

The Ghost in the Mirror: Natural and Supernatural Influences on J. Sheridan Le Fanu

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Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu was raised in an Anglo-Irish household in Victorian Ireland, which greatly influenced his views on life, spirituality, politics and death. The author of fourteen novels and many short stories, “Le Fanu was almost constantly at work throughout his lifetime, recording what he saw around him and chronicling Ireland in the latter half of the nineteenth century” (Begnall 14). His fiction, specifically the novel *Uncle Silas*, contains extensive symbolism and references to the theology of Emanuel Swedenborg, whose ideas also influenced William Blake, William Butler Yeats, Oscar Wilde, and many other poets and authors of the Victorian age. Swedenborgian philosophy connects easily to the particularly Irish brand of belief in the supernatural. LeFanu uses Swedenborgian precepts and symbols to create a Gothic suspense novel that mirrors the difficulties unique to the Anglo-Irish under British rule in Ireland. In addition, the traditional Anglo-Irish themes of isolation, broken tradition, and lost identity are prevalent in *Uncle Silas*. Through the symbolism of the Great House, LeFanu mirrors the isolation and debilitation of the Protestant Ascendancy, while utilizing a Swedenborg model of repetitive action. He combines a viewpoint that is uniquely Irish with the particularly Swedenborgian thought to create a frightening and fascinating tale.

Although the setting of the novel is in the English countryside, Begnall points out that the novel “becomes clearer when it is transferred to an Irish setting” (14). In fact, *Uncle Silas* appeared earlier in the form of a short story entitled “The Murdered Cousin.” The major market for literature was England, and Marjorie Howes asserts that “Anglo-

Irish writers like Le Fanu had to accommodate British reading tastes . . . which often preferred not to read about the Irish at all” (68). According to W. J. McCormack, this is the result of pressure from Le Fanu's publisher, Richard Bentley (89). In addition, McCormack cites the “violent context of Irish agrarian and sectarian strife” as well as the “pressures of local Irish experience” as major influences on Le Fanu and his works (47). In *Uncle Silas*, an argument can be made that much of the symbolism and setting are reflections of Ireland. Begnal asserts that by “presenting aristocracy gone to seed, and the denigration of a once noble family to a base and futile people grasping for money and power,” Le Fanu’s “actual subject here is Ireland” (58). Le Fanu's work is Irish in nature and Irish under the influences of Le Fanu’s personal history.

The struggle of the Anglo-Irish in the nineteenth century is reflected in Le Fanu’s fiction. Howes reiterates that the Anglo-Irish history is “one of a gradual diminution of wealth and power” (170). Once a favored class, they were now caught between two worlds. The number and complexity of agencies, institutions, and laws used to administer Ireland increased steadily over the course of the nineteenth century. Additionally, during that period, British domination shifted from a reliance on military and legal coercion to an increasing reliance on integrating the native Irish into the state apparatus (Howes 169). This assimilation of Irish culture into the British model consisted of many characteristics. The most notable was the establishment of “national schools in Ireland, in which students were forbidden to speak Irish and were taught English history and literature exclusively” (Howes 169). In addition, this “assimilation did not usually signal a harmonious reconciliation with the native Irish” (Howes 173). With regard to Ireland, Le Fanu seems to suggest, “there exists no authority to which the

individual can turn” (Bernal 78). This created a crisis of identity within many of the Anglo-Irish.

Le Fanu was a man who struggled with his own identity and beliefs, and Bernal points out that “most of the protagonists of his stories are men divided against themselves” (28). It becomes easy to compare this struggle with the difficulties within Ireland itself. A country divided between many sets of opposing forces, Le Fanu seems to mirror that division in his characters. “The forces of evil which confront us are implicit and inherent in ordinary people who are quite like ourselves” (Bernal 35). Bernal reminds us that Le Fanu believed that “evil does not spring from some murky shadowland, but exists right here among us” (Bernal 36). Again, this reflects the air of distrust and betrayal that permeated the Irish culture. The novel is a mirror of the struggle between the Anglo/Protestant presences in Ireland. The Ruthyn family in *Uncle Silas* “presented no political problems . . . their denominational isolation mirrored the Protestant presence in Irish society” (McCormack 228).

The symbol of the Great House in Le Fanu’s fiction can also be associated with Ireland itself. The isolation and desolation of Ireland are easily superimposed upon the two Great Houses in *Uncle Silas*. McCormack reminds one that the “isolation of the Great House was inexplicably disturbed by incidents of meaningless violence” in *Uncle Silas* and further asserts that “to declare such acts meaningless, as the novelist virtually declares them, was to reserve some residual dignity and meaning to the Great House itself; nevertheless the final state in each novel is desolation” (McCormack 33).

Already conflicted culturally and politically, the majority of rural Irish continued to believe in the folklore of their ancestors, as readily as they embraced Catholicism. In

researching his article “Superstitions of the Irish Peasantry,” William F. Breslin discovers the rural Irish peasant is a “devout and believing Catholic . . . trusting even fearing the power of the priest,” but even the fear of “[the priest’s] power is unable to stamp out the relics of paganism” (Breslin 87). The Irish peasant’s belief in fairies and supernatural beings is inexorably intertwined with the teachings of the church, and “it is difficult to find any genuine pagan Irish superstition with out [it] being more or less modified by the wonders of the Old or New Testament” (Wilde 556). According to Sally Harris, Le Fanu “takes these Irish folk stories, and adapts them to his current situation, using them in his early short stories to emphasize the immanence of the spiritual world in the material world” (12). Many of La Fanu’s characters believe in this connection between the spiritual and material realms, and Le Fanu relies on his own beliefs as well as his knowledge of Irish folklore and Catholicism.

Irish literature, including its folklore, is also known for its use of the supernatural; however, LeFanu’s supernatural is “a universal as well as a particular phenomenon, transcending time and place, so that we find in his work little use of the banshee, leprechaun, or other manifestation of Irish folklore” (Begna 37). However, according to Peterson, many of Le Fanu's stories “derive from Irish folklore – children stolen by the fairies, visions, ghosts seeking revenge, sometimes Faustian tales of possession by the devil” (124-125). Peterson notes that while Le Fanu's short stories are filled with the supernatural, “the novels are all written in a realistic mode, but Le Fanu's impulse toward the supernatural appears often in his creation of a ghostly atmosphere in novels where there are no ghosts” (Peterson 125-126). Le Fanu is a master at making the natural more frightening than the supernatural. Consequently, “rather than seeing his protagonists as

strikingly abnormal, we are to realize that the only thing unreal here actually is the exaggeration of their predicaments” (Begnal 33). Le Fanu challenges the reader’s perception of what constitutes a ghost. In Le Fanu’s fiction, “a ghost need not wear a white sheet and have intelligible designs on personal property. A ghost need not be a spirit of a dead person. A ghost need have no moral dimension whatever” (Dowling, 46-47).

While Le Fanu’s fiction is uniquely Irish and influenced by Irish folklore and the belief in the supernatural, “commentators both past and present have also noted something else marking Le Fanu as different and other, distinguishing him from the English sensationalists: a repetitive reference to the works of the Scandinavian mystic Emanuel Swedenborg” (Zuber 74). McCormack adds that “both Swedenborgianism and folklore attempt to place the events particularly the disturbing events of life, in the context of a higher rationality” (242). Critics disagree as to the importance of the influence of Swedenborg on Le Fanu. McCormack contends that the influence “must take second place in an analysis of Sheridan LeFanu’s fiction” (186). However, other scholars emphasize that a “study of it can help one to understand some of the religious symbols and theories with which Le Fanu was familiar and of which he made use in his stories” (Harris 20).

Scholars further disagree as to the degree of influence Swedenborgian philosophy had on Le Fanu’s personal life and religious beliefs. It is apparent that Le Fanu had extensive knowledge about Swedenborg, but there is no known proof concerning his acceptance of the precepts, or at what time in his life he began to study Swedenborg. Harris accurately points out that “only after his wife’s death do his tales begin to refer to

Swedenborg directly” (Harris 21). Le Fanu’s later works contain characters who show an increasing interest in metaphysics. However, the argument is made that Le Fanu “was influenced by [Swedenborg] long before... [his wife’s] death,” evidenced by the many Swedenborgian traits of characters in his earlier stories (Zeender 78). In *The Supernatural in Fiction*, Peter Penzoldt argues, “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” (86). It is this belief that interconnects with both Irish folklore and Swedenborg philosophies.

In his biography of Swedenborg, Toksvig brings out similarities between Swedenborg’s views and visions and the folklore and fairy tales common to western Ireland. One such similarity occurs in an event related by Swedenborg in which he encountered spirits who were “sitting in sadness” (Toksvig 309). When he asked them why they were sad, they answered, “the doors of this house are kept closed to those who wish to go out” (309). In many Irish folk tales, the doors or windows of the house should be opened upon the death of an occupant, in order for the soul to escape. Yeats recounts one such tale in *Mythologies*:

One night a Mrs. Nolan was watching by her dying child in Fluddy’s Lane. Suddenly there was the sound of knocking at the door. She did not open, fearing it was some unhuman thing that knocked. The knocking ceased. After a little the front door and then the back door were burst open, and closed again...The child died. The doors were again opened and closed as before. Then Mrs. Nolan remembered that she had forgotten

to leave window or door open, as the custom is, for the departure of the soul. (19-20)

Although Swedenborg's theories are meant to represent the Christian supernatural, there are many similarities to the supernatural worlds of fairies, leprechauns, and other mystical creatures found in Irish folk lore.

Le Fanu's absorption with Swedenborg is not accidental. According to Peterson, "in his last years, Le Fanu withdrew into a private world of study much like that of his character Austin Ruthyn in *Uncle Silas*, fascinated by Swedenborgian theories and reading widely in areas of the occult, vampire lore, and the like" (124). Although Le Fanu may have believed the tenets of Swedenborg, his passion was for their comprehensive methodology (McCormack 242). This would have been attractive to Le Fanu because "Swedenborg's metaphysics and the Irish folk world's infinite power of absorption and transformation offered symbols, not creeds" (242). According to McCormack, there are "four fundamental tenets of Swedenborgianism relevant to the ideology of Uncle Silas: the symmetrical cosmology, the doctrine of correspondence, the world of spirits as the place of judgment, and the possibility of appearance and speech between men and angels" (179).

The basic organization of *Uncle Silas* is developed on Swedenborg's theory of the symmetrical cosmology. Upon scrutiny, one finds "the two sections of Uncle Silas are true to the general symmetry of Swedenborgianism" (McCormack 183). The novel is split into two equal sections and the events of the first section are echoed in the second section. As Howes points out, "Uncle Silas is structured around a series of parallels between Austin and Silas, Knowl and Bartram-Haugh, and the events that occur at each

location. In effect, everything appears or happens twice” (176). The two Great Houses are then mirror images of each other, or as James Walton describes it, “Bartram-Haugh is the shadow of Knowl” (369). Walton applies the same assessment to the relationship between Austin and Silas, as “each presides over a Great House in a state of decline or withdrawal, a repository of secrets, isolated from its social surroundings” (369). In the first half of the novel, Le Fanu builds relationships and actions surrounding Austin, and these are mirrored in the second half of the novel, with Silas replacing Austin and Bartram-Haugh replacing Knowl (McCormack 170). The division between the two sections is distinct and deliberate, charting the collapse of the distinction between the pure and the corrupt (McCormack 167). Noting that in Swedenborg, “the soul relives its actions after death,” McCormack points out,

Silas only takes on active life, as far as we can see, after Austin’s death. The point of succession is as precise as the inheritance of a title: immediately after Austin and Maud enter into their abstract Trust about Silas, Austin dies and Silas emerges. Until Austin’s death he had been inert, a personality postponed. Silas is called into being by Austin’s death. (167)

Howes also discusses Le Fanu’s use of Swedenborg theology to construct and map the distinction between the pure and the corrupt. She reveals the relevance of the repetition of action in *Uncle Silas* calling the journey of Maud from Knowl to Bartram-Haugh, “a process of revelation.” Howes notes that “Bartram-Haugh is the post-mortem re-creation of Knowl in the Swedenborgian sense” (176). By structuring *Uncle Silas* in this way, Le

Fanu deliberately incorporates the Swedenborgian tenet of symmetry between the natural and supernatural worlds.

In addition to the symmetry between the natural and supernatural worlds, Swedenborg believed that “the whole natural world corresponds to the spiritual world, not only the natural world in general but also in every particular. Therefore, whatever in the natural world comes into existence from the spiritual world is said to be in correspondence with it” (Swedenborg 89). In this way, Swedenborg contends that the detail of the future worlds is similar, or corresponds with the natural world. The correspondence is not limited, but as McCormack points out, is “a vast series of correlations between every feature of the mortal or natural world and of the future worlds” (177). This is important because, according to Zuber, “without Swedenborg's theory of correspondence or his notion of influx from a spiritual world, Le Fanu could not have uncannily anticipated post-structural work on linguistics and hybrid identity” (75). In addition, Le Fanu's use of this theory is critically important “for moving the gothic mode away from clanking chains and clichéd ghosts toward a subjectivity of the self, where the true terrors of the night are the uncertainties of one's own mind” (Zuber 75). Zuber continues by stating that “this standard deployment of literary symbols is made more specifically Swedenborgian when the novel applies the ‘correspondence’ of Maud’s interior state onto other characters around her” (80), because in accordance with Swedenborg’s tenets, “absolutely everything in nature, from the smallest to the greatest, is a correspondence” (Swedenborg 106).

For Swedenborg, the supernatural and natural worlds are inseparable. However, one function of the spirits in Swedenborgian theology is to sit in a place of judgment.

Swedenborgian scholar George Trobridge explains, “God separated the material world and the spiritual world for a reason, and it is only by God’s decision that there can be intercourse between the two” (224-25). McCormack points out that “Swedenborg held that, in the world of the spirits, the recent dead carry their memories and appetites which are so to speak 'run through' again, in order to explore the real character of the soul” (McCormack 181). Although the novel does not directly demonstrate Austin Ruthyn hearing voices from the spiritual world, after his death Austin seems to become a disembodied voice. When Maud disobeys her father’s will by staying away from her uncle Silas, she is torn by guilt over her disobedience. After falling into a worn-out sleep she “distinctly heard papa’s voice” commanding her to go to her uncle’s estate (Le Fanu 179). The idea of angels or spirits keeping watch over humans is not new, but Swedenborg “radically suggested that the ubiquitous presence of such spirits was deeply interwoven into human identity, into the functions of memory and language” (Zuber 77).

When spirits come into us, they come into our whole memory and from there into all our thinking – evil spirits into the matters of memory and thought that are evil, and good spirits into the matters of memory and thought that are good. These spirits are totally unaware that they are with us. Rather, as long as they are, they believe that all these matters of our memory and thought are actually theirs. (Swedenborg 292)

As Trobridge clarifies in *Swedenborg: Life and Teaching*, “to the recently dead the spiritual world looks the same as the physical world, and the recently dead often refuse to believe they are dead” (191). Recently dead spirits retain their own memory for a time,

but are not completely able to determine whether the memory is their own, or the memory of the human to which they are tied.

In order to evaluate the true moral significance of the soul, spirits retain memory for a short period. Closely tied to the ability to sit in judgment, is the possibility of appearance and speech between humans and spirits. With regard to the inner world of individual introspection, “Swedenborg's contention was that it literally swarmed with spirits, that the inner life was actually lived amongst them – that there was no clear division between the spiritual and the psychological” (Cerullo 94). Le Fanu mirrored that appraisal in his supernatural fiction, especially the stories written during his reclusive period, which includes *Uncle Silas* (Cerullo 94). After her arrival at Bartram-Haugh, Maud has been looking at pictures of ferocious wolves and an engraving of Belisarius. Maud hears a whisper in her ear, “Fly the fangs of Belisarius!” Maud tries to believe that it is only her imagination, “yet to this hour, I could recognize that stern voice among a thousand were it to speak again” (Le Fanu 355). For both Swedenborg and Le Fanu, according to Cerullo, “the fact that all minds incorporated an unconscious /supernatural dimension meant it was hardly surprising that the outer world should now and again serve as receptacle of supernatural energies” (95). Le Fanu shows the “supernatural world can reach out to affect ordinary humans who have by wrong doing rendered themselves vulnerable” (Brownell 191).

Le Fanu incorporates Swedenborgian theology, visions, and symbols into *Uncle Silas*, however, in the novel “the Swedenborgian worldview is associated not with balm but with terror” (Cerullo 98). John Cerullo, who is a modern Swedenborgian, reports, “Swedenborg prescribed a sincere, rigorous, and exhaustive investigation of the inmost

recesses of the individual personality, a determined and disciplined coming-to-terms by the self with the self. For him, this was the most enriching of processes” (98). Le Fanu spent a great deal of time studying Swedenborg, and in the novel “confronts us with the fact that Swedenborg could be, to many, quite terrifying – that what he represented could be profoundly unsettling” (Cerullo 99). Instead of creating a self-enriching or peaceful process, Le Fanu is actually using Swedenborgian connections to symbolize “a certain state of being . . . that for Le Fanu and his Victorian readers, automatically conjured fear” (Cerullo 96). Cerullo further asserts that this fearful state of being “all but cries out for some kind of haunting, a state that connotes fear as naturally as death itself does” (97). Le Fanu’s use of Swedenborgianism simply to invoke fear, “leaves us with a curiously dualistic treatment of that belief-system in his work” (Cerullo 98).

According to Cerullo, Swedenborg and Le Fanu “shared the conviction that the divisions men had drawn between conscious and nonconscious regions of the mind . . . were arbitrary; that the conscious and unconscious . . . necessarily elide and empty into one another in the course of normal life” (93). In a statement that would have been readily accepted by the common Irishman, Swedenborg believed that “supernatural phenomena do not represent extraordinary irruptions into the natural world but common and necessary (albeit mysterious) features of creation, seamlessly interwoven into the very fabric of day-to-day experience” (93). This belief would be in line with the beliefs of many Irishmen. The folk and fairy tales of western Ireland incorporate the supernatural in a very matter of fact and ordinary way. It is easy to see how the theological thoughts of Swedenborg were easily accepted by Le Fanu and incorporated into his fiction.

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu is a product of nineteenth century Ireland and all of her struggles and difficulties. While Le Fanu is not concerned specifically with the Irishman, he “deals with men in an Irish situation” (Begna 78). It is impossible to separate the man and the writer from the violence and conflict he witnessed during his lifetime. It is also impossible to separate his interest in Swedenborgianism from his isolation as a member of the Anglo-Irish ascendancy. Zuber asserts that Le Fanu’s “unstable language seems best contextualized within Ireland’s national and cultural crises of identity” (234). He provides an argument that Swedenborg’s “placement of a spiritual world inside the natural world mirrored the Le Fanu family’s own dual existence in two conflicting realms, the Anglo and the Irish” (Zuber 234).

Several other critics cite the connection between Le Fanu’s fiction and his Irish upbringing. McCormack emphasizes, “when we come to look at the general pattern of his fiction we shall find that its conventions obliquely acknowledged both the pressures of local Irish experience and the wider implications of Victorian unease” (McCormack 47). Zuber contends, “twentieth-century criticism has amplified how this suppressed Irish past came to haunt Le Fanu's work. Le Fanu stands today as a fascinating cultural hybrid in the sensation canon, writing from the margins of Anglo-Irish Dublin” (Zuber 75). McCormack notes that “not only have we seen that landscape and setting in Le Fanu’s fiction are consciously symbolic, but that landscape was originally presented as the extension of figures emblematic of Irish historical realities” (251). McCormack then connects Le Fanu’s Irish heritage with the outside influences of Swedenborg and the English publishers, stating, “these influences were in a sense an appropriate product of Le Fanu's relationship with the Irish past and present” (251). He contends that, “by a

circuitous route, this interest in Swedenborgian thought underlines the continuity between Le Fanu and the generation of Yeats and Wilde” (6). This is evidenced by words from an essay written by Yeats:

It was indeed Swedenborg who affirmed for the modern world, as against the abstract reasoning of the learned, the doctrine and practice of the desolate places, of shepherds and of midwives, and discovered a world of spirits where there was a scenery like that of earth, human forms, grotesque and beautiful, senses that knew pleasure and pain, marriage and war, all that could be painted upon canvas, or put into stories to make one’s hair stand up. (“Swedenborg, Mediums” 312)

Far from being simply a sensational novelist, Le Fanu “is not only important for understanding the permutation of the gothic . . . but his work continues to strike many readers as peculiarly modern. This resonance depends on the ways in which Le Fanu was able to adapt Swedenborg’s ideas” (Zuber 83). In addition, Le Fanu combines the spiritual and material worlds in his fiction, warning the skeptics of the Victorian age about the perils of rejecting the spiritual realm. Because of this emphasis, Harris contends that

Swedenborgianism is a useful tool for Le Fanu because of its blending of the spiritual world with the physical world, and he uses his knowledge of the metaphysics of Swedenborgianism to the same end that he uses his knowledge and experience of Catholicism, the folklore of the Irish-Catholics, the Protestant church, and materialism in his stories: to

emphasize the connection between the spiritual world and the physical
(22).

Le Fanu's tales remain "poised between demanding our total assent to a traditional supernatural world, and ... exposing such experiences to the detached and curious judgment of an impartial investigator" (Briggs 51). His fiction transcends one specific influence, employing an eclectic blending of his life experiences and personal beliefs to create frightening stories without the clanking chains, moaning ghosts, or grotesque monsters for which gothic fiction is known. For Le Fanu, the realities and uncertainties of life were far more frightening than anything the supernatural world could offer. The ghost in the mirror is far more frightening than the ghost in the attic. In Le Fanu's fiction, "it is the uncertainty of any interpretive conclusion that defines his work" (Briggs 51). Begnal sums it up by saying, "the work of Le Fanu inheres the spirit of Ireland of his time, and for this alone it should be valuable to us today" (82).

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