read only if we accept the existence of an independent, complex and intellectually ungraspable supernatural reality as the centre of the poetic world of the ghost story.<sup>15</sup>

The conception of the supernatural, as a multi-dimensional reality, seems to be suggested by Le Fanu himself through his very intriguing method of narration. All the stories collected in *In A Glass Darkly*, are a collection of cases investigated by Dr Martin Hesselius. They are collected by Hesselius's medical secretary who, out of an "immense collection of papers" (p. 5), chooses the most interesting cases. The stories, before they even begin to be related, are thus "filtered" at least twice. But Le Fanu did not stop at this; Walpole's idea of presenting an old rediscovered manuscript seems nothing in comparison with the technique of narration Le Fanu used. "Green Tea", for example, is a story which had been related originally by Hesselius to his friend Professor Van Loo of Leyden. Written in English, French and German, it was then translated by the editor who "omit[ted] some passages, and shorten[ed] others" (p. 6). Consequently, in the case of "Green Tea" it is a "three-fold" filtration. "Mr Justice Harbottle" is even more mediated than "Green Tea". It had also been written originally in the form of letters, this time to Dr Heyne, but the events described had been gathered by Hesselius from a Mr Harman, who, in turn, had heard them from his father. The level of filtration in this story seems almost unbelievable; it accounts for as many as four different narrators repeating the same story one after another, plus Dr Heyne to whom the correspondence had been addressed.

<sup>15</sup> J. Nałęcz-Wojtczak, "The Old and the New in the Victorian Ghost Story", *Acta Universitatis Lodzianensis, Folia litteraria*, 18 (1987), pp. 96-7.



This complicated, many-layered narration in itself implies the existence of an almost Kafkaesque reality, in which man is only one of many cogs in a sophisticated machine, only a pawn, dependent on others, and controlled by others. So, it is not Jennings's interest in paganism that awakens the malignant, supernatural forces; nor is it his suppressed sexuality. Jennings's only sin seems to be his indulgence in green tea, and this is what he is punished for – an interpretation suggested by the title of the story. J. Sullivan notices:

The very title of the tale registers the fundamental irony: the awful disjuncture between cause and effect, crime and punishment. What emerges is an irrational ... feeling of guilt and persecution.<sup>16</sup>

This is a world in which man can be punished for most ridiculous reasons, a world in which all his steps, and even his thoughts, are carefully watched, and where his slightest slip can activate "agencies ... most inexplicable and terrific" (p. 60), which "carry out a scheme of vengeance" (p. 75). The troubled man can expect mercy neither from the spiritual world, nor from anyone among the living. Having been spotted by the supernatural agencies and abandoned by the mortal world, Le Fanu's characters die in solitude and nobody witnesses their final moments. As in Gothic novels, the doors swing closed, cutting off the vulnerable victim from the outer world. In "The Familiar", for example, the servant who is supposed "never to suffer [Barton] to be alone" (p. 76)

... had ... hardly entered the lobby, when the door behind him slowly swung to under the impulse, as it seemed, of some gentle current of air. (p. 78)

Barton dies alone, and so does Jennings, abandoned by his doctor, while Harbottle, in a house peopled with servants, hangs himself at the top of a great staircase. Le Fanu presents

... a world where things refuse to fit together, where terrible things happen to the wrong people for the wrong reasons, where horrors leap out of the most trivial and ridiculous contexts.<sup>17</sup>

To the vast phantasmagoria of Le Fanu's supernatural apparitions we must add yet another figure – a vampire, who becomes a credible, flesh and blood character in "Carmilla". One of the most interesting aspects of the supernatural in this story may be that it became a means for Le Fanu to cross certain boundaries, directly inaccessible to the Victorian mind. The

<sup>16</sup> J. Sullivan, *Elegant Nightmares. The English Ghost Story from Le Fanu to Blackwood* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1978), p. 18.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

story is a very sensuous and erotic account of the unearthly relationship between Laura and Carmilla – the vampire. Due to the story's direct, first person narration by the main heroine, this eroticism is filtered through Laura's perspective of incomprehensibility and inexplicability. Alongside its being the embodiment of implied, perverse sexuality and a representation of the anxiety of the age – homosexual love – the supernatural in "Carmilla" is, as in all the stories discussed above, a means of presenting the intricate and implacable world of evil gaining a total victory.

And again, the working of the supernatural on the mind and body of the victim is gradual. The process of seducing of Laura is slow and stealthy, just like the development of her affliction, the progress of which, although noticeable in daylight ("I had grown pale, my eyes were dilated and darkened underneath, and the languor ... began to display itself in my countenance", p. 281), really takes place at night.

The inseparable bond established between the girls is from the very beginning deeply erotic. Laura is attracted to Carmilla, or rather to the pleasurable and unparalleled state of excitement with which she constantly supplies her; Carmilla is the carnal visualisation of her dreams and unconscious desires.

At the same time, however, Laura is aware of a growing sense of repulsion and of "antipathy" towards Carmilla. Her "admiration" is "mingled with a vague sense of fear and disgust"; she is "conscious of a love growing into adoration, and also of abhorrence". (p. 264)

Just as Carmilla is the only supernatural manifestation which we can observe so closely, so is Laura the only character who survives her molestations. She survives in physical terms only because, having once experienced the "malignity of hell" (p. 293), she cannot, like other characters in Le Fanu's stories, recover fully.

... to this hour the image of Carmilla returns to memory with ambiguous alternations – sometimes the playful, languid, beautiful girl; sometimes the writhing fiend ...; and often from a reverie I have started, fancying I heard the light step of Carmilla at the drawing-room door. (p. 319)

In fact we doubt if she can ever recover at all, because, according to the theory expressed by Baron Vordenburg, a vampire expert present at the ordeal of Carmilla, her victims "almost invariably, in the grave, develop into vampires" (p. 318). Besides, Carmilla herself says: "you, in your turn, will draw near to others". Does it mean that Laura, too, as Sullivan suggests, is doomed to become one of them?<sup>18</sup> Even if she does not, the

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, pp. 62–3.

ambivalent image of the vampire haunts her till the end of her life, and is most probably the reason of her premature death.

The ambiguity of the story, expressed, first of all, by Laura's ambiguous attitude towards Carmilla, can also be felt in the possibility of a double understanding of Carmilla herself – Sullivan speaks of her as both "victim and victimizer".<sup>19</sup>

We see Carmilla in her youth as the prey of demonic visitations; forced, against her will, into the world of vampires. There she can either lead the life of a vampire and remain a pawn drawn to the scene by a weird ghostly retinue, or have a stake driven through her heart, be decapitated and cremated and thus "on ... expulsion from ... amphibious existence, [be] projected into a far more horrible life" (p. 318). The supernatural reality is again presented as monstrous and malignant, but this time, by drawing the character of Carmilla so minutely, and by making her of equal status with those from the "real" world, Le Fanu provides a deeper insight into this reality and hints at its mode of operation.

Carmilla is a victim of the same "atrocious plan" (p. 28) that ruins the lives of Jennings, Harbottle and Barton. The General, whose ward is wearied to the grave, feels a fool when he realises that he had received a fiend, a monster into his house. But so is Carmilla, "the agent of all this misery" (p. 250), "the dupe of a preternatural conspiracy" (p. 294). Just as Jennings's only flaw is indulging in green tea; Carmilla's and Laura's – being young and beautiful.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu is strongly indebted to the early Gothic novel for the revenge motif for his supernatural, and to the Terror school of Mrs Radcliffe for stressing the importance of the subjectivity of the weird experience. Following the conventional Gothic patterns he simultaneously enriched them with new, distinctive and powerful features. His supernatural takes on the most ingenious and varied forms – it comes to torment its victims over a long period of time, causing irreversible, psychologically-motivated changes in the minds of the characters. The supernatural comes apparently for retribution, but the enormity of suffering caused by its actions far exceeds the supposed crimes. The supernatural can haunt in any form and at any time; there is no escape from its omnipresence and omnipotence – no chance of survival for those who have been once exposed to its malignity.

The ambivalence of the sensations the characters feel towards the supernatural suggests its ambiguous and multi-dimensional nature. Instead of providing easy solutions and univocal interpretations, Le Fanu's stories end by posing questions concerning the essence of the suggested supernatural:

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 63.

is it a product of a mind under stress, or of a guilty conscience, a projection of subconscious anxieties, a spectral illusion, or a real agency of "the most inexplicable and terrific system" "carrying out a scheme of vengeance"? In this respect Le Fanu differs from Walpole, who understood the supernatural as a power coming from a world beyond human perception, as well as from Mrs Radcliffe, whose supernatural anticipates the psychological interpretation of individual perception. Le Fanu's supernatural encompasses it all. Its ambiguity, enhanced by rich poetic imagery, suggests the conclusion that final explanations of the impenetrable mystery of the universe are far beyond us.

Institute of English Studies  
University of Łódź

*Agnieszka Łowczanin*

#### ŚWIAT NADPRZYRODZONY W OPOWIEŚCI O DUCHACH J. S. LE FANU

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, przez wielu krytyków uznany za najwybitniejszego przedstawiciela wiktoriańskiej opowieści o duchach, czerpiąc w dużej mierze z tradycji powieści gotyckiej nadaje światu nadprzyrodzonemu w swoich opowiadaniach zupełnie nową funkcję i znaczenie.

Niewątpliwym wpływem prekursora powieści gotyckiej, Horacego Walpole'a, jest wyposażenie świata nadprzyrodzonego w element zemsty jako jeden z motywów jego działania. Nawiązanie do tradycji Ann Radcliffe i fazy „*Terror Gothic*” ujawnia się szczególnie na płaszczyźnie obrazowości opisów i jest jednocześnie doskonałym kompozycyjnie zabiegiem przygotowującym czytelnika do kontaktu z rzeczywistością nierealną. Innowacja Le Fanu polega na rozbudowaniu tego etapu przez wprowadzenie, obok opisów zniszczonych lub niedostępnych domów tradycyjnie towarzyszących występowaniu elementu nadprzyrodzonego, opisów osobliwego zachowania bohaterów lub bezpośredniej narracji, co ma na celu jeszcze większe podkreślenie niesamowitości przedstawionej sytuacji. Z fazy „*Horror Gothic*” zaczerpnął Le Fanu, obok niezwykle okrucieństwa i dużej dosłowności opisów w niektórych opowiadaniach, bardzo szczegółowy sposób przedstawienia wystanników z zaświatów, nie ograniczając się jednocześnie do nadania im jednego tylko kształtu. Kolejnym wpływem powieści późnogotyckiej jest niewątpliwie fakt, że skutkiem nawiedzenia jest wywołanie nieodwracalnych zmian w życiu i osobowości nękanego bohatera, a w przypadku omawianych utworów jego śmierć.

Wykorzystując i modyfikując niektóre z istniejących już wzorców, Le Fanu udało się jednak stworzyć zupełnie nowatorską wizję świata nadprzyrodzonego, rządzącego się swoimi własnymi prawami, którego motywy działania i powody ingerencji w świat rzeczywisty nie dają się wytłumaczyć na podstawie wydarzeń przedstawionych w opowiadaniach. Jest to świat w którym bohatera spotyka kara niewspółmierna w stosunku do popełnionych przewinień lub kara zupełnie niezasłużona. Niezwykła złożoność tego świata wydaje się być zasugerowana przez samego autora, przez skomplikowaną narrację, która z jednej strony przedstawia możliwość quasi-naukowego wytłumaczenia istnienia świata nadprzyrodzonego, z drugiej jednak strony, przez swoją wielowarstwowość zdaje się wykluczać jakąkolwiek możliwość racjonalnej interpretacji.