

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.18454/RULB.2020.23.3.32>**О НЕНАЗЫВАЕМОМ. ПОЭТИКА УМОЛЧАНИЯ В БРИТАНСКОЙ ГОТИЧЕСКОЙ НОВЕЛЛЕ**

Научная статья

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Аннотация

Для готической новеллы (она же — ghost story) в высшей степени характерны разнообразные фигуры умолчания — смутные неполные описания, лакуны в сюжете, когда читатель может только догадываться о сути происходящего, и, самое простое, формулировки типа «слишком страшно, чтобы это можно было описать». Подобная «недостаточность» информации работает на построение мира, в котором возможно нечто радикально отличное от повседневного опыта, то, для чего буквально не находится слов. Даже если автор что-то не договаривает отчасти из пуританских убеждений, суть от этого не меняется: история совершенно фиктивна (и уже потому динамика «озвучивания» и «умолчания» в ней иная, чем в документальном нарративе), и она приглашает читателя пережить нечто жуткое, непривычное и манящее. Вероятно, умолчание, наряду с неопределенностью интерпретации, можно считать одной из особенностей жанра готической новеллы.

Ключевые слова: готическая новелла, умолчание, повествовательные инстанции.

UNNAMEABLE THINGS. THE POETICS OF OMISSION IN BRITISH GHOST STORIES

Research article

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Abstract

British ghost stories are full of various omissions: vague and incomplete descriptions, ‘gaps’ in the plot when the reader can only guess what is going on, and all kinds of formulae like ‘too frightful to be described’. These instances of ‘incomplete’ information help to create a fictional world where can happen something so far from what we are used to that is virtually ‘unspeakable’. Even if the author is unwilling to describe something for the reasons of decency it does not change the whole picture: here is a pure fiction (and thus the dynamics of omissions is here not the same as in a document) which invites the reader to use his or her imagination and experience something that is both terrible and tantalizing. We have very good reasons to regard those omissions, as well as indefinite interpretation, as one of the staples of classic ghost stories.

Keywords: ghost story, omission, narrative instances.

Introduction

British ghost stories are full of various omissions [11, P. 13-14], [8, P. XXIX]: vague and incomplete descriptions, ‘gaps’ in the plot when the reader can only guess what is going on, and all kinds of formulae like ‘too frightful to be described’. While contemporary readers are used to graphic details, those texts created more than a century ago show a totally different approach. The following article is an attempt to understand how those omissions work and why they are so important for the genre.

Actually certain obscurity is essential for ghost stories, tales in which the line dividing the present from the past [7, P. 27-28], the natural from the supernatural [2, P. 82], [13, P. 97] is crossed and ghosts (and other kinds of strange creatures) enter the world of modern rationality. This tradition flourished in the age both of unparalleled scientific progress and of fashion for occultism [8, P. XIX-XX]. The stories were supposed to frighten the readers, but they were basically a kind of entertainment taken *cum grano salis*, so often it is impossible to say for sure if the events described are real (within the story’s universe) or not [2, P. 82].

Discussion

There existed a peculiar branch of the genre, the so-called antiquarian ghost stories – by M. R. James [6], A. Gray [3] and other authors who widely used their (often professional) knowledge of history and languages to recreate the atmosphere of the past, to involve their characters in research activities and to imitate ancient manuscripts, often tantalizingly incomplete. The process of ‘filling in the gaps’, of reconstructing the omitted information makes various interpretations possible, some of them sinister and implying the supernatural, at the same time retaining the illusion of documentary realism: such are the semi-anonymous ghost stories published under the initials B. and D. N. J. in Cambridge [4].

But there are a lot more varieties of omission in ghost stories, many of them based on one fundamental feature not only of this particular genre but of Gothic fiction in general. Gothic is all about transgressions [5, P. 3], [8, P. XII], about things radically different from what we regard as normal in all senses of the word. H. P. Lovecraft, for instance, is known for his vague descriptions, and the reason is quite obvious: he shows The Other as something resembling humans and other existing forms of life as little as possible, so that it virtually cannot be described (cf. Lovecraft’s story with a very characteristic

title, *The Unnamable*, 1925 [9, P. 274-280]). Moreover, some authors regard even traditional ghosts as literally unspeakable, a gap in the tissue of reality [12, P. 7].

Another famous example, though quite differently explained, is A. Machen's *The Great God Pan* (1894) [10, P. 931-999] – what the beautiful Helen Vaughan did to men who then went mad and committed suicide is not actually described, only vaguely hinted at, though the context suggests some kind of sexual transgression [2, P. 93], so the reader is free to imagine details according to his or her own depravity. Machen does not provide us with graphic details, perhaps because of his puritanism, but he makes us *think* of what Helen could have done.

A similar device is used by Machen in *The Bright Boy* (1936) [10, P. 1812-1847] where a rape is clearly implied though not mentioned directly ('vilely misused' [10, P. 1838-1839], 'shamefully maltreated' [10, P. 1839] etc.). Other crimes of the protagonist are represented in the same way; here is a very characteristic quotation:

This last crime—which the Press had to enfold in paraphrase and periphrase... [10, P. 1846]

That is, the character did something improper, so improper that it cannot even be mentioned in polite society. Machen does something simple and at the same time paradoxical: the very refusal to name the unnameable is a hint at what it actually is, so the reader is again free to imagine the lurid details, and as a result the omission does not make the text more decent, it works better than an exact description – the crime is fictional, and the reader's fantasy is not limited even by true facts.

Thus omissions are, first of all, a way of interaction with the reader. An interesting version, with a touch of parody, can be found in *An Evening Entertainment* (1925) [6, P. 328-337] by M. R. James where this interaction is modelled directly within the text. A grandmother wants to tell her grandchildren why they must not pick blackberries in a certain place. She begins with a long preface: she doesn't exactly remember what is wrong with the place, it was so long ago and she herself heard the story from another people and only in fragments. This is not omission as such but a skillful retardation by a master storyteller (James wrote mostly antiquarian stories), but then incompleteness permeates the grandmother's tale – and there is a very simple reason behind it: not much is known about the mysterious Mr. Davies, whose dabbling with occultism made this place dangerous, he was extremely secretive and some of his actions were seen by the locals as white spots – so strange and unreasonable they looked:

And one day he came back from market, and brought a young man with him; and this young man and he lived together for some long time, and went about together, and whether he just did the work of the house for Mr. Davis, or whether Mr. Davis was his teacher in some way, nobody seemed to know. I've heard he was a pale, ugly young fellow and hadn't much to say for himself. Well, now, what did those two men do with themselves? Of course I can't tell you half the foolish things that the people got into their heads, and we know, don't we, that you mustn't speak evil when you aren't sure it's true, even when people are dead and gone. [6, P. 330]

Local people did not understand why the young man appeared in Mr. Davis's house and, unsurprisingly, tried to interpret the fact, not excluding 'improper' relationship between the two men. The grandmother says she heard all that gossip but does not want to retell it – the information is incomplete and definitely not suitable for children. Another topic, the occult, is also based on mere hypotheses, but it is, so to say, more acceptable and thus mentioned in much more direct terms. James plays a complex game with different levels of credibility and acceptability, and both the fictional 'grandchildren' and the reader are engaged in wandering around the imaginary world where nothing is certain. But the writer never forgets that the story also satirizes dull didactic books for children – and in the end the grandmother reminds the kids that all this burst of dark fantasy is meant... to prevent them from picking blackberries in certain places, but the contrast makes the multi-levelled play with the incompleteness even more impressive.

In his 'serious' ghost stories James also widely uses a variety of omissions – mostly with no sexual implications, they are either 'gaps' in the sources (that very device so typical for antiquarian Gothic) or incomplete descriptions of frightening creatures. Professor Parkins in *Oh Whistle, and I'll Come to you, my Lad* (1904) [6, P. 75-91] encounters a ghost radically different from the traditional shrouded figures or skeletons – it is a heap of crumpled linen with a semblance of face. The reader learns about the event from the narrator who knows Parkins, so there are two intermediaries between the event and the reader. Here is an important extract:

Parkins, who very much dislikes being questioned about it, did once describe something of it in my hearing, and I gathered that what he chiefly remembers about it is horrible, an intensely horrible, face of crumpled linen. What expression he read upon it he could not or would not tell, but that the fear of it went nigh to maddening him is certain. [6, P. 90]

So the narrator is presumably a trusted friend and he honestly tells everything he knows, but Parkins himself, traumatized by the event, is unwilling to tell, and he has not fully understood what happened, thus he is totally unable to provide an exact description complete with explanation. The situation is typical for ghost story as a genre: something inexplicable enters 'our' world, and the story is structured so that there is no final explanation – there could be some kind of illusion or mistake, or a curious but natural phenomenon, but none of these possibilities is enough. Cognitive 'gaps' in James's story are meant to generate the characteristic atmosphere of frightening mystery, but they are also psychologically motivated: no one knows the whole truth, and the only firsthand witness is too traumatized and confused to provide a coherent version. The presence of the narrator helps to enhance the effect of verisimilitude but does not fill in the gaps and does not help to solve the mystery.

And, finally, some examples from ghost stories by another master of the genre, E. F. Benson. *The Man Who Went Too Far* (1904) [1, P. 105-122] can be regarded as a catalogue of fin-de-siècle Gothic themes, a characteristically self-reflexive text emphasizing its own structure and presenting a 'catalogue' of standard themes and devices. For instance, the narrator states that what he tells is a mere reconstruction based on various sources:

So, such as the story is, I have set it forth in connected form. It is based partly on the accounts of the villagers, but mainly on that of Darcy, a friend of mine and a friend of the man with whom these events were chiefly concerned. [1, P. 106]

The story itself is detailed and coherent, though its coherence is an illusion, actually there is no clear explanation of what happened to Frank – it could be just anything, from a supernatural encounter to psychosomatic problems caused by

overindulgence in occult practices. So omission here is not explicit, but it is taken into consideration by the reader who knows 'the rules of the game'.

Another version can be seen in Benson's *The Temple* (1924) [1, P. 451-464]. Two friends, clearly well educated, are used to discussing ancient buildings and cults within the scholarly discourse, so when they encounter mysterious beings in a historical place they don't know in what terms to describe their experience, they even cannot choose between singular (it) and plural (they) number:

I vote we go up there, and see who these nightly wanderers are. It's coming closer, and there's another of them. [1, P. 460]

The reader here almost peers into the darkness together with the protagonists, feeling confused and terrified by those unseen presences. In the same story we see other varieties of omission, e. g. when the cook and her daughter refuse to stay overnight in spite of bad weather, they leave the house without explaining the reason (but then we guess they had known about dangerous supernatural phenomena), and the clerks are unwilling to tell why the previous owner of the house died. The narrator guesses these two facts are interconnected, finds as much information as possible and... promises not to tell anyone, and he actually does not want to tell his friend – the same friend who a bit later is almost killed exactly because he does not know about terrifying events that took place in the house. This is what the narrator thinks after a conversation with the real estate agent:

I knew now what the source of my nameless horror and depression had been. It was no haunting spectre of Townwick that I feared; it was the power, whatever that was, which had driven him to kill himself on the stone of sacrifice. [1, P. 462]

The dynamics of knowledge and ignorance is complex and interesting: the character now sees the ghost of the owner is *not* what should be feared, but this is a vague and terrifying knowledge, for it poses a lot more problems than it solves. The story is told so that gaps (implying something inexplicable or too scary to face) appear and then give way to another gaps thus building the tension and increasing suspense, and some details stay unexplained (the exact nature of the mysterious presences in the house).

Conclusion

Now let us draw a conclusion. Different kinds of omission are so widely used in British ghost stories that they can be regarded as one of the characteristic features of the genre. They work through the interaction between the characters, the narrator and the reader – various narrative instances are associated with different degree of comprehension, the reader gets incomplete information or is reminded directly that the story is a mere reconstruction based on fragmented sources. This is directly linked to the idea of indefinite interpretations so characteristic for ghost stories. Another function of omission is connected with the problem of transgression: either the narrator teases the reader with 'unspeakable' possibilities, terrifying or obscene (and the reader's imagination is activated), or the story is about something so far from the reader's everyday experience that it becomes literally indescribable.

So various omissions, refusals to describe and 'incomplete' information help to create a fictional world where can happen something so far removed from what we are used to that is virtually 'unspeakable'. Even if the author, e. g. A. Machen, is unwilling to describe something for the reasons of decency it does not change the whole picture: here is a pure fiction (and thus the dynamics of omissions is here not the same as in a document) which invites the reader to use his or her imagination and experience something that is both terrible and tantalizing. We have very good reasons to regard those omissions, as well as indefinite interpretation, as one of the staples of classic ghost stories.

Конфликт интересов

Не указан.

Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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