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## THE OLD AND THE NEW IN THE VICTORIAN GHOST STORY

One of the main reasons for considering the Victorian era to represent the first great flourishing of the ghost story is the fact that during that period the ghost story finally acquired the status of an independent literary genre - became distinct enough to be easily distinguished from the vast and varied body of literature called, not very precisely, literature of the supernatural. An attempt to find some elements responsible for this process is presented in this paper which will be based upon the stories of the most eminent representatives of this genre - Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Amelia B. Edwards, Charles Dickens, E. and H. Heron and Vernon Lee.

On the one hand, by being deeply rooted in the whole tradition of the supernatural in English literature or, more particularly, in English prose fiction, the Victorian ghost story can be regarded as a clear continuation of the narrative patterns of the late 18th and early 19th century, while on the other hand, by introducing new elements or making different proportions between the old ones, it could be seen to have become an independent genre. Thus, in order to find elements contributing to its uniqueness it seems necessary first to eliminate those which, though very characteristic and often even identified with the ghost story, are only a heritage of earlier genres.

The supernatural, or, in our case the ghostly, entered English prose fiction with the Gothic novel. During the early phase of the development of the Gothic novel (1764-1797 - a period embracing such writers as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe and Clara Reeve) a very characteristic compositional pattern becomes established. The organizing principle of the plot is the mystery. It is the mystery of the "detective" kind - with a clear unambiguous solution

provided at the end; with somebody, usually a young girl, acting as a primitive prototype of the detective; and with some clues leading to the final unravelling of the secret. One such clue is the ghost itself. The fact that a castle is haunted means that there is something wrong with it; in most cases it means simply that the present owner of the castle is a dishonest usurper, usually with some criminal past to be revealed at the end of the novel.

A detailed discussion of the composition of the Gothic novel having been presented in a separate article<sup>1</sup> I would only like to stress here that the ghost, although so much noticed and associated with the genre, in the early Gothic novel plays only a subsidiary role in the structure of the mystery plot. The very moment the mystery is solved and the evil punished, the ghost vanishes never to trouble the characters or the readers any more.

The majority of later Gothic novels either clumsily repeated the pattern of the early Gothic novel, multiplying much weaker versions of the same pattern, or treated the supernatural mainly as a means of evoking horror or disgust (for example "The Monk" by Matthew Gregory Lewis) and thus they are not relevant to the problem of establishing compositional antecedents of the ghost story.

Charles Robert Maturin, however, at the close of the development of the Gothic romance in 1820 provided it with still another pattern - interesting, original and rich in its possibilities. From the point of view of the supernatural "Melmoth the Wanderer" brought two important modifications into the composition of the early Gothic novel. First of all, while retaining mystery as the main principle organizing the plot it transferred the supernatural from the secondary plane to the main one - the question "who is the Wanderer?" is the essence both of the supernatural element and of the mystery upon which the plot is organized. The other innovation consists in the fact that there is no clear unambiguous solution to the mystery. The novel ends with the same question

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<sup>1</sup> J. Halecz-Wojtczak, Tajemnica w kompozycji angielskiej powieści gotyckiej w pierwszej fazie jej rozwoju (1764-1797), "Acta Universitatis Lodzianis" 1972, I, 91, pp. 39-56.

mark as at its beginning. Leaving unexplained for the reader what was unexplained to himself, Ch. R. Maturin provided English fiction with a very effective artistic method of dealing with the supernatural<sup>2</sup>.

The first step in the present considerations will be to find in Victorian ghost stories these two basic compositional patterns - that of the early Gothic novel and that of *Melmoth the Wanderer*.

In "The Familiar" by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu Sir James Barton, captain of the British Navy, comes back to Dublin after a long service. Having decided to marry Miss Montague, he often visits her and usually comes back home late at night walking along empty streets. During one of such walks Barton feels that he is pursued by the footsteps of an invisible person. Next day he receives a letter signed by "the Watcher" who warns him against walking along the streets leading from his apartment to that of Miss Montague. The letter ends by saying that Barton "has reason to dread the Watcher".

As the action develops the mysterious footsteps become gradually more insistent and are finally accompanied by the presence of a very short man who begins now to follow Barton, appearing at most unexpected moments. As the strange persecutions increase, Barton's health begins to fail. From a period of tense excitement and terror he passes into deep melancholy, resignation and finally death.

Some years after Barton's death it is found out that before his return to Dublin he had a love-affair with the daughter of one of his ship's crew. On learning about his daughter's conduct her father reacted in such a brutal way that the girl died. Taking advantage of his position as a captain, Barton inflicted upon the man all kinds of severe punishments included in the navy regulations. Finally the man managed to escape but died of lock-jaw resulting from the wounds inflicted in one of the punishments.

There are two sub-plots in this story. In each of them the organizing principle is the element of mystery. The first one is the mystery of Barton's past. The beginning of this plot is the anony-

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed discussion of the compositional pattern of "Melmoth the Wanderer", see: J. N a ł ę c z- W o j t c z a k, "S- jennica w kompozycji powieści Ch. Maturina "Melmoth the Wanderer", "Acta Universitatis Lodziensis" 1977, I, 20, pp. 21-33.

mous information that Barton "had reasons to dread the Watcher", the ambiguous allusion to "clear conscience" and the comment that "the whole circumstance was, in his own mind [...] connected with certain passages in his past life, which [...] he hated to remember". (p. 216)<sup>3</sup>. Barton's mental states strengthen the suspicion of some immoral deeds committed in the past; a talk with a physician makes the suspicion more concrete by adding details (wounds, lock-jaw, death of a man, a hospital at Naples). The concluding comment of the narrator is the typical last component of the mystery plot - the solution - the immoral deed of the past was the love-affair with the girl and the sadistic treatment of her father.

If we compare the structure of this plot with a typical early Gothic novel we see that there are no essential differences here: 1) the mystery has a definite solution, 2) it embraces facts and incidents taking place in the natural, material world, 3) one of the elements leading to the discovery of the secret is a supernatural element. This last feature should be stressed particularly strongly because the undoubtedly central role played by the supernatural element in the whole story may influence the perception of its particular parts, and during careless reading it is easy to treat it as a central element also in the first sub-plot, whereas a close reading of the story shows, that from the point of view of its compositional function the Watcher is analogous to the ghost haunting a castle in the early Gothic novel. Both of them are only signals that something evil was committed; they are data suggesting the existence of a secret and the clues helping to discover it.

An analogous situation takes place in "How the Third Floor Knew the Potteries" by A. B. Edwards. A worker has been burnt in a pottery furnace. The appearance of his ghost becomes a stimulus for investigations which confirm his comrades' suspicions:

The ashes were found to have been largely saturated with some kind of fatty animal matter. A considerable portion of those ashes consisted of charred bone. A semi-circular piece of iron, which evidently had once been the heel of a workman's heavy boot, was

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<sup>3</sup> J.S. Le Fanu, *The Familiar*, [in:] *Best Ghost Stories of J.S. Le Fanu*, New York 1964, pp. 208-243.



found, half fused, at the corner of the furnace. Near it, a tibia bone, which still retained sufficient of its original form and texture to render identification possible (182)<sup>4</sup>.

The evidently detective flavour of the above fragment makes the Gothic affinities of the composition of the plot of this story particularly prominent.

Similarly, "The Story of the Spaniards, Hammersmith" by E. and H. Heron<sup>5</sup> conducts the reader along a stereotyped route beginning with tappings at night and ending with the discovery of a foul murder committed long ago. And although the introduction of a detective as the main character and particularly the strong rational, or rather quasi-rational, thinking and deduction remind us only too strongly of contemporary stories about Sherlock Holmes<sup>6</sup>, the characteristic pattern of mystery, in which the supernatural becomes the main clue helping to solve it, remains a strong proof of the Gothic heritage of the ghost story.

The fact that we can find analogous compositional patterns in the Gothic novel and in the ghost story shows, on the one hand, that there are undoubted connections between the two genres, and, on the other, it leads to the conclusion that it is not this element that determines the generic uniqueness of the ghost story.

The same conclusion can be also drawn from the fact that although this type of plot appears in a great number of Victorian ghost stories we can also find stories in which it cannot be found - for example, in "Green Tea"<sup>7</sup> by J.S. Le Fanu, where the main character is troubled by the presence of a little black monkey with a most malignant expression of its eyes. The whole story is

<sup>4</sup> A.B. Edwards, How the Third Floor Knew the Potteries, [in:] The Supernatural Omnibus, Harmondsworth 1976, vol. I, pp. 169-182.

<sup>5</sup> E. and H. Heron, The Story of the Spaniards, Hammersmith, [in:] The Supernatural Omnibus, ..., vol. I, pp. 120-133.

<sup>6</sup> "The Story of the Spaniards, Hammersmith" was, like other stories by E. and H. Heron, first published in "Pearson's Magazine" in 1898, that is, after Arthur Conan Doyle's "A Study in Scarlet" (1887), "The Sign of Four" (1890), "The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes" (1892), and "Memoirs of Sherlock Holmes" (1894). The influence of Conan Doyle's technique, and particularly of the central function of the detective, is one of the most prominent features of stories by E. and H. Heron.

<sup>7</sup> J. S. Le Fanu, Green Tea, [in:] Best Ghost Stories of..., pp. 178-207.

a masterly study of mental obsession caused by a supernatural element - the monkey - and resulting in the victim's suicide.

In this story there are no traces of any detective mystery, of any secret referring to the past. The malignant monkey is neither a punishment or revenge for any sin nor a stimulus to redress evil. The ending of the story does not reveal anything criminal about Jennings - an honest parson devoting his whole life to his work and theological study. Similarly, "Mr. Justice Harbottle"<sup>8</sup> - another story by J.S. Le Fanu - does not contain any detective secret. Although the appearance of "The Invisible Tribunal" is a punishment for crimes committed long ago, those crimes are not presented in the form of a mystery. The fact that Mr. Justice Harbottle is a scoundrel is made as clear as possible at the very beginning of the story, so the supernatural elements that come to take revenge on him are not a signal of any secret to be revealed.

In Ch. Dickens' "The Signalman"<sup>9</sup> the apparition is not even connected with any moment of the past - the warning by the spectre figure standing on the rails at the mouth of a tunnel can be interpreted as a fragment of the future transmitted into the present to reveal the secret of a thing to be. Amelia B. Edwards' "The Engineer"<sup>10</sup>, in which the ghost of a deceived lover comes back at a critical moment to save the life of the woman he had once loved, is another example of a ghost story without any secret of the past in the main plot.

Seeing thus that the detective mystery plot is not essential for the ghost story let us now consider the second mystery plot in "The Familiar". Here, in the very centre of the mystery is the supernatural element - the strange footsteps and later the short figure of a man. All the questions inherent in this mystery, as for example: "what footsteps are they? Who is the strange short man? why does he come? from where? what for?", etc., can, in fact, be reduced to one fundamental question: "what is it?"

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<sup>8</sup> J. S. Le Fanu, Mr. Justice Harbottle, [in:] Best Ghost Stories of ..., pp. 244-273.

<sup>9</sup> Ch. Dickens, No.1 Branch Line, the Signalman, [in:] Classic Ghost Stories, New York 1975, pp. 142-154.

<sup>10</sup> A.B. Edwards, The Engineer, [in:] The Supernatural Omnibus, vol. I, pp. 241-259.

The mystery expressed by this question is introduced into the story in a very definite way. On hearing the footsteps Barton first makes sure that the whole street is really empty; secondly, he establishes that the haunting sounds cannot be the echo of his own footsteps, as they can be heard even when he halts. Thus, the footsteps and, later on, the dwarfish figure are introduced as elements evidently provoking the reader to ask the "what is it?" question: that is, as a mystery.

In trying to formulate the answer we see that from the point of view of the existence of the solution the mystery has two levels. On the first one this is a typical mystery with a solution. The solution in this case consists in the information that all the mysterious events are connected with Barton's wronging the girl and her father - that the strange dwarfish figure as well as the mysterious footsteps are those of the dead father who either in his visible or invisible form is watching Barton. The solution contains even more precise data such as the name of the town where the girl lived, the name of her father, the place of his death, the immediate cause of his death, the name of the ship to which he belonged.

This level of the supernatural mystery is, in those stories in which it can be found, easy to see. In "An Authentic Narrative of a Haunted House"<sup>11</sup> by J.S. Le Fanu we have the question: who is the sinister looking old woman noticed always at dusk at the moment of retreating? who was the red-faced man seen one night in the children's bedroom? who is the young woman in black with a very pale face and a wound in her throat? The end of the story provides the answer: they are immaterial signs of a bloody drama of the past; a drama in which the man was the murderer, the old woman was his accomplice, and the young woman - their victim. Similarly, in "An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street"<sup>12</sup> by the same author the "what is it?" question referring to the figure disturbing the narrator's dream, the strange footsteps on the stairs and many other disturbances and illusions ex-

<sup>11</sup> J.S. Le Fanu, *An Authentic Narrative of a Haunted House*, [in] *Best Ghost Stories of...*, pp. 419-430.

<sup>12</sup> J.S. Le Fanu, *An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street*, [in] *Best Ghost Stories of...*, pp. 361-379.

perienced by people staying for the night in the house in Aungler Street is answered by the information that all these phenomena are connected with the suicide of Mr. Horrock, who, many years ago in this very building hanged himself by the skipping rope of his illegitimate child. In V. Lee's "Oke of Okehurst"<sup>13</sup> the singularly enigmatic personality of the heroine and the nervous break down of her husband may be accounted for as resulting from a vague yet persistent immaterial presence of a murdered cavalier poet. In E. and H. Heron's "The Story of Yand Manor House"<sup>14</sup> all the strange phenomena are explained in a precise, almost Holmes-like manner:

Sir Gilbert in his fear of death appears to have mastered and elaborated a strange and ancient formula by which the grosser factors of the body being eliminated, the more ethereal portions continue to retain the spirit, and the body is thus preserved from absolute disintegration. In this manner true death may be infinitely deferred. Secure from the ordinary chances and changes of existence, this spiritualized body could retain a modified life practically for ever. (p. 277).

We see thus that the supernatural mystery here is again organized into the same characteristic pattern of question and answer, a pattern analogous to that of the Gothic novel. An essential difference between these two genres, however, can be seen when we try to see to what extent the answer provided by the story is exhaustive - to what extent the supernatural is accounted for.

In the early Gothic novel the explanation of any ghost and why it haunts the castle is completely exhaustive - sufficiently for the complete enjoyment of the novel. The mystery embraces only the single ghost, without even trying to touch the whole immaterial reality to which the weird creatures belong. Read according to the 18th century convention the supernatural in the early Gothic novel represents simply a cluster of conventional moral principles of virtue rewarded and evil punished, being thus

<sup>13</sup> V. L e e, Oke of Okehurst, [in:] The Supernatural Omnibus, vol. I, pp. 321-371.

<sup>14</sup> E. and H. H e r o n, The Story of Yand Manor House, [in:] The Supernatural Omnibus, vol. I, pp. 256-278.

a primitive one-dimensional reality; a reality whose single elements can be easily understood, explained, accounted for in an unambiguous way. And since no other aspects of the supernatural are either suggested or necessary for the enjoyment of this genre, the reader's curiosity is fully satisfied in closing the pages of an early Gothic novel, and he is left with no questions to trouble his mind.

To see how much different this matter is in some ghost stories let us try to see the relationship between the supernatural mystery and its explanation in Le Fanu's "Schalken the Painter".<sup>15</sup> Schalken, a talented young Flemish painter is in love with beautiful Rose Velderkaust - the niece of his master, Gerard Douw. Being ignorant of Rose and Schalken's love, Douw agrees to her marriage with a certain mysterious Minheer Vanderhausen who admits to have fallen in love with her while seeing her once in St. Lawrence's church in Rotterdam. After a speedy marriage Rose goes with her husband to Rotterdam and for a long time is heard of no more. No enquiries conducted by her uncle, now uneasy in his conscience, bring any result.

One day, however, Rose comes back. She is almost starved to death, looks wild, fierce and haggard with terror and exhaustion. Her behaviour as well as her loose, white dress are very strange. In frantic panic she entreats her uncle and Schalken not to leave her alone. One careless moment, however, is enough for a blast of wind to shut the door and separate her from Douw and Schalken. Hearing her piercing and agonizing shrieks they rush to open the door to find the room empty, its window wide open, and, on the waters of the broad canal beneath, ever-widening circles.

When many years later Schalken comes to attend his father's funeral in St. Lawrence's church he falls asleep near the vaults which are already opened and prepared for the body to be laid in. After some time he is awoken by a figure of a woman in loose white robe beckoning him towards the vaults. Ascending the stairs she raises the lamp and displays the face of Rose Velderkaust. There is no terror or even sadness in her expression any more. On the contrary, it wears the same arch smile which used to enchant the

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<sup>15</sup> J.S. Le Fanu, Schalken the Painter, [in:] Best Ghost Stories of ..., pp. 29-46.



artist so many years ago. Descending the stairs she leads him into an old-fashioned apartment, and, approaching a big four-poster bed, she, still with the same provoking, tempting, ambiguous smile, draws the curtains aside and displays sitting bolt upright in the bed the livid and demoniac form of Vanderhausen. Schalken faints and is found on the next day lying in the vaults close to a large coffin.

The answer to the "what is it?" question referring to all the mysterious events of this story is not easy. We do not have here as in the case of "The Familiar", many definite, precise pieces of information that could provide unambiguous explanations of some aspects of the supernatural mystery. Trying, however, to formulate at least some vague answer we might say that Vanderhausen was some after-death form of a man of that name who was buried in St. Lawrence's church in Rotterdam, and that Rose, who, while alive, rejected with utmost disgust the existence that he was offering her, accepted it totally and probably even enjoyed after her death.

Even if we accept this very vague answer we see that it explains very little of what the supernatural elements suggest. And they suggest much. They suggest a rich complex reality pulsating in its own peculiar rhythm: a reality in which a girl drowned long ago in a canal approaches with an ambiguous smile the bed of a demoniac un-dead lover; a reality which not only exists as something individual, fully developed and multidimensional but which is also a place of some action; a place in which there happened a tragedy - great, wild, violent, and unknown to us.

The large number of stories in which the explainable part of the supernatural mystery is, thanks to the concreteness of detail, very easy to notice may overshadow the role and importance of this part of the supernatural mystery which is not unveiled. That is why I would like to stress that the answer, the explanation concerning the ghost in a typical ghost story accounts for only a superficial aspect of the supernatural which, in contrast to the early Gothic novel, becomes here an independent reality whose depth and complexity far exceeds the scope of the answer. The supernatural in "An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street" stands for something more than the banal explanation according to which it was simply a ghost of a judge who used

to haunt the place of his suicide. Presenting these hauntings, J.S. Le Fanu with the subtlety of a great master, confronts the reader with some elusive and yet irresistibly present reality of condensed evil, hatred, cruelty; a reality in which exists the figure of the judge - puzzling, tempting, fascinating with its intellect, sensuality, paralyzing with its malignant power. The living characters of this story - two young students who spend some nights in the haunted building - experience only a momentary nervous shock, and safely move into another house, but at the end of the story we learn that for many people the stay in the house ended tragically. Those final, almost casual remarks masterfully strengthen the intensity of the supernatural world with which we are constantly confronted by incessant touches throughout the story. They show that the action of the story - the adventures of the two students - is only a tiny fragment of an action that takes place in the supernatural world; it is only one episode in the drama of death and guilt that is being continually enacted independently of its constantly changing spectators. Trying to describe his experience, one of the students says:

No one can conceive or imagine what it is for flesh and blood to stand in the presence of such a thing, but one who has had the terrible experience. Dick, Dick, a shadow has passed over me - a chill has crossed my blood and marrow, and I will never be the same again - never, Dick, never. (p. 376)

If we tried to refer those words only to a stereotyped "ghost that used to haunt a place" they would have no more meaning than the notorious faintings of the Gothic heroines; their real meaning can be read only if we accept the existence of an independent, complex and intellectually ungraspable supernatural reality as the centre of the poetic world of the ghost story.

Looking for the explained level of the supernatural mystery in J.S. Le Fanu's "Urtor DeLacy"<sup>16</sup> we find that the cause of the misfortunes of an old Irish family of the DeLacys was the revenge of a certain O'Donnell who, 200 years ago was accused by one of the DeLacys of plotting against the queen and, in consequence, executed. After his death O'Donnell manages to find access to

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<sup>16</sup> J.S. Le Fanu, Urtor DeLacy, [in:] Best Ghost Stories of ..., pp. 444-466.

beautiful Una, the youngest daughter of Ulterior DeLacy. During his strange nocturnal visits O'Donnel weakens her resolve to resist the temptation of following him, and, after a complete change of personality, disintegration of her self, and a slow process of deepening apathy Una elopes with O'Donnel.

However moving and convincing the narrative of Una's suffering, the story suggests that the untold action that takes place in the world to which Una elopes has greater dramatic tension than the one presented directly to the reader. In this reality, independent of time and space, the same O'Donnel burns with the same never-ceasing lust for revenge; living in that reality Una is sometimes seen by the peasants in the form of images expressing pain, suffering, sadness, melancholy, resignation. And while the pain that she suffered as a human being was strong but comparatively short, her pain in the timeless universe into which O'Donnel drew her is never-ending and thus, just like O'Donnel's devastating passion, it has greater dramatic impact as a suffering, a passion that transcends the limits of time.

Being a lesser artist than J.S. Le Fanu, the anonymous author of "The Ghost in the Bank of England"<sup>17</sup> does not rely so much upon the reader's sensitiveness to subtle touches and so he confirms the existence of the supernatural as a world with a life of its own by direct statements. By doing this he deprives the reader of the pleasure of the fascinating quest for the unknown, but at the same time he provides the critic with good quotations:

In any case, there, behind the counter over which cheques are paid - there, I know in my inner brain, stands the corpse of Isaac Ayscough, in his habit, in his sin, and in his remorse as he lived, honouring with burned bank-notes the cheques of dead men. (p.286)

The image of the ghost of a dead bank clerk paying the ghosts of banknotes to the ghosts of his dead clients becomes a symbol of the independent and complex existence of the supernatural in the Victorian ghost story.

And it is this independent existence of a supernatural reality which, though shrouded by mystery till the very end, stirs the reader's imagination in the direction of the motifs of revenge

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<sup>17</sup> Anonymous, *The Ghost in the Bank of England*, [in:] *Victorian Ghost Stories*, London 1936.

jealousy, love, desire, hatred, remorse, that seems to be the most essential feature which the Victorian ghost story contributed to the heritage of the literature of the supernatural.

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#### STARE I NOWE W WIKTORIAŃSKIEJ OPOWIEŚCI O DUCHACH

Opowieść o duchach - gatunek, którego największy rozkwit przypada na okres Anglii wiktoriańskiej - z jednej strony kontynuuje wzory narracyjne z końca XVIII i początku XIX w., z drugiej strony, dzięki wprowadzeniu nowych elementów lub odmiennych proporcji między elementami tradycyjnymi, osiąga swą niepowtarzalną odrębność, wyróżniającą go na tle ogromnie bogatej literatury, określanej dość nieprecyzyjnie jako literatura grozy.

Na podstawie utworów Josepha Sheridana Le Fanu, Amelii B. Edwards, Karola Dickensa, E. i H. Heronów i Vernona Lee praca analizuje zapożyczenia z tradycji powieści gotyckiej a następnie próbuje ustalić elementy nowe, które zdecydowały o charakterystycznej odrębności opowieści o duchach.

Tradycja literacka, z której wyrasta opowieść o duchach to wypracowany przez powieść gotycką chwyt kompozycyjny tajemnicy istniejącej na płaszczyźnie świata materialnego - chwyt o uwypuklonych dwóch osłonach: pytanie - rozwiązanie, przy jednoczesnej ingerencji elementu świata nadprzyrodzonego (ducha), który spełnia rolę sygnału świadczącego o istnieniu tajemnicy lub też czynnika pomagającego w znalezieniu jej rozwiązania. W późniejszym okresie rozwoju powieści gotyckiej chwyt tajemnicy obejmuje czasem również płaszczyznę świata nadprzyrodzonego, przy czym w jednym aspekcie posiada ona konkretne rozwiązanie, natomiast w drugim - pozostaje do końca pytaniem bez odpowiedzi. Takie układy kompozycyjne spotykamy w opowieści o duchach często, aczkolwiek nie zawsze, co z jednej strony świadczy o silnym ich zakorzenieniu w tradycji gotyckiej, z drugiej zaś każe szukać jej odrębności gdzie indziej.

Wydaje się, że odrębność tę stanowi tajemnica bez rozwiązania, odnosząca się do świata nadprzyrodzonego, przy czym, w odróżnieniu od powieści wczesnogotyckiej, zostaje ona przeniesiona w centrum kompozycyjne utworu; natomiast, w odróżnieniu od powieści późnogotyckiej, abstrakcyjny charakter świata objętego tajemnicą zostaje zastąpiony sugestią bardzo konkretnych motywów. Duch w opowieści o duchach daje się interpretować jako cząstka jakiejś rzeczywistości, która, mimo iż niepoznawalna, sugeruje rozgrywaną się w niej akcję o napięciu dramatycznym przewyższającym napięcie akcji w świecie realnym. Dziejące się w niej dramaty, których najczęstsze motywy to zemsta, zazdrość, miłość, pożądanie, nienawiść, wyrzuty sumienia - konfrontują czytelnika z cierpieniem, przydmiwającym poprzez swoją ponadczasowość cierpienie bohaterów świata realnego.