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О ГРАНИЦАХ ЖАНРА: КОМИЧЕСКАЯ ГОТИКА ДЖ. К. БАНГЗА

Научная статья

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Аннотация

Готическая новелла (ghost story) – жанр, точное определение границ которого до сих пор весьма проблематично. Например, не вполне ясно, какова роль комических готических новелл — и где пролегает граница между пародиями и комическими текстами, остающимися в пределах жанра. Например, новеллы американского писателя Дж. К. Бангза все же выходят за жанровые границы, поскольку автор систематически и сознательно разрушает структуру и гносеологические предпосылки готической новеллистики. Отчасти это реакция американца на европейскую литературную традицию, но Бангз испытывает к ней слишком явный интерес, чтобы ограничиться простым пародированием, и два его сборника представляют собой сложную рефлексию по поводу жанра. Это интересные свидетельства того, как воспринималась готическая новелла в то время, когда она одновременно находилась на пике популярности и при этом заметно видоизменялась.

Ключевые слова: готическая новелла, жанр, пародия.

ON THE LIMITS OF THE GENRE: J. K. BANGS AND HIS COMIC GHOST STORIES

Research article

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Abstract

Defining ghost story as a genre is a complex task. Among other aspects, it is still far from clear what the role of comic ghost stories within the genre is – and where lies the boundary between parodies and texts which are comic but still belong to the genre itself. For example, ghost stories by the American author J. K. Bangs are mostly parodies lying outside the genre's limits for in them he consciously and consistently violates the genre's structure and epistemological premises. Partly this is how an American writer reacts at European tradition, but Bangs is clearly too much interested in the genre to write mere parodies, and his books of ghost stories are complex reflections on it. They can be seen as an interesting evidence of how ghost story was perceived in the era when it was highly popular but was also undergoing certain complex transformations.

Keywords: ghost story, genre, parody.

Introduction

Defining ghost story as a genre is a complex task, though this genre once was (and actually still is) an important part of anglophone literature and it has been discussed in a wide variety of scholarly works on Gothic fiction. Chronology, epistemology and structural features of ghost stories still cause much discussion in British criticism [7, P. 4], and, significantly, there are quite few works on them in other countries, which is also true for Russia.

Among other aspects, it is unclear what the role of comic ghost stories within the genre is – and where lies the boundary between parodies and texts which are comic but still belong to the genre itself. If we consider this branch of Gothic fiction we will see that it often contains humorous moments for an obvious reason: its complex epistemology which does not allow choosing between different versions of what has happened. Characters often drink, take medicines, lose consciousness, and these circumstances do not let the reader see with enough clarity whether the accident described is really supernatural or it was an illusion, dream etc. Narrators also tend to make notes concerning their own trustfulness and their audience's credibility. On the other hand, ghost story as a genre tends to be formulaic [9, P. 67-68] which makes it an easy prey of parodists. Here the question arises: where is the boundary between ghost story as such and its parodic versions? Our hypothesis is that parodies (in contrast to humorous specimens of the genre) are characterized by destruction of conventions typical for the genre, they are *structurally* different, notwithstanding the amount of comic elements as such. We accept S. Dentith's definition according to which parody and its object are *different* cultural productions or practices [5, P. 9].

Discussion

Gothic fiction in general is sometimes regarded as intrinsically parodic because of its excesses [10, P. XI], and ghost stories are no exception: they can mix horror with laughter [10, P. 56]. E. F. Benson, a well-known author whose stories were written quite late, many of them as late as in the 1920s, shows a tendency towards exaggerating many characteristic elements of the genre and thus making overused tropes sound comic, but it does not prevent them from being ghost stories as such, not mere parodies. *The Face* (1928) [4, P. 35-56] is perhaps parodic in its portrayal of the villain as a stereotypical Lombrosian criminal but it follows a traditional story about demonic (and dead) lovers very closely, continuing the line beginning in folk ballads [1, P. 7-9]. It also preserves all the characteristics essential for a ghost story, such as the intrusion of the supernatural into everyday life and the ambivalence of explanation. Possibly its ironic element is a feature of a very late specimen of a genre, it 'exposes the untimely' [8, P. 6] but is not intended to deconstruct the tradition as such.

M. R. James, another writer famous for his ghost stories, is often playful (and never denies he regards the genre as a kind of entertainment [7, P. 79]) and some of his texts are clearly parodies, though the object of parody is not ghost story but rather didactic literature for children: such is *A School Story* (1911) [6, P. 98-113] where supernatural and frightening elements are used to provide a grotesque frame for two characters, a stereotypical good boy and an even more stereotypical bad boy – a dangerous situation ending with the latter's death shows how shallow the contrast is and how absurd is the very idea of telling cruel moralistic stories to teenagers (James's story was originally told to scouts, boys of roughly the same age as the two protagonists).

American ghost stories provide particularly interesting material for exploring the problem: ghost story is a mostly British genre closely linked to its cultural context and British worldview. There were American authors like H. James and E. Wharton who wrote genuine ghost stories creatively following the genre's rules, but many of their colleagues preferred explicitly parodic versions. The very idea of contrast between British and American mentality was a popular topic (also known to British authors, such as O. Wilde). American worldview was regarded in such cases as something incompatible with Gothic horrors – it is clearly seen in such classic works as stories by W. Irving and M. Twain, but there are later cases, such as ghost stories by J. K. Bangs.

Bangs, a popular and prolific comic writer, wrote only two collections of ghost stories — *The Water Ghost and Others* (1894) and *Ghosts I Have Met and Some Others* (1902). Let us see in closer details how the generic canon is transformed in them. The stories from those collections are very different, as if the author was trying out the genre's potential and playing with its different versions.

The Water Ghost of Harrowby Hall begins very traditionally, with a ghost haunting an old house and tormenting its inhabitants. The author makes clichés known from the beginning of Gothic fiction almost grotesque:

It never appeared except on Christmas Eve, and then as the clock was striking twelve, in which respect alone was it lacking in that originality which in these days is a sine qua non of success in spectral life [3, P. 1].

Ghost stories are typically based on the potentially dangerous collision of two worlds, human and supernatural, and here this collision takes place, but there is no fear here: characters react in a very businesslike way, they take reasonable measures such as making rooms as waterproof as possible. Late Gothic fiction is full of everyday details, exactly because it describes the intrusion of dangerous wonders into the life of ordinary people, but Bangs pushes this feature up to its limit making his descriptions at once very mundane and extremely detailed.

In the same way he deals with the idea of danger: one gentleman catches cold after meeting the water ghost and dies four years later... at the age of 78. On the surface it looks like a double explanation characteristic for ghost stories, but it comes into contradiction with the idea that we are told of a very old man who died *after* and not *because of* encountering the ghost.

The end of the story is even more grotesque: the ghost has been frozen and put into a warehouse. The creature that can be first liquid, then frozen, cannot be a spirit. But still it is a spirit of a young girl who once had a quarrel with her father and committed a suicide. Traditionally such revenants can be put to rest if they are provided with proper burial or the evil done to them is somehow corrected. Bangs totally destroys the traditional scheme: here the logic of a ghost story gives way to purely rational way of thinking and acting (even the method of freezing is 'high-tech' by Victorian standards).

The Spectre Cook of Bangletop [3, P. 20-103] is also a parody but based on another premises. Here all the Gothic (in every sense of the word) elements are shown through the worldview of a man belonging to a different culture. The castle that has been constantly rebuilt for many centuries looks as a caricature of British history and culture, it consists of incompatible parts, sometimes belonging to nonexistent architectural styles. The proud owner of this architectural nightmare is called an erudite – clearly not without irony.

The storyline follows an ancient model known from folklore and widely used by ghost story writers: a dangerous place that can be rid of the evil creature haunting it only by a noble hero. But here the 'evil creature' is just a spectre cook, not really dangerous but very annoying, and the 'hero' is a wealthy American businessman. Hence the method of solving the problem: the ghost is given the salary which it was denied when alive and is married to another ghost. Essentially it is classical 'putting the dead to rest', when the deceased gets what he or she wants and stops troubling the living, but it is arranged following the logic not of folktales, but of modern business transactions. Thus the very idea of a ghost story is transformed. *The Spectre Cook* is, therefore, a parody, a comic tale going beyond the limits of the Gothic tradition.

Significantly, in this story the American shakes hands with the ghost: so the supernatural is fully submitted not only to the ethos, but also to the physical laws of our world, it loses its 'special' place in the story's universe.

The Speck on the Lens [3, P. 104-120] works differently: it is a comic Hoffmannian fantasy. The story is actually based on a variety of sources, among which there are texts not only by E. T. A. Hoffmann, but also by R. L. Stevenson and an early American fantasy writer FitzJames O'Brien. Bangs creates a complex network of allusions to his own 'fantasy canon'. As one should have expected, the final scene turns magic into a joke: the narrator says he could not buy the wonderful object because he had forgotten to take cash with him:

"And the moral?" queried the lieutenant. "You promised a moral, or I should not have listened." "Always have money in your pocket," replied the doctor, pocketing the last ball, and putting up his cue. "Then you are not apt to lose great bargains such as I lost for the want of \$25 [3, P. 120].

Here once again mundane matters leave the supernatural in the shadow, but the reason is different: up to the end the story looks like a literary game, and the final point (a characteristic feature of novellas) violates the readers' expectations and turns a parable into a joke.

Interestingly, in the final story of the collection Bangs violates the readers' expectations in one more way – *The Literary Remains of Thomas Bragdon* [3, P. 247-296] (the title itself is polysemantic, referring both to heritage and to the writer's dead body) does not poke fun at ghost stories, it makes use of familiar Gothic themes but neither denies the supernatural nor treats it in a businesslike way so typical for this author. Here the ghost represents the power of friendship and imagination: one of the two friends dies but does not stop communicating with the other. Characteristically, this story closes the collection; the

author's strategy is quite complex: he laughs at outdated conventions, makes a comic review of European culture but finally shows that revenants are closely linked to the idea of time and memory and meet certain fundamental psychological needs.

Bangs wrote another book of ghost stories only eight years later. Here the author's strategies are more ambiguous and intricate. It is essential to remember that for many people of that era ghosts were not only fictional characters but often a part of reality – they were studied, consulted during seances, described in non-fiction books (*True Ghost Stories* was a commonplace title). This is the background of the story called *Ghosts that Have Haunted Me* [2, P. 1-25] imitating an eyewitness's account. The narrator says:

I have seen so many horrid visitants from other worlds that they hardly affect me at all, so far as the mere inspiration of terror is concerned. On the other hand, they interest me hugely [2, P. 1].

The story's composition is very distinctive: it is centered on parodying occult tropes and the narrator's figure. The protagonist knows a lot about Gothic conventions and finds them ridiculous, he is also posing as a fearless hero so typical for popular fiction:

I am prepared to assert that if a thing with flashing green eyes, and clammy hands, and long, dripping strips of sea-weed in place of hair, should rise up out of the floor before me at this moment, 2 A.M., and nobody in the house but myself, with a fearful, nerve-destroying storm raging outside, I should without hesitation ask it to sit down and light a cigar and state its business or, if it were of the female persuasion, to join me in a bottle of sarsaparilla although every physical manifestation of fear of which my poor body is capable would be present [2, P. 2].

And, no wonder, the narrator supposes the reader won't believe him but nevertheless he is willing to tell the story – this is a hint at the theme of verisimilitude essential for classic ghost stories.

Contacts with the ghosts are shown here using the genre totally alien to European tradition – an American yarn resembling Mark Twain's early stories, full of grotesque material details. The theme belongs to one genre, the form – to the other, so this is not even a parody as such but an ironic look at another culture.

The story *Exorcism that Failed* [2, P. 57-108] (also destroying the structure of a typical ghost story) pokes fun at the conventions with its very title. Pacifying an insolent ghost turns into a long epic full of characteristically Bangsian features: a ghost possesses certain physical characteristics and uncommonly bad temper (so that it is not terrifying but merely annoying, like an unpleasant neighbour, for instance), and the approach to exorcism is absolutely businesslike, the protagonist writes advertisements for local newspapers asking for help: this is not a triumph of ratio but rather a satire on the commercialized relations with the supernatural so typical for the era.

The latter aspect is also important in *Thurlow's Christmas Story* [2, P. 109-139], a very paradoxical story. Thurlow appears in many stories of the collection, he is a professional writer who sells ghost stories to a magazine. But now he has to write an explanatory letter to the editor: he has not been able to prepare the next installment exactly because of meeting a real ghost. The story is full of tropes playfully used – a doppelganger (or, a ghostly double of the protagonist, like in E. T. A. Hoffmann's and E. A. Poe's tales), Faustian themes (a contract with the devil – though here not Thurlow's soul or eternal youth is at stake but merely his job) etc.; a demonic guest provides the writer with a so much needed story, but then the papers appear to be clean.

The comic point is the editor's reply:

Your explanation has come to hand. As an explanation it isn't worth the paper it is written on, but we are all agreed here that it is probably the best bit of fiction you ever wrote. It is accepted for the Christmas issue. Enclosed please find check for one hundred dollars [2, P. 139].

So the explanatory note turns into a Christmas ghost story, 'fiction' is bizarrely mixed with 'reality', and yes, Bangs never forgets about business interactions – the reader learns even the exact sum which Thurlow is supposed to get for his work.

The Dampere Mystery [2, P. 140-152] is not so complex, this is just a parody poking fun at Gothic tropes; but the ending is ambiguous, and the narrator desperately exclaims:

If any of my readers can furnish a solution, I wish they would do so, for I am very much interested in the case, and I truly hate to leave a story of this kind in so unsatisfactory a condition [2, P. 152].

Clearly this statement breaks the law of dubious explanation so important for 'serious' ghost stories. We do not have to face a terrible mystery, the story is presented as a blatant fiction and looks as if the author just couldn't invent a decent ending and has to ask the reader for help.

The final story of the book is uncharacteristically serious (the strategy we remember from the previous collection): *Carleton Barker, First and Second* [2, P. 153-191] is not humorous at all, it is a typical ghost story about doppelgangers. Bangs provides us here with an example of the genre he so often parodied, possibly trying 'to make it serious' or providing a background for the other texts in the collection.

Conclusion

If we regard both collections we can state that ghost stories by Bangs are mostly parodies lying outside the genre's limits for in them he consciously and consistently violates the genre's structure and epistemological premises. Partly this is how an American writer reacts at European tradition, but Bangs is clearly too much interested in the genre to write mere parodies, and his books of ghost stories are complex reflections on it. They can be seen as an interesting evidence of how ghost story was perceived in the era when it was highly popular but was also undergoing certain complex transformations.

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Не указан.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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