



Вампир и жертва: два «женских» сюжета в готических новеллах Э. Ф. Бенсона

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Vampire and Victim: Two Gender-Oriented Plots in E. F. Benson's Ghost Stories

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Аннотация

В противоположность «классической» готике, в которой видное место занимали сюжеты о страдающей героине, готика второй половины XIX в. и первых десятилетий XX в. представляет преимущественно мужской мир; женские персонажи либо отсутствуют, либо весьма амбивалентны. Материалом для изучения этого вопроса могут служить новеллы Э. Ф. Бенсона, в которых обретают новую жизнь канонические сюжеты о вампире («Миссис Эмворт») и о женихе-мертвце («Лицо»).

Abstract

In contrast to classic Gothic novels where a suffering female protagonist plays an important role, ghost stories continuing the Gothic tradition in late 19 and early 20 c) represent men's world: female characters are either absent or mostly

ambivalent. E. F. Benson's stories reviving traditional images of a vampire («Mrs. Amworth») and a spectral bridegroom («The Face») are characteristic examples of this trend.

Ключевые слова: готическая новелла, гендер, мотив, пародия.

Keywords: ghoststory, gender, trope, parody.

Female Protagonists in Gothic Fiction

Gothic fiction is known to deal with gender-related topics quite often [3: 95], moreover, the so-called Gothic novel of the late 18 c) often featured female protagonists and enigmatic male villains [4: 103–105]. Later on, as the so-called ghost story became popular, we find that there are much fewer female characters – probably due to the fact that some leading authors were also university teachers or



clergymen (M.R.James, E.G.Swain, A.Gray) and were interested in “scholarly” themes related to history, ethnography and all kinds of curious antiques.

Classical ghost stories in turn started to lose their popularity in the 1920s, and the decline of the genre was marked with some interest to new versions of very traditional subjects. A ghost story typically has a rather rigid structure and deals with a limited range of themes, so it is basically an exercise in storytelling, where narrative skills and choice of details are probably more important than the story itself. That is why masters of Late Victorian and Edwardian ghost story tended to play with already existing models, for instance, Vernon Lee introduced elements of essay and made use of her knowledge of art and history, Arthur Gray produced a hybrid of a historical essay and a ghost story rich in authentic detail, E.G.Swain wrote a tribute to his friend M.R.James mixing imitation with parody. E.F.Benson (1867-1940), one of the last masters of classical ghost story, playfully used some commonplace subjects and motifs, some of them very clearly gender-related. Further analysis is based on two of his stories: «The Face» and «Mrs. Amworth».

«The Face»

«The Face» [2: 35–53] introduces its protagonist, a young married woman, and stresses the fact that Esther is perfectly happy and successful. She is beautiful, healthy and rich, she has an adorable husband and equally adorable children [2: 35] (the adjective is repeated intentionally). It is somehow typical for a ghost story (a picture of peaceful harmony that is later destroyed by the intrusion of malignant forces), though is clearly overdone and represents a

stereotypical image of a Victorian lady verging on parody.

In fact, malignant forces are very soon hinted at: Esther’s unclouded happiness is spoiled by a repeated nightmare featuring a stranger’s face and ruins of a church that has tormented her since her childhood. A nightmare is a very common Gothic theme, and Benson turns his story into a sort of catalogue of such tropes. Esther wants to tell her beloved husband about her experience but eventually gives up the idea: she is afraid this can only make the dream more real. This can be regarded both as a trace of modern psychoanalytic ideas (dreams being a private realm of forbidden desires) and a motif of a vain warning common in folktales.

Later on Esther visits a gallery and sees a 17c) portrait of the man from her dreams. A mysterious portrait and unstable borders between past and present also belong to Gothic tropes, besides, in this scene Benson explicitly refers to fashionable psychological theories (in contrast to more sinister possibilities). The protagonist is sent to a health resort (which again refers to rational scientific discourse) but the stranger visits her even there, now in person, and leads her to the seaside. The lady mysteriously disappears, and the stranger’s body, exceptionally well-preserved (like vampires’ bodies usually are), is found in a grave.

The whole story is pretty much typical for the genre, though it is intentionally overdone: Benson’s stories are usually much subtler. Besides, the main storyline can be read as a tragicomic inversion of a well-known tale about a spectral bridegroom: originally a girl follows the man she loves into the grave, and here is a story about a rich and mostly happy married lady in a sea resort. The author makes fun not only of literary tropes but also of popular gender stereotypes: a



young flippant wife, a placid homely husband, a dangerous seducer (coming from the past, probably because the present is too rational and down-to-earth).

Actually this gathering of the popular tropes together is characteristic for a genre experiencing decline: tropes are easily recognized and feel not so exciting any more, so it is more and more difficult to take them seriously.

«Mrs. Amworth»

The second story, «Mrs. Amworth» [1], features a group of friends fond of talking over a cup of tea. Among them is a widow of a clerk from India. Colonial East is regarded in ghost stories as a “strange” potentially dangerous place, but what is even more disturbing, Mrs. Amworth is distinctly androgynous: she smokes, drinks, enjoys physical activity and regards men as friends. Moreover, she is 45 and does not conceal the fact. All in all, she is everything a stereotypical heroine should not be – a striking contrast to Esther.

The narrator clearly likes her, but their mutual neighbor the professor (with some experience in occult studies) is rather suspicious and regards her as scientifically interesting.

The three friends are discussing vampires – are they real? It is very typical for a ghost story to introduce dangerous beings initially in the form of dreams, pictures, descriptions and all kinds of premonitions. So it soon becomes clear for the reader that the strange masculine woman is a vampire: Benson knows the Gothic tropes well and intentionally makes some of them obvious.

Besides there is some meaningful wordplay – the protagonist twice mentions blood and her willingness to be closer to the cemetery.

Eventually a young boy falls mysteriously ill, and the investigation

shows that Mrs. Amworth is guilty and she herself probably became infected with vampirism in India. A very traditional scene with nailing the body down with driving in a stake follows.

A typical Victorian and Edwardian female vampire is eternally young, beautiful and sexually attractive (sex had dangerous implications those days) [5: 232]. A memorable example is Sheridan Le Fanu’s Carmilla. Benson’s vampire is neither young nor physically attractive and obviously not interested in romantic relationships. She looks more like another popular image, that of an emancipated woman, already quite ordinary in real life but still suspicious. Benson combined two versions of otherness – mythical and social, so his parody verges on satire, though it is essential to analyze the writer’s legacy as a whole in order to make an accurate conclusion.

Conclusion

The two stories dealt with in the article are only examples but they enable us to see the ability of late British ghost story to playfully reuse highly recognizable tropes among which are two images important for the whole Gothic tradition: an innocent female victim and a beautiful and dangerous vampire. Benson’s interest in gender roles says a lot not only about his creative activity (also including satire and nonfictional biographies) but also about the genre of ghost story and of literary Gothic as a mode: evidently gender-related themes are important enough to be widely reproduced and easily recognized and therefore can provide material for literary games and parodies.

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