

Sheridan Le Fanu

From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

(August 28,
1814 –
February 7,
1873) was an
Irish writer
of Gothic
tales and
mystery
novels. He
was the
premier
ghost story

writer of the nineteenth century and had a
seminal influence on the development of this
genre in the Victorian era.



Sheridan Le Fanu

Contents

- 1 Biography
- 2 His work
 - 2.1 The Purcell Papers
 - 2.2 Spalatro
 - 2.3 Historical fiction
 - 2.4 Sensation novels
 - 2.5 Major works
 - 2.6 Other short-story collections
- 3 Further reading
- 4 See also
- 5 External links

Biography

Sheridan Le Fanu was born at No. 45 Lower Dominick Street, Dublin, into a literary family of Huguenot origins. Both his grandmother Alicia Sheridan Le Fanu and his great-uncle Richard Brinsley Sheridan were playwrights. His niece Rhoda Broughton would become a very successful novelist. Within a year of his birth his family moved to the Royal Hibernian Military School in Phoenix Park, where his father, an Anglican clergyman, was the chaplain of the establishment. Phoenix Park and the adjacent village and parish church of Chapelizod were to

feature in Le Fanu's later stories.

Le Fanu studied law at Trinity College in Dublin, where he was elected Auditor of the College Historical Society. He was called to the bar in 1839, but he never practised and soon abandoned law for journalism. In 1838 he began contributing stories to the *Dublin University Magazine*, including his first ghost story, entitled "A Strange Event in the Life of Schalken the Painter" (1839). He became owner of several newspapers from 1840, including the *Dublin Evening Mail* and the *Warder*.

In 1844 Le Fanu married Susanna Bennett, the daughter of a leading Dublin barrister. In 1847 he supported John Mitchell and Thomas Meagher in their campaign against the indifference of the Government to the Irish Famine. His support cost him the nomination as Tory MP for County Carlow in 1852. His personal life also became difficult at this time, as his wife Susanna suffered from increasing neurotic symptoms. She died in 1858 in unclear circumstances, and anguished excerpts from Le Fanu's diaries suggest that he felt guilt as well as loss. However, it was only after her death that, becoming something of a

recluse, he devoted himself full time to writing.

In 1861 he became the editor and proprietor of the *Dublin University Magazine* and he began exploiting double exposure: serializing in the *Dublin University Magazine* and then revising for the English market. *The House by the Churchyard* and *Wylder's Hand* were both published in this way. After the lukewarm reviews of the former novel, set in the Phoenix Park area of Dublin, Le Fanu signed a contract with Richard Bentley, his London publisher, which specified that future novels be stories "of an English subject and of modern times", a step Bentley thought necessary in order for Le Fanu to satisfy the English audience. Le Fanu succeeded in this aim in 1864, with the publication of *Uncle Silas*, which he set in Derbyshire. In his very last short stories, however, Le Fanu returned to Irish folklore as an inspiration and encouraged his friend Patrick Kennedy to contribute folklore to the *D.U.M.* Le Fanu died in his native Dublin on February 7, 1873. Today there is a road in Ballyfermot, near his childhood home in south-west Dublin, named after him.

His work

Le Fanu worked in many genres but remains best known for his mystery and horror fiction. He was a meticulous craftsman, with a penchant for frequently reworking plots and ideas from his earlier writing in subsequent pieces of writing. (Many of his novels are expansions and refinements of earlier short stories). He specialised in tone and effect rather than "shock horror", often following a mystery format. Key to his style was the avoidance of overt supernatural effects: in most of his major works, the supernatural is strongly implied but a possible "natural" explanation is left (barely) open—for instance, the demonic monkey in "Green Tea" could be a delusion of the story's protagonist, who is the only person to see it; in "The Familiar", Captain Barton's death seems to be of supernatural causes, but is not actually witnessed, and the ghostly owl may just be a real bird. This approach has proven important for later horror writers and also for other media (it is surely an antecedent to the film producer Val Lewton's principle of indirect horror). Though other

writers have since chosen blunter approaches to supernatural fiction, Le Fanu's best tales, such as the vampire novella "Carmilla", remain some of the most chilling examples of the genre. Considering the influence of his work—including his enormous influence on the 20th century's most important ghost story writer, M. R. James—it is surprising that Le Fanu is not better appreciated.

The Purcell Papers

His earliest twelve short stories, written between 1838 and 1840 purport to be the literary remains of an 18th-century Catholic priest called Father Purcell. They were published in the *Dublin University Magazine* and were later collected as *The Purcell Papers* (1880). They are mostly set in Ireland and include some classic stories of gothic horror, featuring gloomy castles, supernatural visitations from beyond the grave, madness and suicide. Also apparent is an elegiac political dimension concerning the dispossession of the former Catholic aristocracy of Ireland, whose ruined castles stand as mute witness to this history. The stories include some widely

anthologised pieces:

- "The Ghost and the Bonesetter" (1838), his first published story, in a jocular vein.
- "The Fortunes of Sir Robert Ardagh" (1838), an enigmatic story involving a Faustian pact, set in the gothic surroundings of a castle in rural Ireland.
- "The Last Heir of Castle Connor" (1838), a non-supernatural tale, symbolic of the decline and expropriation of the ancient Catholic gentry of Ireland under the Protestant Ascendancy.
- "The Drunkard's Dream" (1838), of Hell.
- "Strange Event in the Life of Schalken the Painter" (1839), a disturbing story of a revenant coming back from beyond the grave to claim his bride: the old folkloric motif of the demon lover. This tale takes its inspiration from the atmospheric candlelit scenes of the 17th-century Dutch painter Godfried Schalcken, who is the hero of the story. It was adapted and broadcast for television by the BBC for Christmas 1979.[1].
- "Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess" (1839), an early version of his later novel *Uncle Silas*.

- "A Chapter in the History of a Tyrone Family" (1839), which may have influenced Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. This story was later reworked and expanded by Le Fanu as *The Wyvern Mystery* (1869).

Revised versions of "Irish Countess" and "Schalken" were reprinted in Le Fanu's first collection of short stories, the very rare *Ghost Stories and Tales of Mystery* (1851).

Spalatro

An anonymous novella *Spalatro: from the notes of Fra Giacomo* published in the *D.U.M.* in 1843 was added to the Le Fanu canon as late as 1980, being recognised as being by Le Fanu by W.J. McCormack in his biography of that year. *Spalatro* has a typically Gothic period Italian setting, featuring a bandit as hero, in the mode of Anne Radcliffe. More disturbing, however, is the hero Spalatro's necrophiliac passion for an undead blood-drinking beauty, who seems to be a predecessor of Le Fanu's later female vampire Carmilla. Like Carmilla this undead femme fatale is not portrayed in an entirely negative light and

attempts, but fails, to save the hero Spalatro from the eternal damnation which seems to be his destiny.

Historical fiction

Le Fanu's first novels were historical, in the mode of Sir Walter Scott, though with an Irish background. Like Scott, Le Fanu gave a sympathetic account of the old Jacobite cause:

- *The Cock and Anchor* (1845), a story of old Dublin. It was reissued with slight alterations as *Morley Court* in 1873.
- *The Fortunes of Colonel Torlogh O'Brien* (1847).
- *The House by the Churchyard* (1863), the last of Le Fanu's novels to be set in the past and, as mentioned above, the last with an Irish setting. It is noteworthy that here Le Fanu's historical mode is blended with his later Gothic mode, influenced by his reading of the classic writers of that genre, such as Anne Radcliffe. This novel was later an important source for Joyce's *Finnegans Wake* and is set in Chapelizod, where Le Fanu lived in his youth.

Sensation novels

Le Fanu published many novels in the contemporary sensation fiction mode of Wilkie Collins and others:

- *Wylder's Hand* (1864).
- *Guy Deverell* (1865).
- *All in the Dark* (1866), satirising spiritualism.
- *The Tenants of Malory* (1867).
- *A Lost Name* (1868).
- *Haunted Lives* (1868).
- *The Wyvern Mystery* (1869).
- *Checkmate* (1871).
- *The Rose and the Key* (1871), which describes the horrors of the private lunatic asylum, a classic gothic trope.
- *Willing to Die* (1872).

Major works

His best-known works, still widely read today, are:

- *Uncle Silas*

(1864), a macabre mystery novel and classic of gothic horror. It is a much extended adaptation of his earlier short



The seductive vampire Carmilla attacks the sleeping Laura.

story "Passage in the Secret History of an Irish Countess", with the locale switched from Ireland to England. A film version of the same name was made by Gainsborough Studios in 1947, and a remake entitled *The Dark Angel*, starring Peter O'Toole as the title character, was made in 1987.

- *In a Glass Darkly* (1872), a collection of five short stories in the horror and mystery genres, presented as the posthumous papers of the psychic investigator Dr Hesselius:
 - "Green Tea"
 - "The Familiar"

- "Mr Justice Harbottle" (perhaps better known in its earlier, very different version, "An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street")
- "The Room in the Dragon Volant", not a ghost story but a notable mystery story that includes the theme of premature burial
- "Carmilla", a compelling tale of a lesbian vampire, set in darkest central Europe. This story was to greatly influence Bram Stoker in the writing of *Dracula*. It also served as the basis for several films, including Hammer's *The Vampire Lovers* (1970) and Danish director Carl Theodor Dreyer's *Vampyr* (1932).

Other short-story collections

- *Chronicles of Golden Friars* (1871), a collection of short stories set in the imaginary English village of Golden Friars, including:
 - "A Strange Adventure in the Life of Miss Laura Mildmay", within which

is incorporated the story "Madam Crowl's Ghost".

- "The Haunted Baronet", a novella.
- "The Bird of Passage".

- *The Watcher and Other Weird Stories* (1894), another collection of short stories, published posthumously.
- *Madam Crowl's Ghost and Other Tales of Mystery* (1923), uncollected short stories gathered from their original magazine publications and edited by M. R. James:
 - "Madam Crowl's Ghost", from *All the Year Round*, December 1870.
 - "Squire Toby's Will", from *Temple Bar*, January 1868.
 - "Dickon the Devil", from *London Society*, Christmas Number, 1872.
 - "The Child That Went with the Fairies", from *All the Year Round*, February 1870.
 - "The White Cat of Drumgunniol", from *All the Year Round*, April 1870.
 - "An Account of Some Strange Disturbances in Aungier Street", from the *Dublin University*

- *Magazine*, January 1851.
- "Ghost Stories of Chapelizod", from the *Dublin University Magazine*, January 1851.
- "Wicked Captain Walshawe, of Wauling", from the *Dublin University Magazine*, April 1864.
- "Sir Dominick's Bargain", from *All the Year Round*, July 1872.
- "Ultor de Lacy", from the *Dublin University Magazine*, December 1861.
- "The Vision of Tom Chuff", from *All the Year Round*, October 1870.
- "Stories of Lough Guir", from *All the Year Round*, April 1870.

The publication of this book, which has often been reprinted, led to the revival in interest in Le Fanu, which has continued to this day.

Further reading

There is an extensive critical analysis of Le Fanu's supernatural stories (particularly "Green Tea", "Schalken the Painter" and "Carmilla") in

Jack Sullivan's book *Elegant Nightmares: The English Ghost Story From Le Fanu to Blackwood* (1978). Other books on Le Fanu include *Wilkie Collins, Le Fanu and Others* (1931) by S. M. Ellis, *Sheridan Le Fanu* (1951) by Nelson Browne, *Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu* (1971) by Michael H. Begnal, *Sheridan Le Fanu* (third edition, 1997) by W. J. McCormack and *Vision and Vacancy: The Fictions of J. S. Le Fanu* (2007) by James Walton. Le Fanu, his works, and his family background are explored in Gavin Selerie's mixed prose/verse text *Le Fanu's Ghost* (2006).

See also

- List of horror fiction authors

External links

- E-texts of many Le Fanu stories and information on his life
- Sheridan Le Fanu database
- Complete text of *Carmilla*
- Complete text of *Strange Event in the Life of Schalken the Painter*

- Works by Sheridan Le Fanu at Project Gutenberg
- A talk by M. R. James on LeFanu
- Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies

Retrieved from

"http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sheridan_Le_Fanu"

Categories: 1814 births | 1873 deaths | Burials at Mount Jerome Cemetery | People from County Dublin | Irish horror writers | Irish novelists | Irish short story writers | Irish mystery writers | People associated with Trinity College, Dublin | People from Dublin | Irish Anglicans

- This page was last modified 10:10, 15 July 2007.
- All text is available under the terms of the GNU Free Documentation License. (See **Copyrights** for details.)
Wikipedia® is a registered trademark of the Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., a US-registered 501(c)(3) tax-deductible nonprofit charity.