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MEISART, MICHELE F. Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu: An Initiator of the Psychological Thriller. (1973)  
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Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, an important figure in the world of supernatural literature, was born in Ireland and as a writer could never escape his Irish origin. In his short stories the themes as well as the characters are Irish and in his novels the atmosphere is definitely Irish. The Irish people furnished Le Fanu with a never ending source for the psychological study of characters of his novels. His power of penetration into the human mind was enhanced by his own neurosis and his personal grief (when his wife died he became a recluse). His neurosis and his grief also caused his novels to become more indepth studies of death, murder and retribution. The strength of his stories lies in the fact that they are based on his own experience.

The bases for his weirdly horrible tales, specifically the novels Uncle Silas, Checkmate, Wylder's Hand and Willing to Die are the following: one, the reader shares in the hallucinations and premonitions of the victim, two, he also shares in the identity of the agent of terror.

In supernatural literature Le Fanu is between the gothic period and the modern supernatural fiction. There are elements of both in his own stories. The natural elements, typically gothic, condition the reader psychologically. Le Fanu, deeply learned in Swedenborgianism, believed that "men are constantly

surrounded by preternatural powers," represented by vegetation, the moon or a house. These preternatural influences create an effect on the characters in the stories.

In the novels there are three main groups of characters: the heroines who suffer but are innocent and harmless, the intermediary people who are the instruments of the third class, the wicked people whose purpose is to harm the heroines. Le Fanu describes these characters physically and psychologically so perfectly that the reader feels that he knows them intimately. Le Fanu displays great skill in using the physical aspect of his characters to suggest their psychological frames of mind.

In Le Fanu's characters the reader, although he may not be aware of it, is contemplating his own image both in the victims and in the agents of terror. In reflecting the reader's image Le Fanu was also depicting himself in the characters that he created. He tried to communicate with the human group by transcribing his own torments and terrors into literary works. Louis Vax comments, "the sickness of the soul becomes putrefaction of the cosmos." I believe that Le Fanu desperately tried to show that.

JOSEPH SHERIDAN LE FANU: AN INITIATOR OF  
THE PSYCHOLOGICAL THRILLER

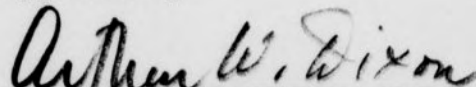
by

Michele Meisart

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Arthur W. Dixon  
Thesis Adviser

APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of the Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Thesis Adviser

Arthur W. Dixon

Thesis Committee

Randolph Bulgin  
Chauvignier

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The writer of this kind of literature is to make the reader  
 share in the hallucinations and preoccupations of the victim.  
 It is our contention that the reader also, though perhaps  
 unconsciously, shares in the identity of the agent of terror  
 when the agent is supernatural and that he does so even more  
 readily when the agent is human.  
 Thus we find such human monsters in the real world, our  
 attitude toward them is repulsion, even rejection. But we  
 accept them in the horror tale because we do identify with  
 them. Louis Vax suggests in L'Érotisme et la Littérature Fantastique  
 (Paris: Éditions de la Librairie Fantastique, 1933) "The monster we read about is an incarnation of our  
 own perverse and homicidal tendencies."<sup>2</sup> So it seems that it

<sup>1</sup>Howard E. Lucraft, Supernatural Horror in Literature  
 New York: Abraxas, 1943, p. 11.

<sup>2</sup>Louis Vax, L'Érotisme et la Littérature Fantastique (Paris:  
 Presses Universitaires de France, 1933), p. 11.

## INTRODUCTION

In his introduction to Supernatural Horror in Literature, H. P. Lovecraft writes: "the oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown. These facts few psychologists will dispute, and their admitted truth must establish for all time the genuineness and dignity of the weirdly horrible tales as a literary form."<sup>1</sup> Thus Lovecraft implies that the purpose of the writer of this kind of literature is to make the reader share in the hallucinations and premonitions of the victim. It is our contention that the reader also, though perhaps unconsciously, shares in the identity of the agent of terror when the agent is supernatural and that he does so even more easily when the agent is human.

When we find such human monsters in the real world, our attitude toward them is repulsion, even rejection. But we accept them in the horror tale because we do identify with them. Louis Vax suggests in L'Art et la Litterature Fantastiques: "The monster we read about is an incarnation of our own perverse and homicidal tendencies."<sup>2</sup> So it seems that in

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<sup>1</sup>Howard P. Lovecraft, Supernatural Horror in Literature (New York: Abramson, 1945), p. 12.

<sup>2</sup>Louis Vax, L'Art et la Litterature Fantastiques (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1963), p. 11.

this kind of fiction our interest is based on three elements: (1) we identify with the victim, (2) we identify also with the agent of terror, and (3) we may shudder at the discovery of this identification with the monster. Luckily we accept these diversified aspects of ourselves only when they are fictional. As Penzoldt concludes: "...when we close the book we can feel delightfully certain that the horrors we have been contemplating are nought but fiction."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to these three elements forming the basis of our interest, there is a forth--the god-like power imparted us to create or destroy at will monsters as poignant as Dr. Frankenstein's creature. This power resides in the simple act of opening or closing the book whenever we want. So it is that through an act we gain victory over our sadistic and masochistic impulses. We like to read about castles with dark gloomy rooms, statues moving in an inexplicable way, portraits stepping out of their frames--and amidst all these a young, innocent and most frightened heroine. If not a castle it may be an abbey with vaults, graveyards and their gruesome accessories; a bleeding nun walking about in the night; a monstrous creature made up from unbalanced parts of humans; a wicked uncle ready to do anything to gain possession of money which is not his --all these serve our desire for sensations of fear and of power. And when we close the book, we put away these desires

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<sup>3</sup>Peter Penzoldt, The Supernatural in Fiction (London: Baynard Press, 1952), p. 6.



to play the mad scientist or the evil count and the poor trembling heroine.

In examining the history of the creation of Gothic tales, Lovecraft notes that "the romantic, semi-Gothic, quasi-moral tradition... was carried far down the nineteenth century by such authors as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu..."<sup>4</sup> Le Fanu was one of the first Gothic writers to replace objectified supernatural monsters with the human beings that such monsters actually represent. Lovecraft sees this as a weakness, and feels that it lacked the power of "sheer artistic nightmare" since "a diluted product can never achieve the intensity of a concentrated essence."<sup>5</sup> Yet it may be contended that Le Fanu found not his weakness but his strength in this use of the human element, that with his understanding of the anomalies of human psychology, he created both a more powerful and more subtle genre. E. F. Benson claims, for instance, "Le Fanu produces, page after page, a far higher percentage of terror than the more widely read Edgar Allan Poe."<sup>6</sup>

It will be our purpose, then, not only to examine the Gothic elements in Le Fanu's work, but also to explore his

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<sup>4</sup>Lovecraft, p. 43.

<sup>5</sup>Lovecraft, p. 43.

<sup>6</sup>E. F. Benson, "Sheridan Le Fanu," Spectator, 21 February, 1931, p. 264.

psychological perception in the whole process of creating fear, not by creating spectres outside ourselves, but by gradually and quietly showing the reader his own image, then pointing toward the in depth exploration of horror within man in the modern psychological thriller. For Louis Vax is right in calling Le Fanu "le veritable initiateur du ghost story contemporain,"<sup>7</sup> and Penzoldt is right in stating that Le Fanu's "...influence alone on contemporary and later authors entitles him to a better place in the history of English literature than he is generally given."<sup>8</sup> Though there was a Le Fanu revival in 1923 when M. R. James published his edition of Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery, that revival was ephemeral. Edna Kenton observes, "surely the unmitigated famelessness of Sheridan Le Fanu can be ranked among the outstanding curiosities of literature."<sup>9</sup>

By way of furthering our purposes, we should like to examine, in the following order, three areas important in the art of Le Fanu. First, the light cast on his work by certain events in his biography. These consist mainly of the influence of his native Ireland and the deep interest he later showed in the Swedenborgian religion, both of which certainly contributed to his mastery of the terror genre.

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<sup>7</sup>Louis Vax, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup>Penzoldt, p. 72.

<sup>9</sup>Edna Kenton, "A Forgotten Creator of Ghosts: J. S. Le Fanu, Possible Inspirer of the Brontës," Bookman, 69, July 1929, p. 528.

The second and third chapters will explore four of Le Fanu's novels: Uncle Silas, his most popular work; Checkmate, an absorbing mystery story; Wylder's Hand, his greatest novel; and his last novel, Willing to Die. Chapter Two will demonstrate his use of Gothic elements and study their effects. In particular it will point out how these Gothic features helped to create an atmosphere in which the psychological elements, especially the projection of "superhumans," could be developed to the greatest advantage in the creation of terror and recognition.

Chapter Three will concentrate specifically upon Le Fanu's achievement as a novelist who revealed a sensitive awareness to human drives and behavior. In particular, concrete arguments will be advanced concerning the claim that he might be considered the initiator of the psychological thriller and the master of a type of literature that not only combines the entertaining with the gripping, but does so in order to offer insights to readers about their own psychological make-up. Any conclusions about Le Fanu's value to his own Victorian age as well as to ours will, of course, be drawn in the hope that Le Fanu's position in literary history might be more properly evaluated.

## CHAPTER I

## BIOGRAPHICAL INFLUENCES ON LE FANU'S WORKS

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was born and raised in Ireland and lived there all of his life. As a writer he could never escape the influence of this Irish origin. Though he attempted to escape it in Uncle Silas by setting the novel in Derbyshire, we have the feeling that we are in Ireland throughout the whole novel. When we are told by Le Fanu himself that the book is expanded from a short tale entitled "A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess" we are not surprised. Ordinarily, Le Fanu took advantage of his Irish origins and used them quite successfully. His short stories bear a strong Irish influence in their themes as well as in their characters. He borrowed some of the themes from the folklore of the country with which he was so familiar. He drew some of the characters from life, adapting them to create sometimes very powerful and sometimes very humorous tales of the supernatural. In his novels the connection with Ireland may not be as obvious as it is in the short stories or the ballads, yet it does exist and may even be stronger, for it lies deeper: in other words, the atmosphere of the novels is Irish. The Irish people furnished Le Fanu with a never-ending source for the psychological study of characters in his

novels. His personal life also supplied him with valuable material, his own neurosis and his personal grief contributed to develop his power of penetration into the human mind. Thus an account of his Irish background and his own personal life, and the significance of both to his work seems an appropriate and necessary prelude to a more thorough study of his novels.

The Irish branch of the Le Fanu's family, who were of Huguenot descent, settled in Dublin around 1730. Le Fanu's great grandfather, Thomas Sheridan, was an actor as well as an author, so it may be that the histrionic qualities found in many of Le Fanu's tales were inherited. Three other members of the family were also writers: Alicia Sheridan wrote the comedy Sons of Erin; Alicia Le Fanu, niece of Alicia Sheridan, wrote several novels; the other writer in the family was the far more famous Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Le Fanu's great uncle. It appears then that Joseph Le Fanu's family background was already connected with the world of drama and literature, thus setting a precedent for his own interests.

Le Fanu, the son of Thomas Philip Le Fanu, was born on August 28, 1811 at the Royal Hibernian Military School in Phoenix Park, Dublin. Phoenix Park exerted a strong influence on young Joseph. As S. M. Ellis says: "His early impressionable years were spent amid most romantic surroundings and

traditions, which he was to recall and represent years later."<sup>1</sup> We shall see later with what skill and descriptive details Le Fanu depicted these surroundings in his novels. Nelson Browne gives the following description of Phoenix Park in his book on Le Fanu: "There were the huge, gnarled trees, the mysterious shadows, the lights and glooms of the parkland that made it a veritable counterpart of the Forest of Arden; there were the weaving patterns of form and colour as the soldiers drilled on the Fifteen Acres; there were glimpses of regal or vice-regal state; there were the alarming crackles of musketry practice; the dramatic situations associated with the duels that occasionally disturbed the quiet of the dawn."<sup>2</sup> These surroundings, the soldiers parading in the Waterloo uniform, and the duels still fought there supplied a source of endless romance to the young boy. But the park alone did not in itself create these indelible impressions. From his earliest childhood, Le Fanu had been acquainted with the numerous superstitions, wild legends, and ghost stories of his country, for which the park served as a perfect setting.

As a child, Joseph Le Fanu loved practical jokes. Yet he was a rather reserved boy who did not participate very

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<sup>1</sup>Stewart M. Ellis, Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and Others (London: Constable, 1931), p. 141.

<sup>2</sup>Nelson Browne, Sheridan Le Fanu (London: A. Barker, 1951), p. 12.

much in the games and sports others played. Of a solitary temperament, he often preferred to be left alone. His sanctum was on the roof of the house and was only accessible by a ladder which he pulled up when he wanted to retreat there. One might see a slight contradiction between his love of practical jokes and his need for solitude. Peter Penzoldt comments: "Even from childhood Le Fanu showed a strong tendency to escape from reality. Fortunately, his escapism took other forms besides a morbid taste for supernatural horror. Although he was known even as a boy for his wide knowledge of Irish ghostlore, he was also renowned as a practical joker."<sup>3</sup>

William Le Fanu, in Seventy Years of Irish Life, tells us one of Joseph's favorite stories, a misadventure which befell Anthony Trollope on a trip to Ireland. Trollope, called on business to a remote little village, had found a room with two beds at the small inn there. He retired for the night and, because he could not lock the door, he felt nervous and ill at ease. He was suddenly awakened from a restless sleep by the footsteps of someone walking carefully in the room. He got up, grabbed the intruder in the dark, fought with him, half-strangled him, and threw him out of the room and down the stairs. The noise awakened the people in the

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<sup>3</sup>Peter Penzoldt, p. 87.

inn who were ready to murder Trollope when they discovered that he had almost killed the parish priest. Fortunately, the priest explained what had happened and eventually became good friends with Trollope. Though this episode is funny, it is also frightening, and it suggests certain things about Le Fanu. His sense of humor and love of practical jokes, even in childhood, involved a fascination with the supernatural and the dangerous; this was to be found later in his stories and his novels.

The rapidity with which the people in the inn reacted and the vigor of their reaction brings to mind another factor which influenced Le Fanu's fiction--the climate of violence in which he found himself when the problems caused by the Tithe arose and Irishmen revolted against paying the tax. At that time the family was living in Abington, in the county of Limerick--where he set several of his stories--and in which the atmosphere was often one of excitement, violence and even danger. The angry people of Abington who had previously been friendly to the Le Fanus now hated them and on one occasion even threw stones at Joseph's sister and his brother William. William recalls another occasion when he and a cousin were going to deliver a proposal for an agreement to end the trouble. They were obliged to threaten with their pistols in order to go through the angry crowd. Again they were hit by stones and whatever else people were holding at the moment.



One of the men in the mob tried to hit William with a spade but only hit the horse which fell but, fortunately, got up again and carried him home before it died.

Joseph witnessed violence and hatred during these events, yet he still understood and loved these people. According to William he said: "Never mind, their time will come; rents will be attacked, as tithes are now, with the same machinery, and with like success."<sup>4</sup> The poor people living around his house, when not blinded by political passion, loved him and his family too. These people showed a roughness and a naivety which deeply interested Joseph. Ellis says about them: "Such were the quaint and plaintive people, passionate, often treacherous and murderous, yet often lovable and faithful, among whom Le Fanu spent most of his impressionable years, whose qualities of mind and character he grew to understand more truly perhaps than any other author who has sought to present his humble fellow-countrymen in poetry and prose."<sup>5</sup> These people, whose character was so varied, so prompt in unexpected reversions, possessed a spark of life no one could ignore. Joseph Le Fanu knew how to overlook the unpleasant sides of this character and fully appreciated the

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<sup>4</sup>William Le Fanu, Seventy Years of Irish Life (New York: Macmillan, 1893), p. 70.

<sup>5</sup>Ellis, Wilkie Collins, p. 146.

warmth and the riches deeply rooted in these people. The interest he showed in them probably forms the basis of the most remarkable psychological studies he has made of the characters in his novels.

The Irish people naturally have a very rich heritage of legends and tales and just as naturally both William and Joseph showed a deep interest in them and the superstitions they embodied. From his earliest childhood Joseph had been acquainted with the numerous superstitions, wild legends and ghost stories of Ireland and, being an imaginative boy, he had found great pleasure in them. According to Ellis he said: "In my youth I heard a great many Irish traditions, some of them very peculiar, and all, to a child, at least, highly interesting," and then he went on to picture the appropriate setting in which he heard these mysterious tales: "...the old-fashioned parlour fireside and its listening circle of excited faces, and outside, the wintry blast and the moan of leafless boughs, with an occasional rattle of the clumsy old window-frame behind shutter and curtain, as the blast swept by..."<sup>6</sup> It is no coincidence that the heroines of his novels go through the same experience, they are told the same kind of stories in the same kind of atmosphere and thus find themselves conditioned in the same manner.

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<sup>6</sup>Ellis, Wilkie Collins, p. 149.

One of the stories Le Fanu probably most often heard was told by his mother, who was a very romantic woman and showed a keen interest in the Irish patriots. Joseph Le Fanu and his brother enjoyed watching factional fights. They also enjoyed listening to their mother tell them how she came into possession of the dagger with which the Irish patriot Lord Edward Fitzgerald had killed Captain Ryan on the day he was captured in Dublin, a story which most certainly evoked very romantic ideas in the minds of the young boys. Joseph borrowed the theme of the patriots for several of his short stories, "An Adventure of Hardress Fitzgerald, a Royalist Captain" being one of them. Kirby, the outlaw, inspired Le Fanu's famous ballad of Shamus O'Brien.

Le Fanu not only heard stories told, he also read some of them. When he was a young boy his teachers were his father and an elderly clergyman who was more interested in making flies for his fishing lines than in teaching Latin. Consequently Le Fanu devoted most of his time to reading whatever he found in his father's library, particularly old books on demonology and occult and curious lore. These books confirmed and cultivated his natural inclination to such subjects. As we can see, several factors contributed to the development of Joseph Le Fanu's naturally romantic inclinations and to his interest in the curious, the occult and the supernatural. At the same time, his fascination with the Irish mind shows his beginning passion for human psychology.

Later, in his college years, Joseph Le Fanu became acquainted with a fiddler and bag-pipe player who entertained passengers on a steamer between Limerick and Kilrush. He eventually adapted a ballad especially for this man, Paddy O'Neill, and the minstrel character to whom he chose to attribute the authorship of his ballads was drawn from Paddy. William Le Fanu records Joseph's own comment about Paddy O'Neill's influence on one of his works: "My brother told me that it was a favorite song of Paddy's that suggested to him the plot of Shamus O'Brien."<sup>7</sup> Knowing that Joseph Le Fanu went very often on the steamer to listen to Paddy, we may safely assume that the old fiddler and bag-pipe player furnished him with material for other works as well.

In 1838, while at Trinity College, Le Fanu published his first ghost story, "The Ghost and the Bone Setter", in the Dublin University Magazine. The same year he published in the same magazine fifteen short stories among which were "The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh" and "A Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess". From 1838 to 1840, he produced quite a number of short stories in the supernatural vein, some rather humorous, such as "The Ghost and the Bone Setter" or "Jim Sullivan's Adventure in the Great Snow," and others approaching the supernatural more solemnly. Among the latter,

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<sup>7</sup>William Le Fanu, p. 93.

which are more numerous, "Shalken the Painter" is a powerful story which illustrates the themes of demonic visitation and satanic possession that were to recur so often in his later works. Several of these stories are short versions of later novels.

In 1839, he was called to the Irish Bar, but he soon left the law and turned to journalism. In 1841, he became proprietor of a paper, The Warder, and came to own several other papers as well in the following years. In 1844, Le Fanu married Susan Bennett, daughter of George Bennett, Q. C. After his marriage he started to publish novels. His first one, The Cock and the Anchor, was published in 1845 and was a historical romance, much in the fashion of the time; as Ellis says: "It was written of course in the prevailing popular mode of Ainsworth and G. W. M. Reynolds, but Le Fanu was able to add his own distinctive original touch by reasons of his archaeological knowledge of the Irish setting which the celebrated English writers of his school had not traversed."<sup>8</sup>

His second novel, The Fortunes of Colonel Torlogh O'Brien, came out in 1847. The two novels were not very successful, and Ellis notes: "Strange to say, these two first books did not meet with much encouragement and success--a matter for regret. For if Le Fanu had continued his series

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<sup>8</sup> Ellis, Wilkie Collins, p. 155.

of Irish historical romances, he might have done for Ireland what Scott achieved for Scotland: no writer has ever been more ably gifted to understand and interpret the forces, spiritual and natural, of his romantic native land."<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps because he was disappointed by this lack of success, he began to concentrate more on journalism and in the next fifteen years he published only one book, Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery, in 1851. In this book we find some of his best short stories, such as "The Evil Guest" and "The Watcher"--later published under the title "The Familiar". In these stories he seems to have reached his full power for they are composed in such a way that the horror builds up and intensifies in a beautifully climactic crescendo.

In 1858, a very significant and tragic event occurred. It was to change entirely Joseph Le Fanu's life and to have a strong bearing upon his further writings as well. His wife, to whom he was devoted, died prematurely. The grief Le Fanu felt was never to end. And in fact it seems that his wife's death had a tremendous impact on his mental state.<sup>10</sup> After his wife's death, as A. P. Graves tells, "...he quite forsook general society, in which his fine features, distinguished

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<sup>9</sup>Ellis, Wilkie Collins, p. 156.

<sup>10</sup>Earlier in life his sister's death, most likely his first acquaintance with death, must have also given him quite a shock since she was very young. This experience is surely behind the several examples in his later works of the young heroine feeling forsaken because of her sister's death.

bearing, and charm of conversation marked him out as the beau-ideal of an Irish wit and scholar of the old school."<sup>11</sup> Only a few friends were guests in his house in the sixties, and gradually he gave up seeing even his very close friends and became a complete recluse.

He also started writing novels again. Nor were these novels like his earlier ones; they bore the influence of his new state of mind, joining a spirit of melancholy with the supernatural element that emerged in the shorter tales. Stanley Kunitz says that during this period: "...he began to pour out a series of powerful novels, most of them dealing with the supernatural, with which his melancholy thoughts were so constantly engaged."<sup>12</sup> The first novel of that series was The House by the Churchyard, in 1863. As the title suggests the mood of the novel is a sad one yet, as in all his novels, Le Fanu expresses a love for life which counterbalances the gloom of his themes, and this is what Browne has found dominant, for he claims that: "...none of his novels is so rich in humour, so full of vitality and animal spirits, and in none of them is the characterization more solidly convincing."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Alfred P. Graves, Irish Literary and Musical Studies (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1967), p. 68.

<sup>12</sup>Stanley Kunitz and Howard Haycraft, British Authors of the Nineteenth Century (New York: The H. W. Wilson Company, 1936), p. 375.

<sup>13</sup>Nelson Browne, p. 37.

In The House by the Churchyard we also find the motifs of murder and retribution which so often appear in the novels which followed it. This theme, though traditional, was no doubt suggested to Le Fanu by personal experience. He felt an endless grief for the early death of his wife, and his grief was mingled with a feeling of injustice. Perhaps the vengeance against the murderer in the novels was symbolic of his attempt to retaliate against the powers which had taken his wife away from him.

The fact that he dealt with the supernatural in most of his novels, as Kunitz pointed out, made it easier for him to exploit the themes of death and retribution. One of the supernatural elements in The House by the Churchyard is the ghost of a hand, which plays a very destructive role. It kills those close to it, not physically, but by its presence and no human power can prevent its action. We may note here that Le Fanu introduced a new type of ghost, a fragment of body which by being unattached may be more frightful, unlike the "whole" ghosts previously found in literature.

Despite these elements the novel is not gloomy throughout and shows multiple facets of Le Fanu's work. V. S. Pritchett says of The House by the Churchyard: "There are ghosts you shrink from, ghosts you laugh at, cold murder is set beside comic duels, wicked characters become ridiculous, ridiculous



ones become solemn and we are supposed to respect them."<sup>14</sup> And M. R. James remarks: "It is a book which seems to me to bring together in a concentrated form all Le Fanu's best qualities as a storyteller."<sup>15</sup> Ellis calls it "...one of the greatest romantic narratives in our language."<sup>16</sup>

In 1864 another very good novel, Wylder's Hand, was published. The theme of murder and retribution is again present. The novel is extremely well constructed and was highly praised by Charles Lever, one of Le Fanu's friends. In a letter to Le Fanu, Lever said: "Your blunder was in not holding back your novel some ten or fifteen years, for you will never beat it--equal it you may, but not pass it. It is first rate, and I feel assured it will have a high success."<sup>17</sup>

The same year, 1864, Uncle Silas came out. It really is the only novel by which Le Fanu is remembered. Some editions of it came out recently and it is still in print. The critics' opinions on Uncle Silas sometimes diverge. Pritchett says: "Uncle Silas has ingenious elements"<sup>18</sup> but

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<sup>14</sup>Victor S. Pritchett, The Living Novel and Later Appreciations (New York: Random House, 1964), p. 126.

<sup>15</sup>Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery, ed. Montague R. James (London: G. Bell and Sons, 1923), p. 3.

<sup>16</sup>Ellis, p. 157.

<sup>17</sup>Ellis, pp. 160-161.

<sup>18</sup>Pritchett, p. 107.

he finally comes to the conclusion that it should not have been made into a novel. Other critics consider this novel, not The House by the Churchyard, to be Le Fanu's best. E. F. Benson, for example, says: "...far the best of these [novels], to my mind, is Uncle Silas, which in skill of narration, of gradual crescendo towards the most hideous chapter called 'The Hour of Death,' is a sheer masterpiece in alarm."<sup>19</sup> Uncle Silas does have some vividly realized action as well as some beautiful descriptions, but Benson's praise is perhaps exaggerated. The construction of the plot is more effective in Wylder's Hand.

It may be appropriate to mention that in Uncle Silas we find a partial self-portrait of Le Fanu. In his memoir of the Le Fanu family, Mr. T. P. Le Fanu suggested that Austin Ruthyn, the heroine's father, was drawn from Joseph Le Fanu himself. Le Fanu looked very much like his description of Austin Ruthyn. Another similarity lies in the fact that Austin Ruthyn had lost his young wife and since then was melancholic and lived as a recluse. T. P. Le Fanu also points out some similarities in the furnishings between Ruthyn's and Le Fanu's houses. And, strangely enough, Le Fanu like Ruthyn died of an aneurism. We might add that Le Fanu made Ruthyn an ardent Swedenborgian and that he was himself deeply learned

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<sup>19</sup>E. F. Benson, "Sheridan Le Fanu," Spectator, 21 Feb. 1931, p. 264.

in Swedenborgian religion.

In 1865 Guy Deverell was published, in 1866 All in the Dark, in 1867 The Tenants of Malory, in 1868 A Lost Name and Haunted Lives, in 1869 The Wyvern Mystery, in 1871 Checkmate and The Rose and the Key. Finally Willing to Die, his last novel, came out in 1873, the year in which he himself died.

As has been said, after his wife's death, Le Fanu became a melancholic and a recluse and devoted his time to writing novels that were the products of that reclusion and melancholy spirit. Most likely, the peculiar and neurotic writing habits which developed towards the end of his life were associated with his melancholia. His son Brinsley Le Fanu says that Le Fanu wrote mainly at night. With two candles at his side, he would sleep for a little while and wake up around two o'clock in the morning. Then he would stay in his dark, heavily furnished room, brew some tea and write. It was in these hours of night when everything was silent except for the creaking of furniture, when darkness surrounded everything, that he saw the elongated shadows of such ominous characters as Mme de la Rougierre, Captain Lake, and the pinkeyed attorney Larkin. Their silhouettes were dancing on the walls in the projected shadows of the blinking flames of his two candles. These writing habits seem quite fitting for a writer of his type, yet along with his other habits they also affirm one's suspicion that he was an abnormal person.

He rarely went outside at all except into a little garden onto which his window opened. His only walks to the city were sometimes late in the evening to search old bookshops for more books on demonology, ghosts and the supernatural.

Peter Penzoldt advances the theory that Le Fanu was suffering from a neurosis: "Towards the end of his life, Le Fanu, who had always been extremely sensitive, and was probably a neurotic, became definitely abnormal."<sup>20</sup> His living as a complete recluse, which made people call him "the invisible prince", and the numerous dreams and nightmares which disturbed his nights seem to support the theory. One recurring nightmare frightened him particularly and he would sometimes cry out in his sleep. He even mentioned this nightmare to his doctor--in his dream he found himself in a house in ruins, quite similar to many of the mansions he described in his romances; he could not move from that house which was going to crumble down at any moment, burying him. When he died in 1873 his face was so terror-stricken that the doctor, when he saw him, said: "I feared this--that house fell at last."<sup>21</sup>

Penzoldt adds to these another argument which to me is most convincing: Le Fanu describes the symptoms of mental and nervous diseases with extreme accuracy--"uncannily" is the word Penzoldt uses. Le Fanu's accounts of the causes of the

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<sup>20</sup>Penzoldt, p. 74.

<sup>21</sup>Ellis, p. 177.

diseases may not be exact from a scientific point of view, but the intuition he showed in his descriptions was enhanced by his concern for his own case. Apparently Le Fanu was aware of his mental state and tried in vain to seek help from his own doctor. Thus Penzoldt advances the theory that, disappointed in his doctor, Le Fanu created a doctor of the mind in a "pathetic attempt" to cure himself.<sup>22</sup>

The doctor he invented--Dr. Hesselius--does not appear until 1872. The volume in which he appears is made, so the narrator tells, from notes Dr. Hesselius took of the cases he treated. In the prologue of "Green Tea", the narrator says: "In Dr. Martin Hesselius, I found my master. His knowledge was immense, his grasp of a case was an intuition."<sup>23</sup> Such a doctor would most likely have greatly helped Le Fanu's own mental condition. There is another strange coincidence as well in "Green Tea." The doctor meets the patient too late and cannot save him; Le Fanu "met" Dr. Hesselius only one year before his own death.

Finally there are two more elements to support the theory that Le Fanu suffered from severe neurosis. One is that in a great number of his romances written in the first person the narrator is a feminine character. All his heroines are either young and behave in a childish manner, or they are

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<sup>22</sup>Penzoldt, p. 74.

<sup>23</sup>Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Best Ghost Stories (New York: Dover, 1964), p. 178.

still children when the story starts. They are weak, vulnerable and impressionable. Le Fanu shows a great interest in feminine psychology and indeed he identifies with his feminine protagonists. He understands surprisingly well the emotions, the reactions, and the peculiarities of women. Yet, and here lies the second element supporting Penzoldt's theory, he never tells a completely normal love story between any of his heroines and a man. E. Bowen says of Uncle Silas that it is a sexless novel. We find several examples of bigamy or intended bigamy in his works; in the tale entitled "Carmilla" his description of the relationship between the two girls shows clear signs of lesbianism--which would have been shocking at the time. Another example of an abnormal relationship is found in the novel Checkmate: the interest that the young man shows in his sister sometimes creates an impression of uneasiness. Other women interest him only when they can bring him, through marriage, the money he needs. So we find accounts of several kinds of love relationships except the normal one.

Le Fanu's neurosis indeed has a bearing on his works. Being a neurotic he was himself subject to the neurotic fears which he described in such detail and many of the terrors he invented probably arose from a pathological state. The fact that he identified with characters who were feminine or childish and weak leads us to think that his attitude towards his own neurotic terrors was that of a helpless person. The result of this influence on Le Fanu's writing is positive:

the reader shares in the fears of the heroes, or rather the heroines. And the helplessness of the heroines is rendered plausible by the sincerity of their creator. They are so utterly helpless that their fear submerges and numbs everything; it is so strong that it can cause pain that is almost physical. Because these fears are communicated to the reader, the stories are extremely effective. Since there is a genuine basis for these fears in the experiences of the author, the reader feels no artificiality in them.

The other interesting influence I emphasize is the relationship, mentioned earlier, between Swedenborgianism and Le Fanu's works. William Le Fanu comments that: "He [Joseph] was a man who thought deeply, especially on religious subjects,"<sup>24</sup> and T. P. Le Fanu says: "Le Fanu's taste for the supernatural seems to have grown upon him after his wife's death, and influenced him so deeply that, had he not been possessed of a deal of shrewd common sense, there might have been danger of his embracing some of the visionary doctrines in which he was so learned."<sup>25</sup> Whether or not he embraced visionary doctrines, Joseph Le Fanu did turn his interests to religion. In particular, it seems that Swedenborg's doctrines exerted a very strong influence on him. It has been both implied and denied that he was a member of that sect.

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<sup>24</sup>William Le Fanu, p. 151.

<sup>25</sup>Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, The Purcell Papers (London: Bentley and Sons, 1880), p. xxvi.

Whatever the case, he was deeply learned in Swedenborgianism. In several instances in his works he mentions that certain characters were disciples of Swedenborg. Uncle Silas is the most obvious example; Austin Ruthyn is a disciple as is Dr. Bryerley--Dr. Bryerley is in fact a doctor of Swedenborgianism. At one time he talks to the heroine about Swedenborg and says: "...Swedenborg sees beyond [her mother's grave], over, and through it, and has told me all that concerns us to know...your mamma is alive, but too far away to see or hear us; but Swedenborg, standing there, can see and hear her..."<sup>26</sup> Thus the Swedenborgian influence--which affected such writers as Goethe, and Balzac and Blake--does seem to be an important element in the study of Le Fanu.

Besides making some of his characters Swedenborg's disciples, Le Fanu shares in certain Swedenborgian lines of thought. I shall now attempt to determine these lines of thought in relation to the works studied in this paper. There are three main concerns in Le Fanu where these similarities appear quite clearly. The first is the subject of marriage, the second is the good and evil in man, and the third is the role played by environmental items. Marriage and love are closely intermingled concepts in Swedenborg and they both represent sacred entities. The sexlessness of Le Fanu's novels might have its roots in these concepts, the first being that

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<sup>26</sup>Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Uncle Silas (London: The Cresset Press, 1947), p. 45.



"true marriage love is a chaste love, and has nothing in common with unchaste love. It is with one only of the sex, all others apart; for it is a love of the spirit, and thence of the body, and not a love of the body, and thence of the spirit."<sup>27</sup> The second concept is that "the Christian marriage relation of one man and one woman is essentially holy and chaste and its bonds inviolable."<sup>28</sup> These two short quotations not only explain the sexlessness of Le Fanu's novels, but also give us a clue to the recurring theme of bigamy which seem to have been lurking in Le Fanu's mind. Thus we read about Austin Ruthyn remaining faithful to his wife after her death--as we know the marriage bond, according to Swedenborg, goes beyond life on earth--and we also read about the pitiful protagonist in "A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family" who intends bigamy and is punished for it by dying in a most frightful way.

The second subject is the good and the evil in man. According to Swedenborg man makes himself good or bad, and "if he has deliberately made evil his good and good his evil, then he is his own hell, and does not desire heaven... His sufferings are inflicted by the evil spirits his associates."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Emanuel Swedenborg, The Delights of Wisdom Relating to Conjugal Love, trans. A. H. Searle (London: The Swedenborg Society, 1910), p. 135.

<sup>28</sup> Frank Sewall, "Swedenborg," The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge (New York: Funk and Wagnalis, 1914).

<sup>29</sup> Louis-Leopold De Beaumont, "Swedenborg," Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics (New York: Scribner's, 1922).

Le Fanu shows that the evil characters in his stories are really the instruments of their own misfortunes since they associate with bad spirits and make evil their good. He describes these bad spirits and can do so because he has personified them. These personified spirits seem to fulfill a clear purpose, which is to lead the evil characters to their destruction under the cover of helping them attain what they want. Consequently, we can say that Le Fanu has concretized this particular doctrine of Swedenborg. On the other hand, "in those who are in this effort [to overcome evil] and who are fulfilling faithfully their duty to the neighbor in a life of use according to their station, the Lord implants a good and heavenly nature in place of the evils put away, and so man is regenerated and enters the heavenly life."<sup>30</sup> Naturally, the sufferers in the stories are fighting these evils and eventually are rewarded.

The third subject concerns the environment. Swedenborg says that the spiritual world envelops us. According to him, "the law of correspondence is universal; the natural world is the outbirth of the spiritual world, and the spiritual world of the invisible mental world. Unseen evil is manifested in things hurtful and ugly, unseen good in things useful and beautiful. Man is a summary of nature; nature is man in diffusion; all things, therefore, in nature--fire, air, earth and water--

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<sup>30</sup>Frank Sewall.

every beast, bird, fish, insect and reptile--every tree, herb, fruit and flower--represent and express unseen things in the mind of man."<sup>31</sup> It seems that this theory also had a great influence on Le Fanu. In fact this may be most obviously displayed in Le Fanu's novels, for again and again everything which surrounds us is described vividly and proves in close harmony with the events or the mood of the characters. Throughout the novels the description of the surroundings prepares the reader for a certain kind of event. In Wylder's Hand, for instance, at a certain moment one of the heroines is working in her garden, it is autumn and the light has that orange tint indicating the death of a season, the flowers have lost their brightness, the whole garden has an air of sadness that is a prelude to the sad event to come.

Penzoldt comments on the Swedenborgian influence: "He [Le Fanu] believed that men were constantly surrounded by preternatural powers, and that in certain abnormal physical and psychical conditions they could establish direct contact with the other world."<sup>32</sup> Penzoldt says also: "As 'Green Tea' shows, Le Fanu never ceased to believe that the ultimate cause of such suffering as his own lay in another world, yet at the same time he seemed to think, in some curious way, that the evil

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<sup>31</sup>"Swedenborg," Chamber's Encyclopaedia (London: Newnes, 1964.

<sup>32</sup>penzoldt, p. 86.

could be cured in the body."<sup>33</sup> These ideas are the offspring of Swedenborg, and even if Le Fanu was not technically a disciple, he incorporated Swedenborgian doctrines into his stories and novels.

So it is that from his childhood on Joseph Le Fanu slowly built himself into a powerful writer able to arouse fear in his readers. His environment as a child and a definite taste for the supernatural mixed with a strong sense of psychology produced several stories and two novels. But the crucial factor was the death of his wife. After this event he was obsessed by grief, and his mind dwelt unwearily on death, since death had taken away from him all he loved. He then began to write long and powerful novels which revealed his talent as a novelist. Like Charles Lever, another Irish novelist, Le Fanu recounted stories of Irish life, but Le Fanu's stories take place in a ghostly world--the fantastic and the terrible are his domain. The strength of his stories lies in the fact that they are based on his own experiences. We have said that Le Fanu was a neurotic, a recluse, a "Swedenborgian," a master of the supernatural and an innovator of a new trend in fantastic literature. We shall next proceed to demonstrate these assertions to be true by studying more closely four of Le Fanu's novels.

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<sup>33</sup> Penzoldt, p. 75.

## CHAPTER II

## LE FANU'S USE OF THE GOTHIC ELEMENT IN FOUR NOVELS

We have stated earlier that Le Fanu was a transitional figure between two eras in supernatural literature; he belongs after the Gothic period and before that of modern supernatural fiction. There are indeed Gothic influences at work in Le Fanu's writings and we shall attempt to determine what they are. Actually, our purpose will be twofold: one, we will pick out some of the more typical Gothic elements in Le Fanu's works; two, we will study his way of adapting these elements to serve his own purpose. Before we can do this, however, it will be necessary to define the essential characteristics of the traditional Gothic tale, and to briefly summarize Le Fanu's stories.

Writers of Gothic tales fall into two schools. Those who believe in the supernatural (like Walpole and Lewis), and those who do not, who prefer a natural explanation for apparently supernatural happenings (like Clara Reeve and Mrs. Radcliffe). But both schools believe in horror; their purpose is to terrify us. This they attempt by two simple means: scene and situation. In the stories written by those who believe in the supernatural, though, the spectres are pallid and helpless shades who are totally harmless in any physical sense. Likewise, the characters in a Gothic tale often have

no personalities of their own, and are quite given over to their main function of promoting action. The hero, heroine-victim, and villain are limited by the demand that they produce horror. Psychology is limited to the analysis of terror, and is often lost in the loose structures of narrative within narrative. Nearly always there is a most unfortunate tendency to moralize... So it is that strong action, weird settings, stock types, limited use of psychology, and moralizing emerge as the most obvious characteristics of the Gothic mode.

A short summary of Le Fanu's novels will reveal many of the above characteristics, though we shall analyze them in detail later.

Wylder's Hand is a story of crime and retribution. The key character, Mark Wylder, appears only at the beginning of the book; his disappearance forms the basis for the story. The other main characters are his fiancée, Dorcas Brandon, a beautiful dark-haired, enigmatical heiress; Rachel Lake, a young, attractive neighbor; her brother, Captain Stanley Lake; and Larkin, a sly, malevolent lawyer who will eventually try to rob William Wylder of his estate. Early in the story --though we discover it only at the end--Stanley Lake and Mark Wylder have a fight in the course of which Lake kills Wylder accidentally. After the fight, Lake hides the corpse and takes Mark's place by marrying Dorcas. In order to make believe that Mark is not dead, he has arranged for letters to be sent, supposedly from Mark, from England and Europe at

regular intervals. One day while Lake is riding with some friends his horse is frightened and throws him. When the others go to help him, they notice a hand coming out of the ground and the ring on a finger proves to be Mark Wylder's. Captain Lake, seriously injured after his fall, dies having told the truth. Dorcas and Rachel stay together, and Larkin loses the fruits of his dishonesty. Uncle Lorne, a feeble-minded character who is a relative of Mark, functions as a chorus and wanders about prophesying Mark's death and the fate of the others. Though Uncle Lorne could almost be a comic character, and though his spectral appearances are unexpected, the atmosphere of doom is so strong throughout the novel that, at no moment, do we feel like laughing. The main characters are skillfully drawn; the character of the attorney will be used again in other novels by Le Fanu, who probably was aware of the fact that he had created an interestingly wicked character.

Uncle Silas is the most commonly read of Le Fanu's novels and has still a certain appeal: the 1947 edition has an introduction by Elisabeth Bowen. Uncle Silas is told in the first person by the heroine, Maud Ruthyn. In the beginning of the novel she lives with her father Austin Ruthyn, who, as has been mentioned before, shows features similar to those of Le Fanu himself. Another character that we meet early in the book is Dr. Bryerley, a Swedenborgian, for whom Maud

feels antipathy at first because he is ill-dressed and "regards her merely as a child,"<sup>1</sup> but later she finds Dr. Bryerley to be a kind-hearted person who shows great concern for her happiness. Austin Ruthyn has a brother, Silas, whom Maud does not know but has heard of. Uncle Silas, a gambler, married a woman of low class and has been suspected of having played a part in the death of a certain Mr. Charke (Mr. Charke, to whom Silas owed money, was found dead in Silas's house). Maud's father surprisingly asks that Maud become Silas's ward after his death. Early in the story we are introduced to another important character, Maud's governess, the ghoulish, grotesque, wicked and vain Mme de la Rougierre who later will prove to be Silas's instrument. When Maud goes to Bartram Haugh, the decayed mansion of Uncle Silas, she finds her uncle a polished gentleman whose conversation shows the remnants of former pomp and vanity. He is one of the most awe-inspiring characters ever created by Le Fanu. Silas is interested in Maud's money and hopes to get it through a marriage between his son and Maud; when this project cannot be realized, he resolves to murder the girl. The murder does not succeed. Maud escapes the house safely, marries and lives, if not happy, at least a calm life and Silas dies of an overdose of opium. Of Uncle Silas, E. F. Benson says that this

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<sup>1</sup>J. S. Le Fanu, Uncle Silas, p. 34.



novel is the best example of Le Fanu's technique, "the cumulative method leading up to intolerable terror. Le Fanu piles up in the growing dusk, chapter after chapter, the horror of the great darkness."<sup>2</sup>

In Checkmate, we find a story very similar to that of Uncle Silas, yet the crime committed by Longcluse is suggested much later in the novel. The major male character, Walter Longcluse, is surrounded by mystery; he is said to have come from Europe, is very wealthy but physically quite repulsive. He has a broken nose, an underhung jaw and a satirical thin-lipped smile--all of which create a sinister impression. At the same time he shows an interest in music and literature which renders him rather attractive. He falls in love with Alice Arden, the major female character. Alice rather enjoys being with Longcluse, yet her attitude towards him changes quite suddenly. It turns out that her brother, Richard Arden, who used to be Longcluse's friend, has discredited Longcluse in her eyes. Richard Arden will eventually do more than betray his former friend and is an opportunist, a gambler whose principles are rather loose. We have a first clue to the mystery when Alice's governess, an old woman who many years before witnessed the murder of Alice's Uncle Henry, reacts strangely to Longcluse's voice. Finally we discover that Longcluse is the murderer but has undergone facial surgery

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<sup>2</sup>E. F. Benson, p. 264.

performed by a certain Baron Vanboeren and has changed his name. He is arrested but commits suicide while in jail.

The novel is very well constructed. One after the other, things begin to fall into place to form inextricable traps in which Longcluse and Richard Arden will get caught --one to be punished for a crime he committed twenty years before, the other to pay for his dishonesty and his lack of principles. The description of the operation performed by Vanboeren is an innovation in literature which has been borrowed very often since then with more or less success.

Willing to Die is one of the least interesting of the novels, for the heroine, Ethel Ware, who tells the story, is a lacklustre girl who is no more than the helpless victim of circumstances. She gives the following description of herself: "I am not romantic. If I ever was it is time I should be cured of all that. I can laugh heartily, but I think I sigh more than most people. I am not a bit shy, but I like solitude."<sup>3</sup> At the beginning of the novel, she lives with her sister and an old governess in a mansion which bears the symbolic name of Malory. As a child, she had loved to listen to Rebecca, the governess, telling stories of "castles, giants and goblins."<sup>4</sup> Her parents live in London and seldom come to Malory. Very lonely, she grows attached to Laura Grey,

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<sup>3</sup>J. S. Le Fanu, Willing to Die (London: Hutchinson, 1873), p. 3.

<sup>4</sup>Willing to Die, p. 6.

a young woman with a mysterious past. One stormy day the three women witness the sinking of a ship. Only one man, Richard Marston, is saved and they give him shelter for a while. One other person Ethel sees while in Malory is a catholic priest of whom we know very little and who later will help Ethel. As she grows older Ethel goes to live with her parents. At her father's death her mother finds herself financially ruined, and they move to a tiny apartment in a poor section of town. One day Ethel, sick and bitter, sees the man she holds responsible for their ruin. She stabs him and runs away believing she has killed him. For some unclear reason the man is accompanied by Richard Marston when this event happens. Soon after this, Ethel's mother dies; shortly before her death she has seen the man she had left to marry Ethel's father. This man, Sir Harry Rokestone, is Richard's uncle and takes charge of Ethel in memory of her mother. While she is living with Sir Harry, Richard reappears and she falls in love with him. Convinced that he loves her, too, she does what he tells her to do and lets him get possession of the will left by Sir Harry. Richard burns the will which bequeathed everything to her. She then goes to London looking for a position, and eventually meets Laura Grey again, who is now married and happy. A second will is discovered and Ethel becomes rich. Richard Marston disappears after writing a touching letter asking for her forgiveness. Then she stays alone, watching the graveyard from her window and thinking of

the past.

In this novel we find some of the themes dear to Le Fanu, but the story is rather lengthy and the characters lack the strength of those in Wylder's Hand or Uncle Silas.

In all of these novels, Le Fanu tells in his own individual way stories of crime, remorse and punishment. But it is important to note that the characters evolve in quite specifically supernatural atmospheres. In order to create those atmospheres and settings, Le Fanu uses some typically supernatural elements, but more often relies on natural ones as well as strange coincidences. He uses these atmospheres to create a psychological effect on the reader and to reinforce the psychological studies he skillfully makes of his characters. What is important at this point is that of the natural elements used to create the supernatural ambiance, some are typically Gothic.

We shall examine the houses and the parlours, the portraits, the trees, the seasons, the sun and the moon.

The different mansions in which Le Fanu places his characters are very similar. They are old, sometimes in ruins, and always have been the cradles of families for many years. This creates an immediate influence: the air of decay is perceptible from the outside, a churchyard is often visible from the house and a chapel or a monastery is nearby. In Willing to Die, Malory is described as follows: "The garden of Malory is one of those monastic enclosures whose fruit-trees have

long grown into venerable timber; whose walls are stained by time, and mantled in some places with ivy; where everything had been allowed, time out of mind, to have its own way."<sup>5</sup>

In The Tenants of Malory, the mansion (presumably a different one but with the same name) creates the same impression when seen from the outside; it looks rather dismal and abandoned. Le Fanu describes it in these terms: "Tufts of grass had grown up between the paving-stones of the silent stable-yard, grass had crept over the dark avenue, which, making a curve near the gate, is soon lost among the sombre trees that throw a perpetual shadow upon it; the groves of nettles had spread and thickened among their trunks; and in the sign of neglect and decay, the monastic old place grew more than ever triste."<sup>6</sup>

In the novels Uncle Silas and Checkmate, the subject of the house is treated a little differently. At the beginning of Uncle Silas, Maud Ruthyn lives happily with her wealthy father at Knowl, a house which is old and dark but comfortable and well-kept. The novel opens on the sounds of the wind heard from inside, in a sombre old room lighted with "a cheerful clump of wax candles and a very cheerful fire blazing."<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Willing to Die, p. 6.

<sup>6</sup> J.S. Le Fanu, The Tenants of Malory (London: Tinsley Brothers, 1867), I, p. 1.

<sup>7</sup> Uncle Silas, p. 31.

But when Maud goes to live with her uncle, she discovers a house which is far from being well-kept. The description of this house as she sees on her arrival is very skillfully done:

"At last the postilions began to draw bridle, and at a slight angle, the moon shining full upon them, we wheeled into a wide semicircle formed by the receding park walls, and halted before a great fantastic iron gate, and a pair of tall fluted piers, of white stone, all grass-grown and ivy-bound, with great cornices, surmounted with shields and supporters, the Ruthyn bearings washed by the rains of Derbyshire for many a generation of Ruthyns, almost smooth by this time, and looking bleached and phantasmal, like giant sentinels, with each a hand clasped in his comrade's, to bar our passage to the enchanted castle--the florid tracery of the iron gate showing like the draperies of white robes hanging from their extended arms to the earth.

So this was Bartram, and here was Uncle Silas. I was almost breathless as I approached. The bright moon shining full on the white front of the old house revealed not only its highly decorated style, its fluted pillars and doorway, rich and florid carving, and balustraded summit, but also its stained and moss-grown front. Two

giant trees, overthrown at last by the recent storm, lay with their upturned roots, and their yellow foliage still flickering on the sprays that were to bloom no more, where they had fallen, at the right side of the courtyard, which, like the avenue, was studded with tufted weeds and grass.

All this gave to the aspect of Bartram a forlorn character of desertion and decay, contrasting almost awfully with the grandeur of its proportions and richness of its architecture."<sup>8</sup>

In Uncle Silas, Le Fanu gives a more thorough account of Bartram Haugh than of Knowl, since the atmosphere of supernatural or rather of mystery is much stronger in Silas's house. For example, we see the heroine and her cousin wandering about the corridors, entering deserted chambers trying to find out some clue as to what exactly happened on the night Mr. Charke died so mysteriously. Another day Maud goes alone on her little excursion and finds in one of the rooms someone she fears: the horrible Madame de la Rougierre, her former governess. This illustrates Le Fanu's way of leading the reader to expect some uncanny thing to appear. When Maud goes with her cousin they find nothing, but when she goes alone her search is rewarded.

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<sup>8</sup>  
Uncle Silas, p. 222.

In Checkmate, the house, Mortlake Hall, where the heroine lives, is old but does not have so strong a look of decay. It is described thus:

"About fifty acres of ground, rich with noble clumps and masses of old timber, surround it; old-world fish ponds, with swans sailing upon them, tall yew hedges, quincunxes, leaden fauns and goddesses, and other obsolete splendors surround it. It rises, tall, florid, built of Caen stone, with a palatial flight of steps, and something of the grace and dignity of the genius of Inigo Jones, to whom it is ascribed, with the shadows of ancestral trees and the stains of two centuries upon it, and a vague character of gloom and melancholy, not improved by some indications not actually of decay, but of something like neglect."<sup>9</sup>

It has that gloomy aspect of all the houses but there are signs of life such as swans and fish. We find also statuesque representations of fauns and goddesses which are symbolic of the assiduity with which Longcluse and Richard Arden will pursue the different feminine characters of the novel.

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<sup>9</sup>J.S. Le Fanu, Checkmate (London: Chapman and Hall, 1876), p. 1.



In Wylder's Hand, our first contact with the house where Mark Wylder lives, is established when with the narrator we see the great door of Brandon Hall over which stands in bold relief "Resurgam", the Wylder motto. The mansion is impressive but creates the following impression on the narrator: "...the Wylder coat in the center, with the grinning griffins for supporters, and flaunting scrolls all round, and the ominous word 'resurgam' underneath, proclaimed itself sadly and vauntingly over the great entrance..."<sup>10</sup> Indeed the insistence on the word "resurgam" is the key to the whole novel since its discovery on the ring worn by the corpse will destroy Lake's elaborate scheme. Earlier in the description we also discover the "ancient gray chapel, with its stained windows, and store of old Brandon and Wylder monuments among its solemn clumps of elm-trees."<sup>11</sup> The house which plays a more prominent role in the novel is Redman's Dell; within its old stones it shelters Rachel Lake. The narrator, Mr. de Cresseron, gives us the first description of the house: "This young lady's little Eden, though overshadowed and encompassed with the solemn sylvan cloister of nature's building, and vocal with sounds of innocence, was no more proof than the Mesopotamian haunt of our first parents against the intrusion of darker

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<sup>10</sup>J.S. Le Fanu, Wylder's Hand (London: Richard Bentley, 1864), I, pp. 16-17.

<sup>11</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 15.

spirits."<sup>12</sup> On another occasion Stanley Lake, Rachel's brother, says of Redman's Dell: "Once the sun had gone down behind the distant hills, it was the darkest, the most silent, and the most solitary of nooks."<sup>13</sup>

In Willing to Die, Le Fanu describes the castle of Cardyllion which stands not very far from Malory: "The castle of Cardyllion is a vast ruin, a military fortress of the feudal times, built on a great scale, and with prodigious strength. Its ponderous walls and towers are covered thick with ivy."<sup>14</sup> The castle belongs to Sir Harry Rokestone who, though a powerful man, is yet unhappy since the mother of the heroine, whom he loved, married another man. Early in the novel when the girl goes for a walk in the ruins of the castle she feel that she is being observed by an unknown person, who later proves to be Sir Harry.

In the same novel, we find an example of something a little different since for a while the heroine and her mother live in an apartment. The apartment, to which they move after the death of Ethel's father, is in a house destined to be demolished soon. The mention of an apartment is quite rare in Le Fanu's novels except in reference to young men's apartments in the city, in which case the importance of the apartment as such is quite minimized. Le Fanu describes more extensively

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<sup>12</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 63.

<sup>13</sup>Wylder's Hand, II, p. 191.

<sup>14</sup>Willing to Die, p. 175.

the flat where Ethel and her mother live, for during their stay there some events of great importance happen to them. The mother is ill, they have no money, their house--and their lives as well--are surrounded by "...high piles of rubbish, broken bricks, and plaster, through which now and then, a black spar or plank of worn wood was visible in this dismal closure."<sup>15</sup>

As we can see, the external appearance of all the houses is meant to create an impression of melancholy and gives us a clue as to the kind of life the characters lead. Once we go inside the houses the picture does not brighten very much and we do find a Gothic Le Fanu in these low-ceilinged, immense rooms, the long halls, the numerous chambers, and the giant staircases. Not often though do we find trap doors and oubliettes. There is one room which seems to have more importance than the others, the parlour. Earlier we said that Le Fanu described it as the place where he liked to listen to Irish tales and legends. The depiction of the parlour in Willing to Die gives a good idea of Le Fanu's conception of that room: "[the cedar parlour] ...is a long and rather sombre room, with two tall windows looking out upon the shadowy courtyard. There are on the walls some dingy portraits whose pale faces peep out, as it were, through a background of black fog, from the canvas.

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<sup>15</sup>Willing to Die, p. 253.

As a child, [says Ethel Ware], I loved that room, ...it was solemn and even gloomy, but it was with the delightful gloom and solemnity of one of Rebecca Torskill's stories of castles, giants and goblins."<sup>16</sup> From the aspect of the room we feel the strong influence it could create on the people who lived in it. Later in the same novel when the heroine and her mother have moved into the apartment, Ethel Ware looks around with "...a bitter smile," the room has a "...black oak floor, black oak panelling up to the ceiling,"<sup>17</sup> and she feels that this room became very melancholy as evening came on.

The parlour in The Tenants of Malory is no more cheerful than any of the others: "[It] ...is long and panelled with oak, and at the further end is the fire-place. The ceiling above the cornice slopes at each side with the roof, so as to give quite a chapel-like effect."<sup>18</sup> Often also in these novels (and this is quite Gothic) we find collections of old portraits hanging in the parlour. In the parlour at Knowl there were "...many old portraits, some grim and pale, others pretty, and some very graceful and charming, hanging from the walls."<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>16</sup>Willing to Die, p. 6.

<sup>17</sup>Willing to Die, p. 253.

<sup>18</sup>The Tenants of Malory, p. 81.

<sup>19</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 31.

In Uncle Silas, Maud remembers that one of the portraits hanging on the wall at Knowl was of her Uncle Silas as a young man about whom nobody would talk to her. Yet unlike the pictures in the pure Gothic tale the portraits in Le Fanu's novels stay portraits and do not come down from their frames at midnight. Le Fanu uses them to create an atmosphere, not to terrify his readers.

In Wylder's Hand Le Fanu gives a kind of explanation for the importance he has imparted to old houses in his stories. The narrator says: "In all old houses one is, of course, liable to adventures... Where is the marvelous to take refuge, if not among the chambers, the intricacies which have seen the vicissitudes, the crimes, and the deaths of generations of such men as has occupied these?"<sup>20</sup> The narrator, M. de Cresseron, has the feeling that old houses may hide strange things; he marvels even at his bed which is a masterpiece of complicated carvings: "Its four posts, like the rest of it, oak, well-nigh black, fantastically turned and carved, with a great urn-like capital and base, and shaped midway, like a gigantic lance-handle."<sup>21</sup> It is easily understandable that he could hardly sleep in such a bed and was afraid enough to keep a candle lit all night. During his stay in Brandon Hall,

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<sup>20</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 43.

<sup>21</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 117.

he did go through quite a few surprising experiences in the night; he saw the ghost of Uncle Lorne which came into his room and talked. Likewise, sombre Redman's Dell, where Rachel Lake lives with her old governess, is no more cheerful than the other mansions and Rachel's bedroom is like "the dark chamber of white death."<sup>22</sup> All the elements interior and exterior to the house have a relation with the events taking place there. The depiction of these abodes suggests already to the reader what he is to expect will happen there. We must also remember that Le Fanu believed men were constantly surrounded by preternatural powers, and that these powers can only establish contact in certain physical and psychical conditions.

Along with the houses, elements of vegetation enter into the composition of the background for the events that take place. We cannot fail to notice that Le Fanu has used certain trees, such as the elms repeatedly found in his stories. In Willing to Die, when Mr. Carmel, a catholic priest, comes to see Ethel Ware, "...the beams of the setting sun broke, scattered, through the trunks of the old elms, and one touched the head of the pale young man."<sup>23</sup> In Haunted Lives, the avenue to the house is short but "...dark with the

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<sup>22</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 235.

<sup>23</sup>Willing to Die, p. 135.

shadow of old elms."<sup>24</sup> In Checkmate, we find "shadow of old trees, ...files of gigantic trees, ...grand old timber."<sup>25</sup> In Uncle Silas, one drives to Bartram Haugh "between files of magnificent forest trees,"<sup>26</sup> in Wylder's Hand one arrives at the house through "the broad avenue, with its solemn files of gigantic timber towering at the right and the left hand."<sup>27</sup> The trees are part of the scenery; they surround people somewhat as a house does. Often their influence will be felt even in the house through their branches which bend over the roof, touch the windows or throw their shadows on or into the house. Their influence is exerted on the house, on the characters, and they cannot be dissociated from the story. In Checkmate: "Opposite the window from which she looked, stand groups of gigantic elms that darken that side of the house, and underwood forms a thick screen among their trunks."<sup>28</sup> Again, "he stood in the dim recess of the window, with trains of withered leaves rustling outside, and the shadow of the sear and half-stripped elms upon the court and window."<sup>29</sup> There are also many

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<sup>24</sup>J.S. Le Fanu, Haunted Lives (London: Tinsley, 1868), I, p. 15.

<sup>25</sup>Checkmate, p. 70.

<sup>26</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 222.

<sup>27</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 15.

<sup>28</sup>Checkmate, p. 255.

<sup>29</sup>Willing to Die, p. 134.

instances of a direct influence on the characters. Captain Lake "sat down under the shades of a knot of beech-trees."<sup>30</sup> Richard Marston meets Ethel Ware in the woods and she says: "the scene, the shadow, this solemn decaying forest accorded well in my romantic fancy, with the wild character I assigned them."<sup>31</sup>

The aspect of the vegetation--like the houses--prepares the reader to encounter a situation, usually a dramatic one, of some significance in the story. In Willing to Die, Ethel describes the trees and scenery around her before she finds a dead man: "some wreathed and laden with ivy, others that stretch withered and barkless branches into the air; ground that is ribbed and unequal, and cramped with great-ringed, snake-like roots, that writhe and knot themselves into the earth."<sup>32</sup> In such a tormented vegetation the reader expects Ethel to run into some frightening experience. When Maud, in Uncle Silas, goes with her cousin for a walk "our path [says Maud] lay by the river bank, and as we proceeded, the dwarf timber was succeeded by grander trees, which crowded closer and taller, and, at last, the scenery deepened into solemn forest, and a sudden sweep in the river revealed the beautiful

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<sup>30</sup>Wylder's Hand, III, p. 53.

<sup>31</sup>Willing to Die, p. 122.

<sup>32</sup>Willing to Die, p. 122.



ruin of a steep old bridge."<sup>33</sup> Then Maud stays alone, and there she sees a "squat broad figure"<sup>34</sup> which later will turn out to be one of Uncle Silas's instruments used for her destruction. If we compare these last two descriptions, we notice that the second one serves more as a setting for the figure Maud sees, while the first one could be regarded as a warning to Ethel.

Le Fanu is often precise about the trees which play a role in his stories; they are usually elms or ash-trees, but rarely oaks. As in the purely Gothic tale, there are many dead, barkless trees or trees covered with ivy. In Le Fanu's stories, though, the trees fulfill more of a purpose than they do in the Gothic tale, since he clearly assigns to them a certain role. They are not inanimate objects standing there to create a gloomy background. They share in the emotions or the moods of the characters, they warn them of dangers, they protect them; in other words, they are to a certain extent characters themselves. There are also some fruit-trees in gardens, and they usually are old trees, too big to bear fruits or their fruits are only half-size. In Willing to Die "The garden of Malory is one of those monastic enclosures whose

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<sup>33</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 241.

<sup>34</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 243.

fruit-trees have long grown into venerable timber."<sup>35</sup> In addition to making these trees old, Le Fanu often shows them late in the season: "The fruit-leaves are yellow now, and drifts of them lie upon the walks. Mantling ivy, as before, canopies the door, interlaced with climbing roses, but they have long shed their honours."<sup>36</sup> As for the fruit-trees, they seem to be symbolic of the life of the characters connected with the gardens.

When we speak of the vegetation it is difficult to dissociate it from the seasons, since these have an inescapable influence on both trees and vegetation. For some reason, Joseph Le Fanu does not mention the season directly, saying "it was winter" or "it was summer," but rather he suggests the season by describing the aspect of nature. In a few instances, he mentions the season, but it seems that time has no great importance and what happens to his characters is beyond the boundaries of time, yet the seasonal atmosphere has a bearing upon the events. For example, we will expect some hope when spring comes: "The early spring was already showing its bright green through the brown of winter, and sun and shower alternating, and the gay gossiping of sweet birds among the branches, were calling the young creation from its slumbers."<sup>37</sup> It makes Rachel Lake, in Wylder's Hand, feel

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<sup>35</sup>Willing to Die, p. 77.

<sup>36</sup>Checkmate, p. 352.

<sup>37</sup>Wylder's Hand, II, p. 302.

more like her early self, although she still has in her the fear and feeling of guilt caused by her brother's crime. In Uncle Silas, the story of Maud starts in winter "...that is about the second week of November."<sup>38</sup> The cold damp weather increases the feeling of warmth and safety the heroine experiences while she is still living within the protecting walls of her father's house. On the contrary, when she stays with her uncle in Bartram Haugh the atmosphere in the house is unkind and colder. Le Fanu clearly shows the accord between the season and the situation of the characters in Wylder's Hand: "It was now the first week in November. Bleak and wintry that ungenial month set in at Gylingden; and in accord with the tempestuous and dismal weather the fortunes of the Rev. William Wylder were darkened and agitated."<sup>39</sup> The season also, of course, serves as the background for the setting of the house: "In the autumnal sun, among the embrowned and thinning foliage of the noble trees, Brandon Hall looked solemn, sad, and magnificent, as usual, with a sort of retrospective serenity, buried in old-world glories and sorrows, and heeding little the follies and scandals of the hour."<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>38</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 31.

<sup>39</sup>Wylder's Hand, II, p. 40.

<sup>40</sup>Wylder's Hand, II, p. 3.

Once again we find in Le Fanu's stories an element found in Gothic tales, but in spite of certain similarities, such as the use of autumn and winter more often than not, there is a difference. When the Gothicists use the season, it is for the sole purpose of creating a setting for their traditional characters. It is more plausible for a character to encounter a ghost on a cold wintry day than on a beautiful, clear and sunny one. In Le Fanu's stories the use of the season is part of a whole, which is the atmosphere, and its purpose is to condition the reader psychologically.

From season to light the step is not very big. There are some mentions of the light without a precision about the hour, as in Willing to Die: "A gloomier day could hardly have heralded the critical exposition that was to disclose our future lot. A dark sky, clouds dark as coal-smoke, and a steady down-pour of rain, large-dropped and violent, that keeps up a loud and gusty drumming on the panes, down which the wet is rushing in rivers. Now and then the noise rises to a point that makes conversation difficult."<sup>41</sup> Seldom do we find an extensive description of a "storm" in Le Fanu's novels, while in the Gothic tale the climax of the action often coincides with the peak of the storm. On the awful day described, Ethel and her mother are expecting their attorney, and they find out

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<sup>41</sup>Willing to Die, p. 246.

that their financial situation is disastrous. Lady Lorrimer, after whose death they hoped to inherit part of her fortune, left them nothing and Ethel's father left them with debts only. Far more numerous are the depictions of the sun at its setting and of the moon. In fact the moon, a Gothic cliché, plays a more important role than the sun. The setting sun plays a kind of introductory role in regard to the moon. It visually expresses the idea of a wait for what will come while the moon throws its cold, white light on the scene.

I shall limit myself to only a few examples which seem to be representative of the use Le Fanu made of both the sun and the moon. In Willing to Die, Ethel goes with her mother to pay her respects to her dead relative Lady Lorrimer. She describes the hour thus: "The sun was, . . . , at this time about setting. The sunlight fell faintly on the red brick chimneys above, but all beneath was dark and cold."<sup>42</sup> From this passage we derive the impression that, more than the sunset, Ethel's mood makes the scenery look dark and cold. There is always a very close correlation between the mood of a character and the "light." In Wylder's Hand, Captain Lake has met with Larkin the attorney; from this meeting he has gathered that Larkin may have guessed Lake's connection with Mark Wylder's disappearance and a feeling of terror comes over him. The sky seems to be a reflection of his feelings at the

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<sup>42</sup>Willing to Die, p. 225.

moment: "The sky, as he looked toward Brandon, was draped in black cloud, intensely black, meeting a black horizon --except for one little rent of deep crimson which showed westward behind those antique gables and lordly trees, like a lake of blood."<sup>43</sup> Obviously, the scenery here is a representation of what goes on in Lake's mind at the moment. The sky, or his present, is dark as he looks toward Brandon, a house he has become master of through unethical means. The horizon, or his future, offers no hope. The only color in all this black is the crimson of the setting sun, and it makes him think of a lake of blood. He remembers too well that he has killed Mark, and we remember that his name is Lake. In another passage of the same novel, Rachel Lake fears the future also, and she cannot enjoy the beauty of summer. Sunshine for her is now obscured by a dreadful secret, she sits alone and "in the queer little drawing-room of Redman's farm it was twilight, so dense were the shadows from the great old chesnuts that surrounded it, before the sun was well beneath the horizon; and you could, from its darkened window, see its red beams still tinting the high grounds of Willeston..."<sup>44</sup> In this passage, as in many other instances, the sun and the trees coordinate their efforts to dim the light. The sunlight at sunset help create a mood which leads towards darker moments. The hour of

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<sup>43</sup>Wylder's Hand, III, p. 29.

<sup>44</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 264.

sunset, when all things are still, is an intermediate state.

We have mentioned earlier that Le Fanu told most of his stories in the first person from a woman's point of view. This is important to keep in mind, for his use of the moon is based on this fact. The sun has been considered the symbol of the man, the moon the symbol of the woman. Wilhelm says: "The yin principle is everything dark, shady, cool, feminine and this power commences its power in the autumn."<sup>45</sup> In the hour of sunset when the power of the man disappears, things are still, waiting for the night to bring its spirit out; and with the night, the moon throws its cold deforming rays over things and people.

Examples of Le Fanu's use of the moon are innumerable; we shall limit this study to a few passages which seem most representative. In Willing to Die, "over the sea and land, rock and wood, a dazzling moon was shining;"<sup>46</sup> under this moon three women are looking out the window, contemplating a furious sea on which a ship is in distress. Only one man, Marston, will be saved. In Checkmate, "...the clear cold moonlight was frosting all the landscape, and falling white and bright on the carriage-way outside, and casting on the floor the sharp shadows of the window sashes...";<sup>47</sup> at that moment

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<sup>45</sup>Wilhelm cited in Ether Harding, Woman's Mysteries (London: Longmans, 1935), p. 224.

<sup>46</sup>Willing to Die, p. 62.

<sup>47</sup>Checkmate, p. 256.

Mrs. Tansey, the old governess, sees the shadow of a man and is surprised to discover that it is Longcluse. In Uncle Silas, "It was a very still night and frosty. My candle [Maud Ruthyn is speaking] had long burnt out. There was still a faint moonlight, which fell in a square of yellow on the floor near the window, leaving the rest of the room in what to an eye less accustomed than mine had become to that faint light would have been total darkness."<sup>48</sup> In that light Maud perceives the silhouette of Silas's son, her murderer.

These three examples illustrate Le Fanu's use of the moon to bring his wicked characters close to the feminine characters of his novels.

In Checkmate again, we see a man waiting in the darkness; after a while, he hears the sound of horses and "the moon now began to break through the mist in fierce red over the far horizon."<sup>49</sup> The sound of the hoofs comes closer and closer, "and now, like a huge, red-hot dome of copper, the moon rose above the level strips of cloud that lay upon the horizon of the heath, and objects began to reveal themselves."<sup>50</sup> The rider, we find out, had an appointment with the man waiting. In Willing to Die, Marston walks in the night to meet a man in town, he passes by the church, "its gable and towers cast a sharp black shadow across the grass and gravestones, like that

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<sup>48</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 469.

<sup>49</sup>Checkmate, p. 84.

<sup>50</sup>Checkmate, p. 85.



of a gigantic hand whose finger pointed towards him. He smiled cynically as the fancy struck him."<sup>51</sup> The moon in the first case seems to preside over a conspiracy between the two men, while in the other it directs the shadow of the church in an accusing manner. Let us note here the mention of the graveyard which is typically Gothic, but Le Fanu does not give it a primary importance. Instead he indirectly uses the moon to show its effect on the character. There is a similar use of the moon in Wylder's Hand: "There was a bright moonlight, broken by the shadows of overhanging boughs and withered leaves; and the mottled lights and shadows glided oddly across the pale features. But she saw he was smiling his sly, sleepy smile."<sup>52</sup>

There are instances in which the moon has almost a supernatural effect. One is in Wylder's Hand: "The level moonlight was shining through the stained heraldic window, and fell bright on the portrait of Uncle Lorne, at the other end, throwing a patch of red, like a stain, on one side of its pale forehead..."<sup>53</sup> According to the legend in the family a patch of blood on Uncle Lorne's forehead announces that some catastrophe will befall the house very soon. This passage could be very Gothic except that the catastrophe, Mark's death, has already taken place.

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<sup>51</sup>Willing to Die, p. 115.

<sup>52</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 114.

<sup>53</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 160.

From these different passages we may conclude that Le Fanu's use of the moon differs from the Gothic tradition in that he imparts an active role to the moon, he does not make it a mere observer. It seems that to him the moon is the guide to the occult side of nature, as opposed to the sun. The moon is closely associated with the night, which is maternal, enveloping, unconscious and ambivalent because it is both protective and dangerous.

All these natural elements which Le Fanu has used to create these so important atmospheres are Gothic; yet while in the Gothic tale they serve only as a setting, in Le Fanu's stories they condition the reader psychologically, as they do in the Gothic tale but with a personal touch added. The Swedenborgian Le Fanu believes that all that surrounds us fulfills a purpose, and he also believes that "men are constantly surrounded by preternatural powers" represented by vegetation, the moon or a house. These supernatural powers are closely related to the characters of the stories. Through the study of these elements we already know quite a lot about these characters, but Le Fanu goes much further, and gives us most interesting psychological studies of them, as we shall demonstrate in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER III

## A PSYCHOLOGICAL STUDY OF THE CHARACTERS IN THESE FOUR NOVELS

In his novels, Le Fanu seems less concerned with what happens than to whom it happens, how it happens, and with the impact it makes on the characters. He gives such descriptions of these characters that the reader feels he knows them intimately. These descriptions work in two ways: they give us both the physical and the psychological aspects of the characters. There is a close interaction between these two aspects, and Le Fanu is skilled in using the physical to suggest the psychological. In order to study these characters we shall divide them into three groups. The first group is the heroines, who suffer but are innocent and harmless. The second group consists of the intermediary people who are used as instruments by the third and most interesting class, the wicked people. Outside of these classes there are, of course, other characters, but this study will restrict itself to the main characters.

Let us consider first the heroines, whom Le Fanu has chosen sometimes as his narrators, as in Uncle Silas and Will-ing to Die. Within this group we can distinguish three kinds of girls. They all share common traits yet they are not all alike: there is no stereotyped heroine typical of Le Fanu. First there are the extremely beautiful women, like Dorcas

Brandon in Wylder's Hand; her beauty is almost perfect, but it is also enigmatic, immovable. Her face shows only "an acquiescence, a faint expression of surprise, a fainter smile...";<sup>1</sup> "she was not exactly languid, but a grave and listless beauty, and a splendid beauty for all that..."<sup>2</sup> The narrator says: "If Dorcas Brandon had been a plain woman, I think, she would have been voted an impertinent bore, but she was so beautiful that she became an enigma."<sup>3</sup> She is "a goddess in her aerial place, haughty, beautiful, unconscious of human gaze, and seen as it were telescopically by mortals from below. No shadow of trouble on that calm marble beauty, no light of joy, but a serene superb indifference."<sup>4</sup> Through this physical description, Le Fanu implies early in the novel what he states clearly elsewhere. Dorcas has studied the history of her family and intends to avoid the errors and misfortunes which befell her female ancestors. She has decided that she will not fall into the same weaknesses and passions. Trying to go against the power of human nature, she attempts to raise herself up to the level of the gods and, as expected, fails in her attempt. Instead of being stronger, she is in fact an easier prey, since she refuses to face reality and lets

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<sup>1</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 22.

<sup>2</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 23.

<sup>3</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 50.

<sup>4</sup>Wylder's Hand, II, p. 4.

Stanley Lake take advantage of her. Towards the end of the novel her physical appearance shows signs of the psychological destruction she has gone through; that destruction is more nearly total since she was unprepared for it and thought of herself as almost invulnerable. The narrator says: "In the hall, I met the mistress of the house, looking very handsome but with a certain witchlike beauty, very pale, something a little haggard in her great, dark eyes, and a strange listening look."<sup>5</sup>

In The Tenants of Malory, Margaret Fanshawe shows a strong similarity to Dorcas, but while Dorcas was cold from the beginning, Margaret's beauty has "a transparent and saddened character... the face voluptuous, yet pure, funeste but innocent."<sup>6</sup> As the story develops her beauty becomes colder as she makes herself more and more indifferent to Cleve Verney. Alice Arden, in Checkmate is also very beautiful; her eyes, her lips, her dimples, her teeth are beautiful; but she does not try to suppress her feelings the way Dorcas Brandon and Margaret Fanshawe do and her beauty does not have their chill.

In this first group of heroines, we find women who have in common a classical but cold beauty. These women fit in the stories yet they do not participate in them; their beauty

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<sup>5</sup>Wylder's Hand, III, p. 187.

<sup>6</sup>The Tenants of Malory, I, p. 9.

reflects a lack of vitality, either because they want to stay aloft, as Dorcas Brandon and Margaret Fanshawe do, or because there is really not much life in them, as is the case with Alice Arden. Dorcas and her dream of invulnerability shatter, Margaret and her dream of pride crumble, Alice's dream of happiness vanishes. Their beauty seems to be a symbol of their ephemerality. When describing the beauty of Margaret Fanshawe, Le Fanu uses the term "funeste" which can easily be applied to the others as well; for that beauty is at the origin of their destruction.

The second group of heroines described by Le Fanu is, in my opinion, his most powerful one, for the reader feels closer to them. They are attractive but not unbelievably so. Maud Ruthyn in Uncle Silas describes herself in the beginning of the novel: "A girl, of a little more than seventeen, looking, I believe, younger still; slight and rather tall, with a great deal of golden hair, dark grey-eyed, and with a countenance rather sensitive and melancholy, was sitting at the tea-table, in a reverie. I was that girl."<sup>7</sup> When Mme de la Rougierre, her governess, tells Dudley Ruthyn about her, she says, "she is vary nice - wat you like. Slim waist, wite teeth, vary nice eyes - dark - wat you say is best - and nice leetle foot and ankle"<sup>8</sup>. Rachel Lake, from Wylder's Hand, like

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<sup>7</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 31.

<sup>8</sup>Uncle Silas, pp. 66-67.

Maud has a certain charm which is strongly enhanced by her liveliness. A warmth radiates from her which does not appear to exist in Maud. Rachel is friendly towards people, talks nicely to everybody, shows sincere concern when others are unhappy. Maud stays rather cool when she meets new people, she dislikes Dr. Bryerley because of the way he dresses, and she makes fun of her cousin Milly the first time she sees her, while Milly expresses great happiness at meeting her cousin. Physically, Maud shows a strong resemblance to Rachel, but we find in her some of the coldness mentioned in the women of the first group. The reader feels more sympathetic towards Rachel.

The last group of women consists of only one character, Ethel Ware in Willing to Die. Physically she is not very attractive and she knows it, or, at least, we derive the impression that she does from the way she talks about herself. There is no extensive description of her appearance anywhere in the novel. In this the novel differs from the others where such descriptions are frequent. Only once in the story is there a mention of the beauty of her eyes and the strength they express. We know more about her psychological aspect, for Ethel is the narrator. She seems to enjoy talking about herself and often describes her reactions and feelings. One big difference between Ethel and the other heroines mentioned above is the duality in her nature. She, like the others, is a victim, an innocent girl easy to prey upon, but unlike them, she quite unexpectedly tries to kill one of her persecutors.

In this one novel Le Fanu has moved beyond physical descriptions. He has transferred his emphasis to the psychological aspect of his characters. At the same time, he has made his heroine more human and less weak. Since Willing to Die is his last novel, it is the only evidence that he was developing another and perhaps even more skillful way of treating the character of his heroines.

Whatever he was attempting in his last novel, Le Fanu does use extensive physical descriptions as a device to present their psychological aspects. These physical depictions are skillfully constructed to make the reader believe that the heroines suffer terror and fear; if they do not tell us they are afraid, we see it on their faces or in their eyes. Long-cluse meets Alice towards the end of Checkmate, and "he saw with a bleak rage the contracting look of horror, so nearly hatred, that she fixed on him for a breathless moment."<sup>9</sup> And in Wylder's Hand when Stanley Lake has told his sister that he killed Mark Wylder, "Rachel sat down. No living woman ever showed a paler face, and she stared with a look that was sharp and stern upon the wainscoat before her."<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup>Checkmate, p. 335.

<sup>10</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 185.



One question which arises, though, is: "why do they suffer such terror and fear?". There is something rather paradoxical in the way they behave. They usually give the impression of being mere puppets in the hands of the wicked. Events and catastrophes befall them one after the other, and they do not fight back, they do not try to escape their difficulties; on the contrary, they act in such a way that their situations become more and more intricate and all the more painful. They seem to close themselves the door of the trap in which they are caught. We find examples of this lack of awareness in the face of danger in every novel, perhaps less strongly in Willing to Die. In Wylder's Hand, Rachel despises her brother, fears him and feels only horror towards him, yet she gets involved in the murder he has committed when she agrees to give him help after he has killed Mark Wylder. It would seem natural for her to close her door to him after she finds out what he has done, yet she does nothing to avoid all this. She keeps the secret, and the reader somehow gets the feeling that her suffering is one part of her life she does not want to miss.

Likewise, Maud Ruthyn in Uncle Silas, feels only awe and horror towards her governess, yet she does not tell her father about it. The reason she gives for not telling her father is that she is afraid to displease him, but this does not seem a sufficient reason. When she has proof of the dishonesty of her governess, she could use it to get rid of her,

but she remains silent. At times, she tries to rebel against the governess and refuses to do what the other commands, but the governess threatens to tell her father, and Maud yields. It is true that the girl's personality possesses no great strength, but her meekness reminds us of a paralysed animal unable to escape the danger, in fact attracted to it. These attitudes come from mixed feelings of attraction and repulsion. Maud is attracted by the mystery around her uncle; the suspicion of crime which surrounds him makes it all more thrilling.

In Wylder's Hand Rachel tries to convince herself that fraternal love prompts her to act the way she does when she normally would avoid the situation she is in; she consciously and deliberately walks into a positively inescapable trap. All the other heroines are both horrified by and irresistibly attracted to the people who plan to trap them. Perhaps they find in them attitudes which correspond to tendencies which exist in themselves. All the heroines have had protected childhoods in wealthy families and have grown up away from the cities. Though these feminine characters occasionally show something like strength and presence of mind, when the chips are down, they do not. When there is still time to escape getting into intricate situations they do not even try; by the time they realize the gravity of the situations they are already deep into them and only circumstances can save them.

The second group of characters in Le Fanu's novels is composed of what I have called the "intermediary" people.

These characters, both men and women, seldom seem to act on their own; they are used as instruments by the third group of characters. From the way Le Fanu describes them, we derive the impression that none of them belong to a high social class, despite the names of some of them. Their vulgarity shows in their faces. They are not especially ugly, but their facial expressions, their cunning looks, their hypocritical smiles reflect an innate vulgarity. Some are gaudily dressed. They seem to be picked by Le Fanu to illustrate the vice of greediness. They serve the purpose of whoever employs them for money, but they do not do so blindly. They keep in mind their own interests and will, if necessary, turn against those they have been helping. We can distinguish two classes within this group: those who help the wicked characters for money but get away without being punished, and those who are punished for their vile actions.

Those in the first subdivision are minor characters, they appear sporadically and only help in promoting the action. We have the feeling that whenever these people appear something unfortunate will happen to the heroines. They always meet in secret and they usually show up when the situation becomes more intricate and dangerous. Le Fanu seldom reproduces dialogue between these characters and the people they work with, but he suggests that something wicked is being planned. Toward the end of the story, though, these people turn out to have been quite harmless and are never heard of again. There are

few extensive descriptions of how these characters look; most often they blend into the background of natural elements that Le Fanu has used to create the atmosphere so typical of his novels. It is more to our profit to move on to the second class of intermediary people than to dwell further on this group.

The second class of characters within the intermediary group includes fewer people. Le Fanu has described them more extensively. In fact, he has given such detailed descriptions of some that we are apt to believe that they are primary characters. Still, like the other intermediary people, they are led by a greed which makes them turn into criminals or thieves.

In Checkmate, Richard Arden, the heroine's brother, is such an intermediary character. He is a very handsome young man; Le Fanu insists on the fact that he looks much like his sister Alice. The reader gathers from this description that his beauty may indicate a certain meekness of temperament. Le Fanu builds his character very slowly, and we find only little by little what kind of person Richard Arden is. Only late in the novel do we find that our suspicions about him were justified. Richard has two weaknesses: he is very concerned with public opinion and he is an inveterate gambler. His friendship with Longcluse started when Longcluse lent him money to gamble and it ends when Longcluse is suspected of being connected with the murder of a little Frenchman. Thus

his first weakness makes him indebted to Longcluse, while his second weakness starts the slow process of his loss. When Richard stops being Longcluse's friend, which he does abruptly and without declaring it openly and frankly, Richard is already caught in the trap. Longcluse has too much power over him, a power which is derived from their financial transactions. Richard will never be free again. He tries everything to hurt Longcluse, but in vain. His passion for gambling makes him promise marriage to two young ladies, wealthy, of course, but they eventually find out about the man and politely but firmly turn him down. There is a time when he needs money so badly that he agrees to sign a paper illegally and thus closes the trap on himself. The circle is closed and naturally the whole thing had been planned by Longcluse.

Alltogether Richard Arden is not a very bad person, he is merely weak. The way Le Fanu has handled the character is perhaps a little moralistic, but it is interesting that Richard, though wicked, is handsome. His physical beauty emphasizes the contrast between the ideas implied by feminine beauty and masculine beauty. While Alice's beauty suggests vulnerability and fragility, Richard's beauty represents the same notion but with a pejorative connotation. Alice's vulnerability becomes weakness in Richard, her fragility becomes inconsistency in him. Richard Arden is a destructive person, especially to himself, and that is another characteristic of Le Fanu's intermediary people: in trying to serve their own interests they

lead themselves to destruction.

In Uncle Silas, two intermediary characters play important parts in the development of the story. The first is Dudley Ruthyn, Maud's cousin, and the second is Mme de la Rougierre, Maud's governess. Dudley appears very early in the story, but the reader does not know then who he is. He originally shows up under a disguise which immediately makes him look like an unpleasant person. Mme de la Rougierre creates the same impression the first time we encounter her in the novel. It seems that Le Fanu wants to make clear from the beginning that the character he is introducing has certain physical characteristics which reveal his inner personality.

Dudley Ruthyn physically corresponds to the general pattern of the intermediary people. Maud describes him as "...a rather fat and flashily-equipped young man, with large, light whiskers, a jerry hat, green cutaway coat with gilt buttons, and waistcoat and trousers rather striking than elegant in pattern."<sup>11</sup> She also says that he has a "...brown and rather good-looking face..."<sup>12</sup> and that his expression is habitually "impudent and sulky."<sup>13</sup> The impression created by

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<sup>11</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 66.

<sup>12</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 66.

<sup>13</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 66.

this description certainly fulfills Le Fanu's purpose: the character seems very unpleasant and superficial and his way of dress shows a certain vulgarity in its need to be noticed. Later in the story, Maud describes him again as she explains why she dislikes him. She says: "...I confess that his features were good, and his figure not amiss, though a little fattish... But there was an odious mixture of mauvaise honte and impudence, a clumsiness, a slyness, and a consciousness in his bearing and countenance, not distinctly boorish, but low, which turned his good looks into an ugliness more intolerable than that of feature; and a corresponding vulgarity pervading his dress, his demeanour, and his very walk, marred whatever good points his figure possessed."<sup>14</sup> As the story progresses, the character reveals the weaknesses his physical aspect suggested. In order to obey his father, Maud's Uncle Silas, Dudley courts Maud in a very awkward manner and quite unsuccessfully. In a memorable scene, she makes him avow in front of his father that he is already married and thus cannot marry her legally. This event shows that the young man is quite dishonest, but it also shows that he fears his father, since he kept his marriage secret. As it turns out he married a very common girl. At the end of the story, Dudley is the accomplice of his father in the attempted murder of Maud. As we can see,

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<sup>14</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 296.

the character's actions correspond to what was expected of him as suggested by his physical description. The character lacks moral strength to an extreme, relies on his father for decisions as to what should be done, is willing to do anything as long as his life stays easy, and he does not have to worry about money. It will be no surprise to add that he gambles.

Mme de la Rougierre is a more interesting and fully developed character. While Dudley is nothing but an instrument in the hands of his father, Mme de la Rougierre had more initiative, she is a "full-grown" character. At times we feel that Dudley has a touch of pity for Maud; we never gather such a feeling about the governess. On the contrary, she seems to take great pleasure in making Maud miserable. Here is how Maud sees her for the first time: "On a sudden, on the grass before me, stood an odd figure--a very tall woman in grey draperies, nearly white under the moon, curtsying extraordinarily low, and rather fantastically. I stared in something like a horror upon the large and rather hollow features which I did not know, smiling very unpleasantly on me; and the moment it was plain that I saw her, the grey woman began gobbling and cackling shrilly... and gesticulating oddly with her long hands and arms."<sup>15</sup> Le Fanu creates quite an impression with this description of the ugly, puppet-like woman.

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<sup>15</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 47.



The girl has forever in her eyes this first vision; and when she finds out that the woman is to be her governess, she is already frightened. When Maud sees Mme de la Rougierre the next day she describes her thus: "she was tall, masculine, a little ghastly perhaps... [she had] great bands of black hair, too thick and black, perhaps, to correspond quite naturally with her bleached and sallow skin, her hollow jaws, and the fine but grim wrinkles traced about her brows and eyelids. She smiled, she nodded, and then for a good while she scanned me in silence with a steady cunning eye, and a stern smile."<sup>16</sup> Physically, Mme de la Rougierre has become a little more human, but she still does not seem very appealing or trustworthy. In the house none of the servants like her except a young girl who serves her blindly. As time passes, Maud becomes more and more afraid of Mme de la Rougierre, but her father pays little attention to her when she mentions her fright. He attributes her reactions to a lack of maturity and an excess of imagination.

The imagination of the governess herself is almost uncanny when it comes to creating ways of frightening Maud. In one instance, Mme de la Rougierre talks to Maud about her father, Austin Ruthyn, and she manages to frighten her when she brings in the topic of death. Another time, taking Maud for a walk in an old churchyard, "...she uttered a horrible yell from her enormous mouth, and pushing her wig and bonnet

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<sup>16</sup> Uncle Silas, p. 49.

back, so as to show her great, bald head. She was laughing and really looked quite mad."<sup>17</sup> The character of the governess is so grotesque that we sometimes feel it lacks veracity. We must keep in mind that Maud is young, very impressionable and hardly acquainted at all with the outside world; to her Mme de la Rougierre is an impersonation of the witches in childhood stories. Another element which must not be overlooked is that Maud has no mother, no one to turn to when she needs warmth and comfort; thus, she is an easy game for the governess. The ultimate purpose of the governess does not seem very clear at the beginning, but we soon find out that she is playing the middleman for Dudley in order to achieve Silas's plan. Her method consists in hurting Maud psychologically rather than physically; she tries to debilitate her in order to make her more supple when needed.

Throughout the novel, Le Fanu very skillfully lets some hope come when Mme de la Rougierre seems to be gone for good, but she always comes back. When she comes for the last time, it is to help in the murder of Maud; unfortunately for her, she gets killed instead of Maud. Her death comes as a relief, for the reader has disliked her from the first. Her death signifies Maud's freedom.

Another character included in this class of intermediaries appears in Wylder's Hand; his name is Larkin and he is

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<sup>17</sup> Uncle Silas, p. 65.

an attorney. Like the others, he serves to precipitate the events towards the resolution of the mystery; unlike the others his acts are not dictated by another person. Larkin serves as attorney to Mark Wylder and fulfills the orders which he receives by letters since his client disappears early in the novel. Mark Wylder is dead, really, but neither Larkin nor the reader are aware of it. In addition to obeying the orders expressed in the letters, Larkin takes advantage of Mark's disappearance to increase his own assets.

Once again the physical aspect is a clear indication that Larkin cannot be trusted. The narrator describes him: "He was a tall, lank man--rather long of limb, long of head, and gaunt of face. He wanted teeth at both sides, and there was rather a skull-like cavity when he smiled--which was pretty often. His eyes were small and reddish, as if accustomed to cry... When things crossed or excited him they grew singularly unpleasant, and greatly resembled those of some not amiable animal--was it a rat, or a serpent?"<sup>18</sup> Indeed, this picture is not attractive, no more than that of Mme de la Rougierre. His little schemes, when we find out about them, make him even more unpleasant. The narrator compared Larkin's eyes to those of a rat or of a serpent; the whole person is like a vulture. The man exhibits signs of intelligence; unfortunately that intelligence is at the service of hypocrisy

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<sup>18</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 46.

and shrewdness. Under cover of protecting Mark Wylder's interests, Larkin serves his own. He shows a good face to people, pretends that he commiserates, but inside calculates what he can get from them. As it is for the other intermediaries, Larkin's primary concern is for money. His most pitiful victim is a vicar, Mark Wylder's brother; Larkin pretends that he tries to help the vicar while he is really trying to rob him of his estate. Here is another description of Larkin after the naive vicar has just come to ask for his help: "The attorney stood at his window with a shadow on his face, and his small eyes a little contracted and snake-like, following the slim figure of the threadbare vicar..."<sup>19</sup> Rachel Lake soon becomes aware of the danger represented by the attorney. She decides to try and help the vicar, but the task is difficult. Larkin has made sure that no one can stand in his way, and when she tries to defy him, "there was a confidence and significance in the attorney's air and accent, and a peculiar look of latent ferocity in his evil countenance, which gradually excited her fears, and fascinated her gaze... and those falty little eyes, in their pink setting, that nevertheless fascinated her like the gaze of a serpent."<sup>20</sup> Rachel's attitude in front of Larkin reminds us very much of Maud's in

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<sup>19</sup> Wylder's Hand, II, p. 58.

<sup>20</sup> Wylder's Hand, III, pp. 109-110.

front of the governess. They both know or feel that those people are dangerous, yet they do not know exactly why and are defenseless and unable to react. There is nevertheless a time when the fascination wears off and the girls are no longer victims. In Uncle Silas, the governess dies accidentally; in Wylder's Hand, the attorney does not lose his life but his money, which is worse for him.

Dudley Ruthyn, Mme de la Rougierre and Larkin are ominous figures of wickedness. Their physical aspects are an early indication of their intentions. Although these portraits tend to be like caricatures, there may be an intention behind them. The grotesque depiction of Mme de la Rougierre helps in drawing the portrait of Uncle Silas: She exhibits signs of clumsy cruelty which make his cruelty look more refined, thus more horrible. Her obvious attempts to frighten Maud serve as a decoy and prevent the girl from realizing Silas's intentions. Likewise Larkin's schemes turn the attention of Rachel away from her own problems for a while; they also keep the reader interested. The physical aspect of the attorney contrasts with the aspect of Stanley Lake. They are both dangerous people, but the schemes elaborated by the attorney cannot compare with those of Stanley Lake. As a result, the wickedness of the attorney is so obvious that the evil fate which pervades the story stays undetected until the end. In Checkmate, Richard Arden's attempts to dupe Longcluse are very clumsy and underline the artfulness of Longcluse's strategy.

We may conclude that these intermediary characters are really an aid to the study of the evil characters.

Finally, there is the third class, Le Fanu's major evil characters. It is in the study of them, his most interesting group, that Le Fanu has proven he is a master. Among them I shall place Stanley Lake from Wylder's Hand, who, however, should not be considered on the same level as the others, since his actions are indirectly dictated to him by Mark Wylder.

Physically Stanley Lake possesses the features of the evil people. He is quite handsome, but "there was something evil and shrinking in his aspect, which I felt [the narrator is speaking] with a sort of chill, like the commencing fascination of a serpent."<sup>21</sup> Here as with Larkin we find the comparison with a dangerous serpent. The eyes particularly contribute to give him that countenance, they are "very peculiar both in shape and color."<sup>22</sup> We find out later that Stanley Lake's eyes are yellow, a color that seems unpleasant and dangerous. He seems proud of being the cause of his sister's suffering; he seems to feel a certain complacency in his own meanness. He says to Rachel: "I'm Mephistopheles, I suppose, and you Margaret, are some simple heroine--rebuking the fiend in the majesty of her purity."<sup>23</sup> And as the narrator

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<sup>21</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 100.

<sup>22</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 61.

<sup>23</sup>Wylder's Hand, II, p. 20.

comments, "in the reddish light, and in that lonely and solemn spot, the slim form of the Captain, pale, sneering, with his wild eyes, confronting the beautiful light-haired girl, looked not quite unlike a type of the jaunty fiend he was pleased to suppose himself."<sup>24</sup> We wonder, though, whether he really does take pleasure in comparing himself to Mephistopheles. He serves as an instrument of fate, and fate and Mark Wylder are the same. Yet Lake has not completely joined the beast; he experiences fear, and in this he differs from other evil characters. Also at one point Larkin accuses him of being involved in Mark Wylder's disappearance, and "Lake knew that his face had betrayed him. He had felt the livid change of color, and that twitching at his mouth and cheek which he could not control."<sup>25</sup> In Checkmate, the evil character, Longcluse, encounters a similar situation and is also threatened but he "laughs cynically. The baron [his interlocutor] looks very angry. His face darkens to a leaden hue. The fingers which he plunges into his snuff box are trembling... Mr. Longcluse watches all these symptoms of his state of mind with a sardonic enjoyment, beneath which, perhaps, is the sort of suspense with which a beast-tamer watches the eye of the animal whose fury he excites only to exhibit the coercion which

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<sup>24</sup>Wylder's Hand, II, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup>Wylder's Hand, III, p. 20.

he exercises through its fears, and who is for a moment doubtful whether its terrors or its fury may prevail."<sup>26</sup> As we see there is a tremendous difference between the attitudes of these two men. Stanley Lake's actions, really controlled by Mark Wylder, do not spring from his wickedness. Early in the novel, Lake has killed Mark Wylder, but it happened accidentally, and from then on he has had to assume a certain attitude. Let us say that he is an evil character who has not yet reached the apogee of wickedness.

Next among Le Fanu's evil characters we shall consider Mark Wylder. Nelson Browne says that Wylder is the most complete character after Uncle Silas, since he dominates the drama without being present. Physically, we have few complete descriptions of the character, but we have clues as to what he was like. The narrator, Mr de Cresseron, says: "His face was too broad--very brown, rather a bloodless brown--and he had a pair of great, dense, vulgar, black whiskers. He was very vain of his teeth--his only really good point--for his eyes were a small, cunning, grey pair."<sup>27</sup> We soon find out that there is a certain antagonism between Mark Wylder and Stanley Lake when the narrator notes that he looks at Stanley Lake "with an uneasy and not very friendly curiosity."<sup>28</sup> Throughout the novel, his

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<sup>26</sup>Checkmate, p. 283.

<sup>27</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 88.

<sup>28</sup>Wylder's Hand, I, p. 102.



disappearance makes him a constant presence for the reader. He serves as the axis for the other characters' lives. The debilitated mind of Uncle Lorne feels the importance of Wylder's disappearance, and the old man keeps warning the characters and predicting the most unhappy things. As Browne says, "His mysterious disappearance, his callous treatment of Dorcas, the threats contained in his brutal bombastic letters, the secrecy with which his movements are surrounded, the havoc caused by the mere mention of his name or by speculations about his prolonged absence--these things make him a simulacrum of the invisible enemy of mankind himself, working in darkness and making mischief always."<sup>29</sup>

Considering Mark Wylder and Stanley Lake together, we find them to be agents of a superior force. This force, hardly definable, seems to belong to the Brandon and Wylder houses themselves. M. de Cresseron goes into extensive explanations of the intermingling between the two estates and of how their histories cannot be dissociated. The people living in these are subjected to the same influences as the houses. The spirit of the houses is the real reason behind every event that occurs, and Lake or Wylder, as the case may be, is a performer obeying this force.

The two strongest evil characters in Le Fanu's novels are Silas of Uncle Silas and Walter Longcluse of Checkmate.

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<sup>29</sup> Nelson Browne, Sheridan Le Fanu, p. 44.

Silas, whom Le Fanu describes thoroughly, is quite an intriguing person. Maud calls him "a singular old man"<sup>30</sup> when she sees him for the first time. She says:

"For some time I saw nothing but him... A face like marble, with a fearful monumental look, and, for an old man, singularly vivid eyes, the singularity of which rather grew upon me as I looked; for his eyebrows were still black, though his hair descended from his temples in long locks of the purest silver and fine as silk, nearly to his shoulders...

"The wild eyes of this strange old man were fixed upon me as he rose; an habitual contraction, which in certain lights took the character of a scowl, did not relax as he advanced towards me with his thin lipped smile."<sup>31</sup>

Some time later, she remembers how his voice was "...so silvery for an old man--so preternaturally soft; the manners so sweet, so gentle; the aspect, smiling, suffering spectral..."<sup>32</sup> She says: "When I closed my eyes I saw him before me still, in

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<sup>30</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 229.

<sup>31</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 229.

<sup>32</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 234.

necromantic black, ashy with the pallor on which I looked with fear and pain, a face so dazzlingly pale, and those hollow, fiery, awful eyes! It sometimes seemed as if the curtain opened, and I had seen a ghost... I had seen him; but he was still an enigma and a marvel."<sup>33</sup> From the tone of the description we can tell that Silas fascinates Maud. As she was waiting to meet him, the secrecy which surrounded his past made it more thrilling. Silas is no ordinary person, and Maud was not expecting to see an ordinary person. There is also a definite progression between the depiction of Silas as he stands before her and the way she remembers him in her room. The second description includes what her imagination has put into it. She remembers "...the manners so sweet and gentle; the aspect, smiling, suffering, spectral..."; she has the impression that she has seen a ghost. And it may very well be a ghost--the ghost of the Silas her imagination had created before she even met her uncle.

Maud may be partial to Silas, but she is not totally blind, and she notices that the house has an air of decay but that "there were certainly no indications of poverty in Uncle Silas's room."<sup>34</sup> Silas's primary concern is himself; his daughter is poorly dressed and has received no education; his son leads an idle life and behaves like a peasant. Silas shows, nevertheless, a concern for Maud's comfort; he can be very

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<sup>33</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 234.

<sup>34</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 232.

charming and behaves as a gentleman of another century. He retains some of the colors of a previous pomp and sophistication and even uses a few French words in his conversation. But Maud notices that he never shows any warmth in his relations with her, and early in the story Milly indicates that Silas is not in very good health. If Maud does not suspect it, the reader soon gathers that this disease is not a real disease. Silas is an opium-addict.

I would like now to point out Le Fanu's way of introducing Silas clothed in a suggestion of the supernatural. Le Fanu has used this device in several of the novels, but in Uncle Silas it is the more obvious. At the end of the first meeting between Silas and Maud, Silas kisses his niece and blesses her; while this little scene is going on Milly, Silas's daughter, is present and reacts in a surprising manner: she utters a sort of cry and seems to be saying "no." After this, Milly apologizes for her behavior and explains that she had fallen asleep and had a dream.<sup>35</sup> This explanation is hardly plausible. Milly's attitude is an attempt to warn Maud; later in the story, Silas deprives Maud of Milly's companionship, for he is aware that his own daughter is not his ally. On another occasion, we view Silas from a new angle; he is quite ill from an overdose of opium, he is unable to move, and both Milly and Maud watch over him. Maud describes him thus: "...a white

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<sup>35</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 233.

cloth steeped in vinegar and water was folded round his head, his great eyes were closed, so were his marble lips; his figure straight, thin and long, dressed in a white dressing-gown, looked like a corpse 'laid out' in the bed."<sup>36</sup> Milly falls asleep, but Maud stays awake and what she as well as the reader is expecting, happens;

"The figure of Uncle Silas rose up, and dressed in a long white morning gown, slid over the end of the bed, and with two or three swift noiseless steps, stood behind me, with a death-like scowl and a simper. Preternaturally tall and thin, he stood for a moment almost touching me... and diving over my shoulder, with his long thin hand he snatched the Bible, and whispered over my head, 'the serpent beguiled her and she did eat' ".<sup>37</sup>

This passage includes most of the elements necessary to a terror scene: the girl alone in the room with the person she fears, the other tenants far away in the rear of the house, the "long white gown," and the figure approaching noiselessly, and to top it all, the addition of the biblical quotation. The girl is certainly petrified by fear, and Silas shows a very fine sense of psychology--or is it Le Fanu? Silas has obviously

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<sup>36</sup> Uncle Silas, p. 323.

<sup>37</sup> Uncle Silas, p. 325.

understood how imaginative Maud is and found the right way to play with her imagination as well as her nerves; he provides the ghostlore she unconsciously wants and at the same time pursues his aim, which is to make her obey him out of fright and superstition.

When Silas realizes that Maud has no intention of marrying his son, Dudley, he tries a similar method of intimidation. Here is how she describes him: "He also stood--his white head bowed forward, the phosphoric glare of his strange eyes shone upon me from under his brows--his fingernails just rested on the table,"<sup>38</sup> after which "...he heaved a great sigh,"<sup>39</sup> and she feels "...almost as if [she] had murdered the old man."<sup>40</sup> This double approach, which consists in terrifying her and moving her at the same time, indicates a superior intelligence; Silas knows how he can tame Maud and he almost succeeds. She fears him, but she pities him too. She says of him that: "His nature was incomprehensible..."<sup>41</sup> that she "...instinctively felt that appeals to sympathies or

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<sup>38</sup> Uncle Silas, p. 363.

<sup>39</sup> Uncle Silas, p. 363.

<sup>40</sup> Uncle Silas, p. 363.

<sup>41</sup> Uncle Silas, p. 386.

feelings could no more affect him than a marble monument. He seemed to accomodate his conversation to the moral structure of others, just as spirits are said to assume the shape of mortals... If fiend he was, he was yet something higher than the garrulous, and withal feeble, demon of Goethe. He assumed the limbs and features of our mortal nature."<sup>42</sup> Uncle Silas is certainly strange, but his strangeness is enhanced by Maud's imagination. Her analysis of his personality is rather peculiar, for it is a mixture of the reactions of a frightened young girl and those of a fully mature person.

As the novel progresses, Silas's character becomes more and more horrible, for it becomes clear that his wickedness cannot be helped. Silas himself is a victim, he is trapped, has enormous financial problems, is an opium addict, which increases his financial difficulties; and he slowly realizes that he finally cannot manipulate Maud. The man has already committed a crime, and although he was not proven guilty, people have suspected him ever since. The only person who still trusted him was his brother, Maud's father, and Silas most likely resented him for being everything he, himself could never be. Uncle Silas is no longer a human being, he has become what opium allows him to be, and nothing can take him away from the world that drug has helped him create. Le Fanu suggests this even through Silas's death which symbolically

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<sup>42</sup>Uncle Silas, p. 386.

could mean that opium made him what he is and destroys him physically as well as psychologically. He has become an instrument for evil powers and dies when his role is over. In Checkmate, Longcluse says at one point: "There is present at the birth of every human being a demon, who is the conductor of his life. Be it fortunate, or be it direful, to this supernatural influences he owes it all."<sup>43</sup> In Silas's case, the demon is direful. Silas embodies for Maud the evil tendencies she had already envisioned when she was with the governess; only in Silas they are tenfold. In every individual, curiosity prompts a search for these tendencies, then it is a challenge to "play" with them. The feelings that Silas induces in Maud are attraction and repulsion at the same time. And these are the feelings created in the reader as well.

Walter Longcluse, the evil character in Checkmate, has many traits in common with Silas. Like Uncle Silas, he has even committed a crime earlier in his life, but was never caught for it. Physically he is a thin, pale sinister man, with eyebrows like those of Mephistopheles.<sup>44</sup> He does not exert as much physical attraction as Silas, but still fascinates Alice Arden. He is a cultivated man and society prizes his conversation. Silas, as we know, has the fascination produced

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<sup>43</sup>Checkmate, p. 116.

<sup>44</sup>Checkmate, p. 2.



by his secret past; Longcluse puzzles everyone because no one knows where he comes from, what his family is, why he is so wealthy. The mystery remains even for the reader until almost the end of the novel. The novel abounds with hints such as these: Longcluse asks Alice to sing a song--a ghostly one. The old governess, Martha Tansey, reacts very strongly to the sound of his voice. She is afraid, prays to God, yet she cannot explain why. As it turns out, she witnessed the crime Yelland Mace, alias Walter Longcluse, committed.

The feeling created by Longcluse in the reader is slightly different from the feeling created by Silas. We never feel much animosity toward Longcluse; on the contrary pity moves us. We sense that he really tries to escape his evil tendencies. He desperately tries to love and save Alice, but he is unable to succeed because others will not let him and force him to obey his evil tendencies. Once he says: "Well she has refused to hear my good angel; the other may speak differently."<sup>45</sup> He produces in the reader a similar impression to that created by Frankenstein's monster, a feeling of pity for him and a feeling of anger toward the others who do not try to help or understand him, a feeling of injustice and helplessness. Longcluse's power seems to frighten him as much as it frightens others. He fears really no one but himself.

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<sup>45</sup>Checkmate, p. 190.

Another element intervenes and makes Longcluse seem like a ghost; he has undergone facial surgery and has re-entered the world with new features. As we have said earlier, he has committed a crime and was operated on so that he would not be recognized. The fact that he is guilty of a murder and has not been punished has made him sure of his power and therefore even more cruel. This cruelty is evident throughout the novel. Longcluse enjoys watching the fear he can create when he tells Alice that her brother will be "...the evil genius of a bad family."<sup>46</sup> The narrator then says: "...this pale man enjoys her terror cruelly."<sup>47</sup> When Levi, an intermediary character in the story, describes the slow death of the rabbit caught by a ferret, the analogy between Longcluse and the ferret, and Richard Arden and the rabbit is quite obvious. The ferret instinctively needs to kill the rabbit. Can Longcluse really repress the instinct toward destruction in himself? It is doubtful. He has gone too far already. Like Silas he is trapped, his scheme is almost perfect; yet how he suffers and hates the object of his suffering!

In Longcluse, Le Fanu seems to have developed a character very close to his earlier character, Silas. The pity which does not entirely show in Uncle Silas is much more obvious in Checkmate. Longcluse has not yet reached that stage

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<sup>46</sup>Checkmate, p. 290.

<sup>47</sup>Checkmate, p. 291.

of detachment which Silas has reached through opium. Both characters have tried to run away from themselves, Silas by taking opium and Longcluse by being operated on. Neither is human any longer; they are closer to the beasts that humans can become in exceptional circumstances. The unpunished murders they committed provide these circumstances for them. Both have committed a murder in order to resolve some of their problems; neither was ever convicted but they must nonetheless destroy; and both die from their own doing. Silas dies of an overdose of opium, and Longcluse commits suicide.

From the study of the characters in this chapter, we have seen that Le Fanu relies heavily on physical descriptions to present his characters' psychology. There is also a progression from the heroine, young and frightened, to the wicked character who obeys his evil tendencies and exerts his wickedness on the heroine, either directly or with the help of the intermediary characters. Neither the heroine nor the wicked characters really hate one another; but rather they direct their feelings of dislike towards the intermediary people who play the part of traitors for both sides. The heroines and the wicked characters seem to be the objects of fate. Their actions symbolize the eternal theme of struggle between good and evil.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding chapters, we have dealt with three aspects of Le Fanu's works. (1) We have shown that being Irish-born influenced his development into the writer he was. (2) Even though he did not belong to the Gothic school he made use of many a Gothic element to create the atmospheres of his novels. (3) He is a fine psychologist both in the study of his characters and in his approach to the reader. Let us now consider these three features which constitute our hypothesis and draw possible conclusions.

The first chapter would lead us to conclude that he was essentially a folklorist. As it happens Ireland is renowned for its richness of literary tradition, and Irish literature abounds with folk epics and romances. Thus Le Fanu follows the path of a long imaginative tradition. He found in the multiple legends and tales of Ireland ideas for the themes of his stories. His knowledge of the country and the psychology of its people helped him in creating powerful characters. Le Fanu was very interested in folklore, and the first two novels he wrote were different from the later ones in that they were directly drawn from folklore. If he had gone on writing this kind of novel, he would have been in the same class with Charles Lever, but as Stanley Kunitz says: "Le Fanu's are stories of Irish life plus the all enveloping

air of another world."<sup>1</sup> As we know, he was deeply learned in Swedenborgianism and fascinated by visionary doctrines. Obsessed by death after his wife's death, he became neurotic. In the novels studied here as well as in the short stories and other novels he wrote, death is a lingering theme; in fact, death is the whole idea behind the novels written after he lost his wife, since they all are stories of murder and retribution. As Nelson Browne justly remarks, to Le Fanu "the issue of...combat is death. That same struggle awaited him, that he would at last be annihilated by the terrors he had conjured up, that death, the last enemy and the most terrible would come in some fearful guise, was the thought that haunted the last years of J. S. Le Fanu."<sup>2</sup> Finally Kunitz reiterates the importance of the death of the author's wife and his fascination with the ghastly and the supernatural: "His mind dwelt unweariedly on death, which had snatched from him all he loved, and he believed in a spectral atmosphere which he was able to communicate unerringly to his readers. The mysterious and the terrible are his dwelling-place, and the most materialistic reader can scarcely suppress an atavistic shudder on entering with him into that ghostly realm."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Stanley Kunitz, p. 376.

<sup>2</sup>Nelson Browne, p. 119.

<sup>3</sup>Stanley Kunitz, p. 376.

The apparatus of Gothic clichés helps in creating the atmosphere of the novels. It creates a grim world which serves several purposes. The heroines as well as the other characters evolving in that world undergo its influence. (Here the theories of Swedenborg intervene in helping Le Fanu suggest the importance of surroundings to individuals.) These Gothic elements create an influence on the reader as well. When we read descriptions of old decayed mansions, or the moon shining through barkless trees, our minds gather impressions which lead in a certain direction. A whole process of thinking is started, and we come to expect particular things to happen: for instance, we await the arrival of a monster or a ghost. Le Fanu has succeeded: we fear and desire these agents of terror; yet our expectations are not realized. The only "ominous thing" which materialize in these well constructed settings are people, mind you --people who are obsessed by evil.

It seems then that Le Fanu could desire no more, he has doubly succeeded; he has given us the formal approach to ghost stories but has understood that in order to achieve his work and keep us in the grip of fear he did not have to supply anything we could not believe in. Consequently, his monsters are human beings, and thus more terrifying since they embody tendencies which exist within all of us. Peter Penzoldt says: "The psychological ghost story so combines

fantasy and reality that even the most sceptical are held entranced. At first the outbreak of pure fancy, it has become the mirror of man's soul."<sup>4</sup> As it appears, Le Fanu is one of the first to have understood that there is something more terrifying than improbable monsters or ghosts. Through his own experiences, he realized that the most frightening ghost is one's own self, that as Dorothy Sayers puts it "what frightens us is the touch on the sleeve, the small voice in our ears, 'are you quite sane? is life quite sane? are you sure--are you sure?'"<sup>5</sup>

Several factors combine to make the novels powerful. There is in all of them what Ellis describes thus: "the sense of impending tragedy and horror long drawn out which is almost overwhelming in its cumulative effect."<sup>6</sup> Another important element is the juxtaposition of life and death; in all the novels we find expressions of vivacity, of spontaneity, of bubbling life, but they unerringly disappear as destructive powers shove them off and render everything bleak. One last preponderant factor results from the artistry displayed in describing the characters psychologically. It might be reiterated that these psychological descriptions are drawn on a Gothic and supernatural canvas. This combination gives

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<sup>4</sup>Peter Penzoldt, p. 57.

<sup>5</sup>Dorothy Sayers, Great Short Stories of Detection, Mystery and Horror (London: V. Gollancz, 1928), p. 26.

<sup>6</sup>Ellis, Wilkie Collins, p. 163.

the portraits a peculiar relief, the effect of which is comparable for the reader to Dorian Gray's feelings when he looked at his picture.

At the conclusions of the novels, the reader finds a certain satisfaction in having the key to all the mysteries and events which have excited him, yet he does not have the feeling of a happy ending. Early in the novels, the interest he had in the supposed victims shifts to the "evil characters" whom he begins to consider as the real victims. They are the victims of forces they cannot control. Ellis says: "In Le Fanu's work there is something akin to the panoramic pilgrimage of human life, the sunshine and the shadows, the joy and the tragedy, the happy song and the dirge of sorrow, the high lights of the hills of romance and the dark valley through which all must shudderingly pass ere they reach the oblivion of the tomb."<sup>7</sup> The reader may not be aware of it, but he is contemplating his own image both in the victims and in the agents of terror. Yet when he closes the book, he feels reassured and he feels freed--this was fiction. Le Fanu never was reassured and he never was freed; he tried to communicate with the human community by transcribing his torments and terrors into literary works. Louis Vax comments, "the sickness of the soul becomes putrefaction of the cosmos."<sup>8</sup> I believe that Le Fanu desperately tried to show that.

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<sup>7</sup>Ellis, Wilkie Collins, p. 179.

<sup>8</sup>Louis Vax, p. 92.



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