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The Double and the Uncanny in
The Great God Pan

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There are, of course, some interpretations that are more justified than others, but none can assert itself as the only right one.

Tzvetan Todorov

Abstract

Since its first publication in 1890, *The Great God Pan* has been considered a masterpiece of Gothic literature, and its author, Arthur Machen, widely accepted as a foundational figure in the development of modern horror fiction. Born in Caerleon-on-Usk, Monmouthshire, Machen spent his childhood and adolescence surrounded by astonishing landscapes, to which he claims owing “anything which I may have accomplished in literature”¹. From his Celt background, characterized by folkloristic traditions and legends connected both to Wales’s history and landscape, Machen inherited a natural inclination towards the realm of the supernatural which emerges as a recurrent feature throughout his literature. Wales is present in *The Great God Pan* with its awe-inspiring landscapes and its Roman historical background, providing the perfect setting for uncanny supernatural occurrences. Machen’s novella, however, not only is permeated by images of the Welsh valleys and forests. As a matter of fact, another place figures prominently in the tale, namely the city of London, or – as the narrator calls it – the “City of Resurrections”. Machen first encounter with London occurred at the age of 18, as he was sent to the capital by his family in order to train as a surgeon² – a career he immediately abandoned, also thanks to the success he earned with the publication of *The Great God Pan* – albeit his fondness for the life of the metropolis had already sparked some years earlier, in his adolescence, when he would devour the few London’s newspapers he could fetch in his native town. The first chapter of this dissertation will provide an overview of the way in which Celtic themes and images of the *fin-de-siècle* centre of the Empire coalesce in Machen’s writing in an uncanny brew of archaicity and modernity.

The Great God Pan is widely recognized as a Gothic tale written in a Decadent manner. The Gothic literary tradition finds its origin in late eighteenth century, as a subgenre of fantastic literature, when a fashion for Gothic architectures and medieval settings sparked a new interest for Gothic stories as well. Permeated by symbols of arbitrary power and patriarchal oppression, Gothic tales in origin were populated by damsels in distress and scenes of passion. From the middle of nineteenth century, a turn occurred in Gothic literary taste. Terror, which formerly had dwelt in dark dungeons and supernatural occurrences, came to be set in the human mind. The Gothic remains nowadays a popular genre, allowing readers to undergo a cathartic

¹ A. Machen, *Far Off Things*, New York, 1922, 8

² F. Taylor, *Welsh Mythology & Folklore in the Novels of Arthur Machen*, John Cowper Powys & Alan Garner, St Hugh’s College University of Oxford, 2021, 6

experience, giving way to negative and repressed emotions in the safe environment of an aesthetic work of fiction. Machen's Gothic develops from the second wave of the tradition, albeit approaching traditional features in an unconventional manner and advancing innovative visions of long-established tropes. After tracing a history of Gothic literature, the second chapter will linger on two particular features of this specific kind of literature, namely the Double and the Uncanny, and on their treatment in *The Great God Pan* in order to convey particular meanings which differ from traditional tropes of the Gothic mode.

Technological advancements and positivism, while changing 19th century Britain's way of living, also sparked a new interest in science. Darwinian theories paved the way to a new conception and understanding of the human individual. It was a period of change also for what the figure of the woman was concerned. After the Industrial revolution, women had entered the chain of production and started working in factories, playing an active role in the economic life of the country. A new self-awareness for what their role in society was concerned led women to the organization of the first movements to gain the right to vote and to challenging the strict codes in which they had been confined during the previous centuries. Such codes encompassed normative definitions of gender roles, among which the generally established stereotype of the virtuous woman was included. Propagated by much Victorian literature and resumed by 1854 poem entitled "The angel in the house" written by Coventry Patmore, the ideal of the proper Victorian woman was that of a patient, sacrificing, self-abnegating wife. Machen's *The Great God Pan* arguably provides an alternative vision of female sexuality while portraying the struggle women not adhering to normative standards of behaviour had to face in the second half of 19th century. The third chapter will support this interpretation through an analysis of the relationship between the two women in the tale – Mary and Helen – and their male counterparts, namely the gentlemen of Victorian London.

Introduction

In 1927 H. P. Lovecraft composed a long essay entitled *Supernatural Horror in Literature*. In this critical work he defined Arthur Machen's 1890 novella *The Great God Pan* as a "weird tale"³ and established Machen as one of the modern masters of the weird form⁴. The epithet "weird" explicitly occurs in other writings of the period contemporary to Machen, namely *The Time Machine*, written by Wells and published the same year as Machen's tale⁵. Edgar Allan Poe similarly endeavoured in his novels to evoke atmospheres he explicitly defined as "weird"⁶. The weird tale emerged as part of the Gothic mode⁷, albeit it is not to be considered as a continuation of the late Victorian Gothic revival, but rather as a mutation of it⁸. The weird is a hybrid mode which cannot be tied to a fixed typology of writing as it continually slips category⁹. In his celebrated 1927 survey, Lovecraft explicitly resists crystallising weird fiction into a genre proper identifiable through any specific tropes and structures¹⁰. As a matter of fact, he states that weird tales cannot be expected to conform absolutely to any theoretical model¹¹. As the critic said, a weird tale must be judged

not by the author's intent, or by the mere mechanics of the plot, but by the emotional level which it attains at its least mundane point. If the proper sensations are excited, it must be admitted as weird literature, no matter how prosaically it is dragged down throughout the rest of the story¹².

A mode rather than a genre, the term "mode" in a literary context suggesting a broad but identifiable kind of literary method, mood or manner that is not tied exclusively to a particular form or genre. The weird is neither a belief nor a model, but rather a mood or an attitude, and a way of entertaining incongruous experiences, in which judgement is suspended¹³. The weird means 'suggestive of the supernatural, and of a mysterious or unearthly character' but it also carries the sense of 'out of the ordinary, strange, unusual, hence odd, fantastic'¹⁴. The weird is

³ H. P. Lovecraft, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, New York, Dover, 1973, 427

⁴ R. Luckhurst, *The weird: a dis/orientation*, Routledge, 2017, 1043

⁵ Ibidem

⁶ Ibidem

⁷ Taylor, 7

⁸ Luckhurst, 1043

⁹ Ibidem

¹⁰ J. Machin, *Weird Fiction and the Virtues of Obscurity: Machen, Stenbock, and the Weird Connoisseurs*, Forum for Modern Language Studies, 2020, 1067

¹¹ Ibidem

¹² Ibidem

¹³ Luckhurst, 1045

¹⁴ Luckhurst, 1049

a labyrinthine mode rather than an easily definable genre, veering away from familiar frames and binary assumptions¹⁵. The weird is associated with the uncanny, which Freud defines in his essay as “that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar”¹⁶. But while the uncanny is a series of displacements that always leads back to the familiar, the weird does not return to something familiar but repressed. The unease evoked by the weird is linked to shapes and entities outside of the known universe. The very agency behind the events is uncertain, its status being unresolved. The very question whether there actually is an agency persists. And the following question which arises spontaneously is, if there is, is it malign?¹⁷ The weird is an open, dynamic, undetermined set of possibilities. Waywardness is another characteristic of the weird tale¹⁸. Weird fiction expands beyond the expected orbit of writers defined as Gothic authors, hence novelists as Walter de la Mare and Daphne du Maurier can be considered equally to veer across the weird terrain, precisely for the way they slide in and out of generic conventions¹⁹. The weird, never having been considered as a genre, and since it is accepted as a generally slippery mode, represents an intrinsically problematic subject for critical discourse²⁰.

The weird has strong associations with the French Decadent movement and English Aestheticism. As well as Decadentism and Aestheticism, the weird can be seen as part of the reaction to the new late nineteenth century society, a society increasingly characterized, thanks to the scientific progress which involved all areas of human knowledge, and the influence of authors like George Eliot and Charles Dickens, by a general positivistic attitude and a stout belief in utilitarian philosophy, resulting in the mass circulation and commerce of utilitarian literature. Opposite to this kind of mass culture and literature, the weird, as well as Aesthetic literature in general, seeks elaborate, difficult prose, and transgressive or deceptive content.

It is a daring formal rendition of perversity, understood as a twisting away from heteronormative assumptions²¹. The weird can be then considered as a place for potentially radical disarticulations and reformulations of traditional binaries, and, as a matter of fact, the signature of weird fiction is not the vampire or the zombie, to cite few examples of minimal allegorical displacement of human nature, but the tentacle, a limb-tongue suggestive of absolute

¹⁵ Luckhurst, 1052

¹⁶ Ibidem

¹⁷ Ibidem

¹⁸ Luckhurst, 1050

¹⁹ Ibidem

²⁰ Machin, 1064

²¹ Luckhurst, 1051

alterity²². Weird fiction explicitly forbids the use of ‘stock anthropomorphic monsters’ and values originality and subtlety over the standard tropes of the Gothic and horror genres²³. The weird is also a place in which a particular suspension occurs of those fixed laws of nature which are a common safeguard against the assaults of chaos²⁴.

Chaos is what the characters of Arthur Machen’s 1890 tale *The Great God Pan* experience in an apparently ordinary universe which is suddenly subverted by the intrusion of a mythical force from another world. The opening chapter begins with the description of a terrifying experiment carried out on the brain of a young girl named Mary. Dr Raymond has decided to perform a surgical operation on the young girl’s brain with the purpose of enabling her to see “the great god Pan”, an expression which is evocative of the decadent imperative of lifting the veil which divides material reality from transcendental reality. The depiction of Raymond as a mad scientist, alongside with the vivid description of the circumstances under which the experiment is carried out, confers a powerful Gothic aura to the tale from its very beginning. The experiment, to which Raymond’s friend Clarke is a witness, goes terribly wrong and Mary is severely and permanently injured. Several years later, Clarke comes to knowledge of a series of strange happenings in the Welsh countryside, all concerning a young girl named Helen Vaughan. Meanwhile in London a friend of Clarke, Villiers, makes a strange encounter with an old friend who claims having been ruined by the woman he married. A series of suicides committed by respectable and lively gentlemen in the capital upsets the main characters, who decide to investigate. Their main suspect is Mrs. Beaumont, a mysterious and fascinating woman whose acquaintance was common to all the victims, whom however neither Villiers nor Clarke have actually ever met. After finding a portrait of the woman among one of her victims’ belongings, Clarke recognizes Mary’s face in hers. The gentlemen’s suspicion of a kinship of the woman with the supernatural is eventually confirmed in the final scene, in which the woman undergoes a heinous transformation. In the epilogue, an epistolary passage by the pen of Dr Raymond, explains that Helen V. was the daughter of Mary, who had got pregnant during the experiment of many years earlier.

The weird climax, in the final scene of *The Great God Pan*, is rendered by means of a truly Darwinian traumatism, and materialist, biological terror embodied by the figure of a woman who wavers from sex to sex in a horrifying shapeshifting transformation:

²² Lockhurst, 1054

²³ Machin, 1065

²⁴ J. Mydla, “A City of Resurrections” and “a City of Nightmares”: London, Female Monstrosity, and the Weird Sublime in Arthur Machen’s “The Great God Pan”, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Śląskiego, 2015, 44

Then I saw the body descend to the beasts whence it ascended, and that which was on the heights go down to the depths, even to the abyss of all being. The principle of life, which makes organism, always remained, while the outward form changed²⁵.

In its final chapter, Machen's novella features an evolutionary throwback which involves the ability of transmuting from the appearance of a normal human being, by means of extending limbs and shifting shape, until becoming formless. What is exploited in the passage is human disgust at formless, structureless, primordial ooze, the slime dynamics that invoke the arche-origins of life itself, a chaos of protozoan mass that dissolves all boundaries²⁶. The climatic scene featuring a woman who switches shape in an uncanny bodily transformation, conventionally to much weird literature, has sexual disgust at its motor centre²⁷. The mythic resonances of giant squids make the passage a privileged locus of animal existence that 'refuses to be conceptualised', as Derrida put it in *The Animal That Therefore I Am* and it cannot be resumed into the neutralising economy of the self-other²⁸. Helen's shapeshifting crosses the limit of the inhuman, or "ahuman"²⁹. Besides being typical of the weird, shape shifting is also characteristic of the turn of the century, a period of processes which would in the following years consecrate the era of globalisation, where borders 'are often subject to shifting and unpredictable patterns of mobility and overlapping, appearing and disappearing'³⁰. The various types of "ahumanness" can be read as indices of society's shifting quality and the resulting anxieties connected³¹. Therefore, weird representations of shapeshifting as Helen's transformation in *The Great God Pan* can be regarded as embodiments of unbearable fears transmuted into representations of monstrosity³². In the discourse of panic at modernity, sexual disgust plays an important role³³ and *The Great God Pan* arguably discloses horrors and questions concerning human nature and sexuality³⁴. Machen's evil often carries the sexual overtones associated with decadence³⁵. Primarily, the story develops around the figure of "a woman of strangely exotic beauty", a kind of beauty which bears in itself sexual connotations³⁶.

²⁵ A. Machen, *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 50

²⁶ Lockhurst, 1054

²⁷ Luckhurst, 1051

²⁸ Luckhurst, 1054

²⁹ Ibidem

³⁰ Lockhurst, 1057

³¹ Mydla, 34

³² Ibidem

³³ Luckhurst, 1051

³⁴ Mydla, 35

³⁵ J. T. Owens, *Arthur Machen's Supernaturalism: The Decadent Variety, Studies in English*, New Series, 1990, 7

³⁶ Mydla, 28

The gatherings at Mrs. Beaumont's house – Beaumont being the name which Helen starts to be known by after her second reappearance in the novella – where guests drink one-thousand-year-old wine and revel until 2 a.m. leave few doubts concerning the implication of a sexual element³⁷. Furthermore, Helen's crimes, although described in indefinite terms, present a sexual edge³⁸. As a matter of fact, the person whom Villiers gathers information concerning Helen "shuddered and grew sick" in telling him of the "nameless infamies"³⁹ which were laid to her charge⁴⁰. Additionally, her very association with Pan suggests lusty qualities in her⁴¹. In this respect, the weird mode in Machen's tale appears to address conservative trope of the 'monstrous feminine' running through nineteenth century Gothic literature⁴². After acknowledging this, it becomes legitimate to appraise the weird as a male mode about females who determine man's fate – and end up poorly. *The Great God Pan* features the subject of non-normative sexuality and its uncanny representations, natural and urban, and describes it as a horror that is attractive and abject—a source of fascination and a cause of disgust⁴³. The Freudian idea of the uncanny – das Unheimliche – offers a ready explanation of the shock experienced by the sexually inhibited late nineteenth century reading public when confronted with a content that "brings to light" what the "enfeebled" superego – that is culture – has been unable to successfully restrain⁴⁴. The well-known formula, namely that of the return of the repressed, repeatedly applied to the outpourings of decadent authors, including Machen⁴⁵. The female monster herself, Helen Vaughan, may be regarded as a particular instance of the return of the repressed, an uncanny figure that brings to light knowledge about something that society does not wish to, or perhaps cannot, confront directly⁴⁶.

Lovecraft in his long essay defines the weird as "a literature of cosmic fear"⁴⁷. As a matter of fact, Machen's novella articulates some of the most alarming anxieties of the age⁴⁸. Machen in his early fiction modelled himself on Stevenson, inspecting the overlapping terrains of psychoanalysis and psychical research within a gothic frame⁴⁹. His meddling with the crucibles

³⁷ Owens, 7

³⁸ Ibidem

³⁹ Machen, 26

⁴⁰ Owens, 7

⁴¹ Ibidem

⁴² Luckhurst, 1051

⁴³ J. M. Renye, *Panic on the British borderlands: The Great God Pan, Victorian sexuality, and sacred space in the works of Arthur Machen*, 2013, iv

⁴⁴ Mydla, 29

⁴⁵ Ibidem

⁴⁶ Mydla, 35

⁴⁷ Lovecraft, 15

⁴⁸ Mydla, 32

⁴⁹ R. E. Roberts, *Arthur Machen*, *The Sewanee Review*, Vol. 32, No. 3, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1924, 354

of science are equally daring and appalling. Gothic makes a great return in the 1890s also because of the critical accumulation of fears and anxieties in society⁵⁰. The development of natural sciences, of which Charles Darwin with his theory of evolution has been emblematic, raised anxieties about the resulting changes in the commonly accepted world view, especially as man's position in the great scheme of things was concerned⁵¹. Gothic and weird fiction derive their disturbing qualities by the fact that – to use Wilde's mirror metaphor – they disclose and reflect society's fears in the shape of a nightmare⁵². *The Great God Pan* expresses fears surrounding evolutionary degeneration⁵³ which were spreading through the positivistic late nineteenth century British society. Anxieties about science were linked with anxieties about criminality and the difficulty of restraining it in the metropolis. London, which had by the middle of the nineteenth century become the capital of the greatest empire the world had ever seen, was at the same time a symbol of progress but also of contradiction.

Machen's tale, as several other late Victorian narratives, has been read as reenacting *fin de siècle* questions of gender, sexuality, immigration and imperial power⁵⁴. Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, for instance, takes part in this rehearsal by addressing the topical issue of gender in its gruesomely fantastic representation of the New Woman as a voluptuous, sexually liberated predator prowling the streets of London in search of fresh innocent blood⁵⁵. Vampirism is Stoker's metaphor for the insidious destructiveness of all expression of sexuality unsanctified by marriage. His novel dramatizes moral panic towards the immigrant outsider held accountable of secretly importing diseases, perverse sexual practices and new beliefs, such as feminism, to England⁵⁶. The pillars of patriarchy were perceived as endangered, and it was to these men that *Dracula* was chiefly addressed⁵⁷. For these reasons the recurrent abhuman figures in Victorian weird fiction can be understood as embodiments of society's anxieties. Similarly, Helen Vaughan, namely the monstrous progeny of an ancient deity, embodies the unbearable fears of Victorian society, transmuted into a representation of monstrosity⁵⁸.

Lovecraft pointed at the importance of atmosphere in the definition of a tale as "weird"⁵⁹. Likewise, in the construction of the atmosphere for his weird tale, the setting chosen by Machen

⁵⁰ Mydla, 30

⁵¹ Ibidem

⁵² Ibidem

⁵³ Taylor, 7

⁵⁴ Mydla, 33

⁵⁵ Ibidem

⁵⁶ Ibidem

⁵⁷ Ibidem

⁵⁸ Mydla, 34

⁵⁹ Luckhurst, 1043

plays a paramount role. The woman and the metropolis are closely linked together in the narration, both simultaneously fascinating and repellent. Although the scene is not urban throughout the whole story, London is the scene of the monstrous woman's reappearance. To give his visions of the metropolis appears as one of Machen's main concerns, along with the portrayal of the relationship between the two genders. In this respect, not only the city of London does provide the setting to the strange happenings in the novella. As already mentioned, also Machen's native landscape, namely the Welsh countryside, figures as the background to the uncanny events of the plot. Both the city and the rural landscape are able to provide in Machen's tale "something more than secret murder and bloody bones, [...] a certain atmosphere of breathless and unexplainable dread of outer unknown forces"⁶⁰ which Lovecraft considered to be a central element in the definition of a weird tale. In the delineation of the Gothic atmosphere of the tale, as much the Welsh countryside as the city of London play a crucial role. Passages that are devoted to creating the appropriate atmosphere of fascination and dread are found in abundance in *The Great God Pan*.

The noise and clamour of the street had died away, though now and then the sound of shouting still came from the distance, and the dull, leaden silence seemed like the quiet after an earthquake or a storm⁶¹.

A subtle, although deeper, sense of fear and anxiety is delivered to the reader along with the atmosphere, also by the ephemeral and elusive depiction of the uncanny female protagonist. Helen Vaughan never utters a single word throughout the course of the story, and actually all that is known about her comes from rumour and hearsay. For this quality of evanescence, Helen resembles more an idea – or a rhetorical figure – than a living individual. Arguably, what Machen did in his novella not necessarily has to be read as a misogynistic treatment of female sexuality. Several elements seem to suggest, in fact, a reading of Helen as representing the real victim in the story, whereas her alleged male victims represent the real antagonists in the tale.

⁶⁰ Luckhurst, 1043

⁶¹ Machen, 42

Chapter 1

Arthur Machen: life and influences

1.1 The author

Arthur Llewellyn Jones was born on 3 March 1863. ‘Machen’ is actually a pen name which he forged borrowing his mother’s family name. He was three quarters Welsh, the only child of the Reverend John Edward Jones and Janet Machen. His childhood, which he spent mostly at his father’s church rectory, although quite solitary was soothed by the access to a well-stocked library⁶². His heterogenous readings during his youth encompassed a great variety of genres and epochs, ranging from the Greek and Roman classics to the works of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists, from the volumes by his new heroes Cervantes and Rabelais to *The Arabian Nights*⁶³, and of course his contemporaries, notably Charles Dickens⁶⁴. He soon developed a taste in literature, and it did not take long before he demonstrated an inclination for the art of writing. Above all, he was in love with his native Monmouthshire, Wales, which he referred by its Welsh name, Gwent⁶⁵. Here he grew up surrounded by breath-taking landscapes, medieval castles, and ancient Roman ruins. A country which traditions were considered lost or in the process of disappearing, Wales was at the end of nineteenth century as much as it is today a place of transformation, liminality and magic, intimately connected to its mythological past⁶⁶. In *Far Off Things*, the first volume of his autobiography, he affirms,

I shall always esteem it as the greatest piece of fortune that has fallen to me, that I was born in that noble, fallen Caerleon-on-Usk, in the heart of Gwent [...] for the older I grow the more firmly I am convinced that anything which I may have accomplished in literature is due to the fact that when my eyes were first opened in earliest childhood they had before them the vision of an enchanted land⁶⁷.

The intense awe and delight reflected in his memories of his native landscape testify for the influence that this land, with its embedded culture and folklore, had on much of the author’s later writing⁶⁸. As a matter of fact, Arthur Machen was a writer of place – of his native

⁶² F. Taylor, *Folklore and Nation in Britain and Ireland*, Routledge, 2021, 99

⁶³ A. Worth, *Introduction to Arthur Machen The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories*, Oxford World’s Classics Hardback Collection, Oxford University Press, 2018, xii

⁶⁴ Renye, 1

⁶⁵ Ibidem

⁶⁶ Taylor, 217

⁶⁷ A. Machen, *Far Off Things*, London, Martin Secker, 1922, 15

⁶⁸ Taylor, *Welsh Mythology & Folklore in the novels of Arthur Machen*, John Cowper Powys & Alan Garner, 25

Monmouthshire first, and later he would discover the city of London, completing the binary landscape of his imagination⁶⁹. His Welsh heritage always remained noteworthy to the author, whom in the first volume of his autobiography suggested his initial impetus to write creatively as deriving from the large proportion of Celtic blood flowing in his veins⁷⁰. Being Celt, Machen maintained being ‘by nature inclined to the work of words’⁷¹. From a very young age, in fact, he began to compose his own verse, and he was 18 when he published in 1881 his long poem *Eleusinia*, on the subject of the Eleusinian Mysteries. As already said, not only Wales, London too fascinated Machen, who from his early youth developed a fervent interest for London papers⁷². In *Far Off Things*, he recalled the Standard and the Telegraph as ‘mystic documents’ which he would walk several miles in order to fetch⁷³. To London he was sent during his scholarly years in order to train as a surgeon, as – although having already proven himself promising as a man of letters – his family was unable to provide the funds for his education as writer. Notwithstanding, by 1884 the then 21-year-old Machen had secured employment as a cataloguer of unlisted esoteric literature and a magazine editor for the antiquarian bookseller George Redway, approaching, albeit only marginally, his vocational working field. Additionally, by the beginning of the 1890s he had been able to publish several translations of French works and two original creations – a pastiche entitled *The Anatomy of Tobacco*, and a tale which would become his first major work, *The Great God Pan*. Soon after the latter’s early publication in the magazine *The Whirlwind* in 1890⁷⁴, Machen started gaining a certain notoriety as a writer of the supernatural, so much that the tale was re-issued in a single volume by John Lane in his Keynotes series in 1894 alongside another tale, *The Inmost Light*, complete with an Aubrey Beardsley cover⁷⁵. In the same years he became part of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a London-based secret society devoted to the study and practice of the occult and metaphysics. The Golden Dawn included among its initiated meaningful personalities in the literary field as W. B. Yeats and provided Machen with an occult training he would make great use of in his future writing⁷⁶. Conversely to the early success gained by *The Great God Pan*, however, Machen’s tale was received as poisonous and blasphemous by the critique and

⁶⁹ Worth, xi

⁷⁰ Taylor, 99

⁷¹ Machen, 94

⁷² Taylor, 25

⁷³ Machen, 87

⁷⁴ Mydla, 26

⁷⁵ Owens, 117

⁷⁶ E. Alder, *Weird Fiction and Science at the Fin de Siècle*, Palgrave Studies in Literature, Science and Medicine, Palgrave Macmillan, 2020, 137

therefore earned a bad reputation⁷⁷. The novella was judged as “disgusting”, “revolting”, “loathsome”, “demoniac”, “the diseased outpouring of a decadent mind” and condemned as sexually offensive⁷⁸. Oscar Wilde, on the other hand, congratulated Machen on the fervour he had caused and defined the tale “*un succès fou*”⁷⁹. Unfortunately, due to both the content of his novella and his acquaintance with Wilde, Machen was soon implied by association in the scandal of the latter’s arrest and imprisonment⁸⁰. Subsequently, he embraced a life of obscurity, writing as a journalist and resurfacing occasionally with other small masterpieces and his autobiography in three volumes. He has left a fairly rich literary legacy composed of nine volumes in his collected edition, and several additional volumes of short stories and personal essays⁸¹.



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⁷⁷ Luckhurst, 1045

⁷⁸ Mydla, 27

⁷⁹ Worth, xiv

⁸⁰ Luckhurst, 1045

⁸¹ Ibidem

⁸² Cover illustration to the first edition of *The Great God Pan*, reproducing a bare-chested faun, designed by Aubrey Beardsley

1.2 Between Wales and London

In his works, Machen attempts to negotiate a personal identity caught between England and Wales. The author's origins place him in the ancient kingdom of Gwent, modern day Monmouthshire⁸³. Wales, together with Ireland and Scotland, differentiates from England for what its history, culture and literature are concerned. The language of these Celt communities plays a central role in the definition of their identity and represents a mark of distinction from England. Celt languages are characterized by their unique ability to convey ancient meanings deeply linked to the history of their culture and to the landscape. The Celt identity developed in a harmonious relationship with the landscape, and for this reason the naming and language imposed by England in these countries was always perceived as a form of oppression. English in Celt areas remains a colonizing language, unable to subdue both the Celt experience and its exotic wildlife⁸⁴. As Celtic languages are highly based on onomatopoeic sounds linked to the natural landscape, they are able to embed the secrets of the landscape, and they allow their communities to transmit their knowledge of the landscape from generation to generation. Through the transmission of the language from generation to generation, Celt communities have been able to keep alive their past traditions, legends, and in them their knowledge of the secrets hidden in their landscape was able to survive. Certain authors – including the Nobel Prize awarded Seamus Heaney – devoted part of their career to the purpose of reliving and transmitting to the future generations the cultural heritage of Ireland, Scotland and Wales, whose survival was threatened by the imposition of English. The deep connection between Celt culture and its landscapes which is embedded in Celt linguistic heritage, can be understood both at a physical and spiritual level. Knowledge of the land often mingles with legends dealing with the supernatural, hence Celt identity has generally been associated to a pre-modern, pre-Enlightenment and pre-rational or irrational culture⁸⁵. For this reason, the Celt peoples of Wales, Ireland and Scotland often come to be understood as being more irrational, or pre-rational, cultures than their English peers, being still attached to their own superstitions and legends which survive in their linguistic heritage.

The Celt culture, having as its primary characteristic the concern with spiritual rather than physical realities, witnessed sacramental ideas appearing throughout its literature. A general tendency in literary discourse resulted in the eighteenth and nineteenth century to regard authors

⁸³ Taylor, 25

⁸⁴ Fazzini, 'At the back of my ear': a note on Seamus Heaney and Scottish poetry, *Journal of European Studies*, 2016, 3

⁸⁵ D. Jones, *Borderlands: spiritualism and the occult in fin de siècle and Edwardian Welsh and Irish horror*, *Irish Studies Review*, 2009, 34

who defined themselves as Celt as being inherently more sentimental and more attuned to the natural world than their English counterparts⁸⁶. Arthur Machen, who drew from both his Welsh origin and the cosmopolitan England to find his inspiration in writing, embraced the tradition of his country, including the treatment of supernatural themes. Ellis Roberts in her 1924 essay advises those readers who are disturbed at any deviations from the world of fact and the world of sense not to adventure in Machen's writings⁸⁷. In his stories, in fact, Machen conveys a continuous sense of the reality of those other worlds which in traditional folklore are believed to surround, protect, threaten and at times invade the world of fact and appearance⁸⁸. The Wales he describes in *The Great God Pan* is a strange borderland, lying somewhere between dreams and death, peopled with shades, unfamiliar beings, spirits, ghosts, who however mingle with common things, men and women. A pervasive sense of the supernatural, the magical treatment of nature, and the escape into the world of dreams, are distinctively Celtic traits⁸⁹. Likewise, the touch of fancy, of beauty, of melancholy, of the marvellous, of the vague, of the obscure descends on the Welsh author as an heirloom from the elder. Welsh authors' literary production in general, including Machen's, is characterized by an extreme sensitiveness to natural loveliness and a deep religious mysticism.

A romantic interest in Celtic literature and folk customs emerged towards the end of the nineteenth century not only in Celt areas, but in England as well as part of a literary and artistic movement known as the Celtic Revival⁹⁰, in which in literature, in the arts, and in social practices the Celtic legends, poetry, art, and spirituality were revived⁹¹. This renewed interest in Celt literature can be arguably understood as a reaction to modernity. As a matter of fact, wherever secular modernity exerts its power, a reserve of spiritualism emerges alongside with it⁹². Eighteenth and nineteenth century society, being marked by a systematic embrace of industrial – and consequently rational – modernity, alongside with technological development saw the emergence of a “flight from reason”⁹³. The folklore and legends of Celt culture represent a contrast to the conventions of Victorian society. Weber in 1917 wrote that “the fate of our time is characterized by rationalism and intellectualization and, above all, by the

⁸⁶ Taylor, 27

⁸⁷ Roberts, 354

⁸⁸ Roberts, 355

⁸⁹ K. M. Petersen, *Arthur Machen and the Celtic Renaissance in Wales*, Louisiana State University, 1973, vi

⁹⁰ Taylor, 16

⁹¹ M. MacAteer, *Celtic and Irish Revival*, Oxford Bibliographies Online, British and Irish literature, 2019, 1

⁹² K. M. Flanagan, *London Gothic: Place, Space and the Gothic Imagination*, Dublin, The Irish Journal of Gothic and Horror Studies, 2011, 62

⁹³ Ibidem

disenchantment of the world”⁹⁴. This statement can analogously be employed to define the generation that preceded Weber as well. In the new industrial society which developed throughout the course of the nineteenth century, a major tendency arose to draw a neat distinction between matter and spirit. Consequently, religious matters started to be addressed with a more consistent degree of detachment by opposition to the preceding centuries, and the existence of *spirit* was treated with a new scepticism⁹⁵. Notwithstanding, while Victorians refrained from openly professing their spiritual beliefs, the latter, although concealed, continued to pervade virtually every corner of Victorian life⁹⁶. As a matter of fact, spiritualism was the major response to the advances and discoveries of scientific materialism. Enlightened England researched for ancient wisdom in a culture which might claim to be the oldest in Britain and it became a popular trend in British society for artists and writers to address Celtic themes⁹⁷. The Celtic literary revival of the 1890s emerged alongside a resurgence in pan-Celtic nationalism, which however registered certain differences between the various Celt nations⁹⁸. As a matter of fact, it was the Irish and Scottish who dominated the fin-de-siècle Celtic Revival⁹⁹. Differences between Welsh folklore and the Irish and Scottish traditions include the former’s lack of any kind of heroic ballad forms and the fact that much of Welsh oral tradition surviving from the Middle Ages disappeared as a result of the religious revivals of the 18th and 19th centuries¹⁰⁰. Welsh Celtic tales collected in the 1890s range across local legends, saints and heroes, witches and supernatural occurrences attached to specific locations¹⁰¹. The folklore and legends of Ireland allowed W. B. Yeats to speak to and for Ireland as a nation in a historical period in which the question of Irish identity was highly problematic¹⁰². Celtic literature on Irish themes became fashionable in London as well¹⁰³. Machen as well drew from his Celt heritage, infusing his tales with the power of archetypal myth and local lore¹⁰⁴. His tales both grew from a rich tradition and represent his contribution to a long history of Celtic thought. However, while authors on the Irish side of the Revival were rewriting the folklore and legends of Ireland for nationalist purposes, it was never Machen’s intention to utilise his Welsh heritage

⁹⁴ Jones, 32

⁹⁵ R. Ceserani, // *Fantastico*, Il Mulino, 1996, 108

⁹⁶ Jones, 32

⁹⁷ Taylor, 26

⁹⁸ Ibidem

⁹⁹ Taylor, 21

¹⁰⁰ Taylor, *Folklore and Nation in Britain and Ireland*, 100

¹⁰¹ Ibidem

¹⁰² Taylor, *Welsh Mythology & Folklore in the Novels of Arthur Machen*, John Cowper Powys & Alan Garner, 21

¹⁰³ Taylor, *Folklore and Nation in Britain and Ireland*, 100

¹⁰⁴ Renye, iii

for political purposes¹⁰⁵. What Machen primarily sought in his literature was the realization of ‘ecstasy’¹⁰⁶. Machen looked at his Celtic fatherland as the source of inspiration and the point of departure for his Celtic genius. American critic Ellis Roberts affirmed that “Mr. Machen is Welsh and obstinately Celtic”¹⁰⁷. The Celt in him shows over and over again, in his themes, mythological subjects and settings, and in his use of place¹⁰⁸.

The author’s engagement with Welsh identity passes through his depiction of rural life and the rural landscape by means of brief glimpses in the life of the small communities living in the Welsh countryside. As a matter of fact, the geology of the landscape and its cultural association lead the very plot of the story in a series of reported fragments in the second chapter of *The Great God Pan*. The natural environment here is the stage on which the reviving of Welsh mythology and folklore takes place.

It was on one of these expeditions to the forest, that the first of the singular incidents with which this girl is connected occurred, the date being about a year after her arrival at the village. The preceding winter had been remarkably severe, the snow drifting to a great depth, and the frost continuing for an unexampled period, and the summer following was as noteworthy for its extreme heat. On one of the very hottest days in this summer, Helen V. left the farm-house for one of her long rambles in the forest [...]. She was seen by some men in the fields making for the old Roman Road, a green causeway which traverses the highest part of the wood, and they were astonished to observe that the girl had taken off her hat, though the heat of the sun was already almost tropical. As it happened, a labourer, Joseph W. by name, was working in the forest near the Roman Road, and at twelve o’ clock his little son, Trevor, brought the man his dinner of bread and cheese. After the meal, the boy, who was about seven years old at the time, left his father at work, and, as he says, went to look for flowers in the wood, and the man, who could hear him shouting with delight over his discoveries, felt no uneasiness. Suddenly, however, he was horrified at hearing the most dreadful screams, evidently the result of great terror, proceeding from the direction in which his son had gone¹⁰⁹.

¹⁰⁵ Taylor, *Welsh Mythology & Folklore in the Novels of Arthur Machen*, John Cowper Powys & Alan Garner, 27

¹⁰⁶ Taylor, 48

¹⁰⁷ Roberts, 354

¹⁰⁸ Ibidem

¹⁰⁹ Machen, 17-18

All the mysterious happenings in the passages set in the Welsh countryside are strangely interwoven with still enduring reminiscences of the Roman civilisation, and the ancient deities of the place, as sculptured in antique fragments¹¹⁰.

[...] in passing through the hall the paroxysms of fright returned and with additional violence. The father perceived that the child was pointing at some object, and heard the old cry, ‘the man in the wood’, and looking in the direction indicated saw a stone head of grotesque appearance [...]¹¹¹.

The sculpture mentioned in the passage, which was reported to having been dug from the ground, is suggested to belong to the Roman period and to reproduce, according to “the most experienced archaeologist of the district” the head “of a faun or satyr”¹¹². Roman culture provides an extra dimension to Machen’s Gwent¹¹³. The geographical area’s ancient past has left its traces and is still perceived as a living presence in the landscape. A Roman past discovered in Wales reinforces the idea of a layered landscape¹¹⁴. Gwent in his fiction develops into a location of great spiritual meaning¹¹⁵, associated with an ancient place of worship for Nodens, a Celtic healing deity¹¹⁶ whom is also referred to in the novella as “the god of the Deep”¹¹⁷. The novella presents, as much weird fiction, a focus on malignant stirrings of ancient things long buried in the earth, to invent Machen sought inspiration in long existing traditions of Wales. Wales is a locus where occult forces converge. It is the portal between two worlds. In this sense Wales, more than the centre to Machen’s narratives, is a point of departure, which sheds its light of mysticism – and expands to reach the city of London. The importance of place in Machen’s work is foremost evident in the prominence of Celtic themes in his stories¹¹⁸. The Welsh author’s attachment to Gwent is a passionate love for a very small place which would become the *omphalos* of his poetic. Throughout his literary production, Gwent and its local traditions remained a profound part of Machen’s imaginative life¹¹⁹ and the mythology, folklore and folktales of Wales can be recognized as considerable presences across his entire work¹²⁰.

¹¹⁰ Mydla, 27

¹¹¹ Machen, 19

¹¹² Ibidem

¹¹³ Taylor, 55

¹¹⁴ Taylor, 56

¹¹⁵ Taylor, 60

¹¹⁶ G. D. Hart, *A Hematological Artifact from 4th Century Britain*, Bulletin of the History of Medicine, Vol. 44, No. 1, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1970, 77

¹¹⁷ Owens, 2

¹¹⁸ Taylor, 47

¹¹⁹ Taylor, 25

¹²⁰ Taylor, 177

This attachment to the historical past of Celt landscapes and their link with mythological subjects can be remarked in generations that follow Machen as well. Marjory MacNeill, in her biographical essay on the Scottish poet Norman MacCaig, advances an interesting observation concerning the treatment of the figure of Pan as a metaphorical embodiment of the natural elements in the poet's work,

There is a reference to the great god Pan in *Notations of ten summer minutes*. Pan seems in this poem to haunt the hills around MacCaig's Lochinver. A pantheistic, pagan streak runs through MacCaig's poetry – a love of the wild and the frightening elements in nature, a love of storms, and an intense close observation of the creatures and elements. A sense of nature in the raw, unadorned or petrified, pervades his work¹²¹.

Celt culture is present in Machen's tales both in his mythological subjects and in his settings. Strange zones and borderscapes are the setting of his fiction, where borders become less lines of separation than promiscuous contact zones¹²².

Machen's writing represents an investigation in the Welsh landscape and its tradition with the purpose of revealing the darker spiritual truths hidden in it. However, not only did Machen use his Welsh sources to designs imagined temporal portals in clumps of ancient forest in the English and Welsh borderlands. He did it in urban spaces as well, notably in the city of London. Here an apparently common house can hide a portal into other cosmic dimensions which can be opened by the rituals of a woman born from the contact between the human world and an ancient god, violating every principle of physics¹²³. Celticism and Occultism overlap with apparent prosaic *fin-de-siècle* scenarios in his tales¹²⁴. In this respect, his tales of the supernatural fuse elements of Western occultism with Welsh fairy lore. In order to understand his work, insisting on both his Welsh ancestry and the contemporary artistic movement of the English Aestheticism is necessary¹²⁵. Machen's writing assimilated several aspects of both Symbolism and Aestheticism, mixing them with ancient wisdom and traditions attached to the Celt cultural heritage¹²⁶. Wales, being a country whose traditions are spiritual, can be viewed as an alternative imaginative space, distinct from England and isolated from the rest of Britain,

¹²¹ M. McNeill, *Norman MacCaig. A Study of His Life and Work*, Edinburgh, Mercat Press, 1996,71

¹²² Luckhurst, 1055

¹²³ Ibidem

¹²⁴ Jones, 33

¹²⁵ Roberts, 354

¹²⁶ Petersen, 6

in which the author's individual spirituality and philosophy could more easily take shape than in England¹²⁷. Machen's own conception of Welshness is largely romanticised in his writings.

Starting from the third chapter, the background to the events in Machen's *The Great God Pan* is represented by *fin de siècle* London with its stratification of class, race and gender¹²⁸. London Gothic can be regarded as a specific category for understanding not only Machen's work, but also the cultural productions of late nineteenth century in general. Furthermore it continues to represent a topic of major interest to film-makers, as a series of 2009 films testify, which are based on original Victorian fiction – namely *Dorian Gray*, *Sherlock Holmes* and *A Christmas Carol*¹²⁹. Machen's writing provides a fascinating window into the *fin de siècle* cultural milieu¹³⁰ and it is consequently meaningful in the discourse for what socio-cultural self perception is concerned. There are embedded sinister qualities in London, a city built as much on blood, greed, exploited labour as on measured political reform and enlightened rule¹³¹. Machen's characters are peculiarly seen experiencing a certain delight in London byways and obscure quarters, particularly at night¹³².

Villiers had emerged from his restaurant after an excellent dinner of many courses, assisted by an ingratiating flask of Chianti, and, in that frame of mind, which was with him almost chronic, had delayed a moment by the door, peering round in the dimly-lighted street in search of those mysterious incidents and persons with which the streets of London teem in every quarter and at every hour¹³³.

The city itself becomes to some extent implicated in the motives, desires and conflicts of the characters¹³⁴. The city, with its opium dens and labyrinthine slums can be recognized in the contemporary fiction of authors as Stevenson, Stoker and Wilde as a unique setting full of possibilities for incredible stories¹³⁵. Although Machen felt himself to be no part at all of the nineties, these London walks at night definitely lend his stories a decadent, *fin de siècle* flavour¹³⁶. The delight in obscure streets in London at night is a recurrent feature in 1890s

¹²⁷ Taylor, 3

¹²⁸ L. Phillips, A. Witchard, *London Gothic: Place, Space and the Gothic Imagination*, London, Continuum, 2010, 1

¹²⁹ Phillips, 1

¹³⁰ Worth, xi

¹³¹ Flanagan, 61

¹³² Owens, 8

¹³³ Machen, 21

¹³⁴ Phillips, 2

¹³⁵ Phillips, 3

¹³⁶ Owens, 9

fiction – Wilde as well, notably, wrote of metropolitan nights and night walks¹³⁷. However, while on the one hand the charm exerted by the city is defined in his fiction, Machen on the other hand appears to be representing his antipathy to the modern industrialized society as well. At times ancient images intrude the modern London cityscape, for instance when “Villiers turned page after page” and “the figures of fauns and satyrs and aegipans danced before his eyes”¹³⁸. The transition from the Welsh countryside to London may strike as odd¹³⁹. There is a sense of ethnic and cultural distinctiveness between the Welsh and the English, albeit in Machen’s tale gothic London figures as well as Wales as a transitional space. London is a meaningful setting to the author, as testified by the fact that, despite the setting not being urban throughout the story, London is the scene of the monstrous woman’s reappearance. Machen’s *The Great God Pan* juxtaposes and alternates the ancient rural past with the urban present, the pagan with the prosaic, and the urban with the suburban¹⁴⁰. London’s built environment juxtaposed to the rural landscape functions as a metaphor for socio-psychological crisis¹⁴¹. London represents Victorian society with all its contradictions. It is an unheimliche space, familiar and yet alien, labyrinthine, unknowable¹⁴². Any house and any corner, as well as the people who dwell inside, hide secrets and hypocrisy, as Clarke who, albeit appearing as a proper gentleman and “a practical man”¹⁴³, cannot stifle his fascination with the occult and with London and its obscure byways¹⁴⁴. H. P. Lovecraft, who wrote extensively on Machen’s tales in his 1927 long essay, *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, where he affirmed that Machen and the other authors which he defined as masters of the weird tale wrote their tales and stories in the Gothic or fantasy tradition, insisted that the weird was an effect of atmosphere, “a vivid depiction of a certain type of human mood”¹⁴⁵. Eventually, what ultimately renders his settings uncanny places is human presence. Machen’s vision of the metropolis fuses with the figure of an unconventional woman. The city and the woman embody the same characteristics, both being double entities, simultaneously fascinating and repellent¹⁴⁶. The portrayal of the relationship between the two genders alongside with the depiction of his visions of the metropolis having been suggested representing Machen’s main concerns in *The Great God Pan*.

¹³⁷ Ibidem

¹³⁸ Owens, 7

¹³⁹ Mydla, 47

¹⁴⁰ Phillips, 3

¹⁴¹ Phillips, 3

¹⁴² Mydla, 47

¹⁴³ Machen, 27

¹⁴⁴ Mydla, 48

¹⁴⁵ Luckhurst 1043

¹⁴⁶ Mydla, 36

The story, as a matter of fact, develops around the figure of “a woman of strangely exotic beauty”¹⁴⁷. The woman and the metropolis are closely linked together in the narration, both simultaneously fascinating and repellent. The atmosphere is central and the city plays a crucial role in it¹⁴⁸. London, being the capital of the Empire, came to be perceived as a place in which the anxieties not only assembled and concentrated, but were also magnified beyond proportion¹⁴⁹.

1.3 Occultism and scepticism

Secret, ritual and mystic, the occult seems to be at odds with the rational and enlightened thinking of late Victorian Britain¹⁵⁰. The success earned by *The Great God Pan*, however, is partly owed to Machen’s treatment of occult subjects in it. The author had become acquainted with occult literature while working as a cataloguer during his first employment in London. As he recalled in his autobiography, most of the books he read for this commission dealt in one sense or another with occult subjects and later he would refer to these multi-sided occult and esoteric studies he conducted in the eighteen eighties and nineties as an interest in sorcery¹⁵¹. Among the various subjects of the collection, he remembers in particular “books about Witchcraft, Diabolical Possession, [...] the Evil Eye” and he judges the whole garret as thoroughly representing

that inclination of the human mind which may be a survival of the rites of the black swamp and the cave or – an anticipation of a wisdom and knowledge that are to come, transcending all the science of our day¹⁵².

Such readings provided him with rich material for his later creative work¹⁵³. Additionally, The Golden Dawn, the secret society he became part of, offered him an occult training¹⁵⁴.

Occultism might seem outlandish in a world whose inhabitants are representatives of an enlightened and secular modernity as the Victorian period was. The late nineteenth century was an age in which scepticism and disenchantment collided with spiritual and occult beliefs. However, in that very prosaic age occultism developed as a reaction to the major contemporary trend in philosophy, namely positivism – a philosophical thinking grounded on the absolute

¹⁴⁷ Mydla, 28

¹⁴⁸ Mydla, 40

¹⁴⁹ Mydla, 34

¹⁵⁰ Alder, 87

¹⁵¹ Renye, 3

¹⁵² Machen, *Things Near and Far*, London, Martin Secker, 1923, 20

¹⁵³ Worth, xiii

¹⁵⁴ Alder, 137

confidence in scientific progress. Finding its scientific companion in psychical research, spiritualism became an extraordinarily broad movement in the late nineteenth century, able to accommodate all social classes and a variety of beliefs, from Anglicanism to Occultism. The Occult was a controlling, energizing obsession in Victorian period, both for several authors and for the public as well.

Machen's early fiction can be analysed in relation to the Decadent movement of the 1890s, in which Occultism figures prominently. As already said, Machen denied any explicit contact with Aestheticism and even published a selection of his worst reviews under the title *Precious Balms* to celebrate his aesthetic 'failure'¹⁵⁵. As a matter of fact, Machen primarily used his native Welsh material as a vehicle of contemporary sensibility. However, while the solitary and imaginative escape into the dream world is recognizable as a Celtic quality, it was also common to the heroes of Aestheticism¹⁵⁶. The experience known by characters as "seeing the god Pan", refers to the lifting of the veil between the material world and a spiritual 'beyond', a common theme to French Decadentism, English Aestheticism, and occultism and mysticism as well¹⁵⁷. The settings and objects that surround the characters are eloquently described in an Aesthetic fashion – one instance being represented by Clarke's "old Japanese bureau" in which he hides his *Memoirs to prove the Existence of the Devil*. The moral corruption embraced by the gentlemen in the story, as a viable alternative life-option to the intolerably stagnant life of middle-class inhabitants of the metropolis, represents a decadent element in the novella¹⁵⁸. *The Great God Pan* is interspersed with decadent elements, which Machen develops in an original mixture with themes belonging to the traditions of his country. As a matter of fact, the aesthetic values of Symbolism aligned in part with those of the wider Celtic revival, providing a connection between Decadent and Celtic themes in Machen's writing¹⁵⁹. The figure of Pan, the classical rustic Arcadian god of Greek mythology¹⁶⁰, for instance, symbolising the spiritual realm beyond the material world, is also associated in the tale with the worship of the Celtic healing deity Nodens¹⁶¹. An intersection of symbolism and a revivalist view of Celtic character¹⁶² synthesise in Machen's literary production the layered character of the history of the Welsh landscape, in which pre-Celtic, Celtic and Roman rule have left their mark¹⁶³. The

¹⁵⁵ Luckhurst, 1046

¹⁵⁶ Petersen, vi

¹⁵⁷ Taylor, 40

¹⁵⁸ Mydla, 29

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, 48

¹⁶⁰ Renye, iv

¹⁶¹ Taylor, 40

¹⁶² Taylor, 49

¹⁶³ Taylor, 53

culture which Romans had transported to Britain contributes to the polyphonic nature of Machen's picture of Welsh themes¹⁶⁴. In his treatment of mythological subjects, Machen demonstrates an interest in Wales's pagan history, alongside with an awareness of the country's past as being too complex for Wales to be reduced to a misleading idea of an unbroken "Celtic" history¹⁶⁵. Wales, with its spirituality-oriented tradition, constitutes Machen's mysticism's ancestral home and dispenses vast material for the author's literary works. Symbolism is chosen by Machen's as the ideal mode to render his version of the complexity of Celt worldview¹⁶⁶ and as a more privileged means than any other mode in his quest of meaningfully addressing Celtic themes¹⁶⁷.

Memories of a now fallen Roman civilisation and *fin de siècle* fascination for Occultism converge into Machen's late-Victorian re-invention of the Greek figure of Pan¹⁶⁸. The resulting intersection of Celtic, Occult and Symbolist modes in Machen's literature is the way through which the author sought to capture the sense of man's existence within two worlds – the prosaic late nineteenth century and its spiritualist side¹⁶⁹. A similar objective was the purpose of symbolists as well. Further connection with the Symbolists resides in Machen's idea that "fine literature" had to be expression of ecstasy, which the author advanced in a work of literary philosophy published in 1902 under the title *Hieroglyphics*. Ecstasy was otherwise defined by Machen as "rapture, beauty, awe, mystery, sense of the unknown"¹⁷⁰, emotions which the Symbolists as well sought to evoke in their art¹⁷¹.

The fictional world which Machen delineates in *The Great God Pan* is a non-material realm¹⁷² full of poetic esoteric symbols¹⁷³ which occasionally result terrifying and even mortal to his characters' lives¹⁷⁴. The novella deals with forces in the world which go far beyond human understanding, and which no language exists being able to describe¹⁷⁵. What the reader must rely on are mysterious symbols and signs suggesting that material reality means more than it is¹⁷⁶. Machen in his inquiry into reality and subsequent revelation of the horror at the heart of

¹⁶⁴ Taylor, 56

¹⁶⁵ Taylor, 55

¹⁶⁶ Taylor, 59

¹⁶⁷ Taylor, 51

¹⁶⁸ Taylor, 47

¹⁶⁹ Taylor, 48

¹⁷⁰ Franzoni, *Terror and ecstasy in the works of Arthur Machen*, Klagenfurt, Forum Junge Theologie, 2014, 163

¹⁷¹ Taylor, 48

¹⁷² Ibidem

¹⁷³ Jones

¹⁷⁴ Taylor, 48

¹⁷⁵ Owens, 6

¹⁷⁶ Ibidem

things¹⁷⁷ demonstrates a kinship with Baudelaire and the French symbolists, situating within the framework of the major artistic theories functioning at the end of nineteenth century¹⁷⁸. The chief reason that stands behind the power of his rhetoric is that he writes from a deep spiritual conviction in the persistency and power of Evil and an awareness of inhuman forces in the world¹⁷⁹. At the same time, he investigates whether the spiritual force underlying physical reality might not be evil. Machen lifts the veil of reality and passes beyond it. His stories are written with the intent to reveal the darker spiritual truths of his age. He proposes his own theory that ancient fearful and shocking rites still survive in this disillusioned age, sometimes giving the idea of being frightened at what he has evoked¹⁸⁰. At the end of the novella, the boundaries between the two worlds, spiritual and material, completely collapse.

Machen's Gothic horror romance requires multiple readings before the reader understands that they remain deliberately fractured and enigmatic¹⁸¹. Such truths can only be suggested rather than fully understood and willing suspension of disbelief is required of course, as nothing receives an actual explanation in the end. The vagueness in his description of both events and characters is typical of his treatment of evil¹⁸². For instance, in the description of Helen Vaughan the power resides more in what is not stated than in what is¹⁸³. The deliquescent figure in the final chapter is indeed mysterious in its descent of the evolutionary ladder¹⁸⁴. Charles Herbert, a friend whom Villiers encounters during one of his nightly expeditions in the byways of London and allegedly the first of Helen's victims in London, reports how Helen on the night of their wedding "spoke in her beautiful voice [...] of things which even now I would not dare whisper in blackest night"¹⁸⁵. Earlier in the novella, Rachel, a little girl whom Helen becomes fiends with, starts telling her mother about her experiences in the forest with Helen, however the narrator suddenly interrupts their report of the events as they cannot bear the content of the conversation¹⁸⁶. Machen's several vague and obscure assertions, or rather suggestions, of unspeakable evils convey the idea of a level of evil which transcends words – admittedly a difficult task for a writer¹⁸⁷.

¹⁷⁷ Ibidem

¹⁷⁸ Petersen, vii

¹⁷⁹ Owens, 2

¹⁸⁰ Roberts, 355

¹⁸¹ Luckhurst, 1051

¹⁸² Owens, 4

¹⁸³ Ibidem

¹⁸⁴ Ibidem

¹⁸⁵ Machen, *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 23

¹⁸⁶ Owens, 6

¹⁸⁷ Owens, 7

Machen's literature is able to lead man beyond the common world of appearances to reach the world of the miraculous, that is a world which, however, cannot be mapped, as if it were, the very instances of supernatural phenomena, or secret occult rituals, would lose their allure the very moment they would be converted into actual knowledge¹⁸⁸. Lovecraft in his famous definition of what he called "literature of cosmic fear" stressed this centrality of uncertainty for the concretization of that "atmosphere of breathless and inexplicable dread of outer, unknown forces"¹⁸⁹ which is the force of fantastic literature¹⁹⁰. In his way of dealing with the unspoken and the unspeakable which resists representation, Machen pioneered what would become a trope of twentieth-century horror¹⁹¹.

¹⁸⁸ Flanagan, 62

¹⁸⁹ Mydla, 43

¹⁹⁰ The fantastic mode will be further discussed in the following chapter of this dissertation

¹⁹¹ Worth, xiv

Chapter 2

The Great God Pan as a Gothic narrative

2.1 The Fantastic

In a fictional world, which apparently reflects in every aspect the historical reality of late nineteenth century's bourgeois society in London – the world depicted by Arthur Machen in *The Great God Pan* – a series of unexplainable events are taking place. The scene of this story is the prosaic background where the everyday life of ordinary people normally proceeds, with no particular emotion. This ordinary world, which contemporary readers would have immediately recognised, and still a century later continues to appear as *normal*, represents the perfect setting for the Fantastic. Tzvetan Todorov, who wrote extensively on the subject, in his definition of the Fantastic recalls the words of another scholar, the Russian philosopher Vladimir Soloviov, according to whom “in the Fantastic there is always the possibility of a simple explanation of phenomena¹⁹²”. The Fantastic, henceforth, does not constitute on the opposite to the faithful reproduction of reality¹⁹³. Although for certain phenomena which occur in this category of stories simple explanations are not easily accepted, it is neither as easy to surrender to an acceptance of the supernatural. The Fantastic does not derive from a hesitation between fairy-tale narration and realistic narration, but rather from the contradiction between these two modes¹⁹⁴. The Fantastic sets itself in the prosaic movements of everyday life, and it should not be considered the mere overturning of enlightenment's rationalism¹⁹⁵. Ordinary life and supernatural occurrences mingle together in a chaotic mix which is capable to throw into confusion the hero players and the reader with them, while denying every possibility to solve the uncertainty by means of simple explanations. In chapter “The Discovery in Paul Street”, Villiers shares with his friend Clarke the sensations and feelings he experienced when he entered the house where his former friend Herbert lived with his mysterious wife and “a gentleman of good position was found dead”¹⁹⁶. In spite of having “always been fond of going over empty houses”¹⁹⁷, Villiers does not enjoy his expedition over Number 20 Paul Street. He reports having noticed “a queer, heavy feeling about the air of the house”¹⁹⁸, something strange he cannot define that made his limbs tremble. One room in particular seems to “overpower”

¹⁹² Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 1975, 28

¹⁹³ Todorov, 39

¹⁹⁴ Ceserani, 67

¹⁹⁵ *Ibidem*

¹⁹⁶ Machen, 24

¹⁹⁷ Machen, 29

¹⁹⁸ *Ibidem*

him, and as soon as he steps out, staggering from one side of the street to the other, passers-by cannot avoid staring at him, and one man affirms he is drunk. Villiers appears to be at the mercy of a supernatural force which causes him to experience strange bodily sensations and confusion of the senses. However, a simple explanation which does not contemplate any supernatural element is actually suggested by the passer-by. Furthermore, when he reports the same story to his other friend, Austin, Villiers adds having felt as if he were “inhaling at every breath some deadly fume”¹⁹⁹. This sentence, if read in a literal way, could reinforce the hypothesis that Villiers himself, at least unconsciously, recognises that the supernatural had nothing to do with his experience in Paul Street, and the strange physical sensations he was affected by were actually caused by substances that could be normally found in any abandoned house. This strange experience then, arguably admits to some extent a rational explanation. Villiers’ sensations could be reconducted either to an illusion of the senses, to a dream, or to an altered psychological condition due to the inhalation of harmful substances. When an author of a literary work starts to outline a story in the manner of mimesis and presents normal inhabitants of a normal world as his characters, the above-mentioned author is placing themselves on the ground of familiar reality. The act of overstepping the limits of reality in a literary work could provoke a sense of dissatisfaction in the reader²⁰⁰. Such reaction can be prevented by means of avoiding any clarification. Thus, certain texts maintain this state of uncertainty until the very end.

It could be noted, with respect to Arthur Machen’s *The Great God Pan* that some clarification is given, if not explicitly throughout the course of the whole tale, at least in the description of Helen’s uncanny transformation. However, such affirmation of the supernatural is not provided by the author in the form of an omniscient narrator. As a matter of fact, it is related by the pen of a character in an epistolary anecdote and this is exactly how it should be considered, namely nothing more than an anecdote. Delegating the report of the events to the voices and writings of the characters, the author neither affirms nor denies the veracity of the events which are narrated. All the supernatural occurrences in the story are reported by a variety of points of view, which contribute to maintain the element of doubt providing the basis of the Fantastic. The only real truth in a story is what is affirmed by the narrator – unless the latter gives readers any reason to doubt the veracity of their word, presenting themselves as an unreliable narrator. Characters, instead, can always lie²⁰¹. Reasons why characters might provide false versions can

¹⁹⁹ Machen, 33

²⁰⁰ S. Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume 19: The Ego and the Id and Other Works (1923 - 1925)*, Vintage Classics, 2001, 112

²⁰¹ Todorov, 47

vary depending on their role in the events. They might be directly implied and feel the need to hide the truth. Or they might conceal someone else's implication out of sense of comradeship. In *The Great God Pan* it must be noted that all accounts of the events always come from a roughly unified viewpoint, that is the one of male bourgeoisie in London. It is not a minor detail that all the characters whose voice is heard in the novella belong to the same social category. Detective stories and thrillers constantly linger on false accounts provided by characters. Many examples of this technique can be found for instance in the novels by Agatha Christie. The affirmations of Machen's narrators share this ambiguous status and they should be read in a critical manner, although they seem quite convincing. All in all, these gentlemen are described as respectable and mentally stable members of an enlightened and modern society. Villiers consults Clarke as he considers him "a practical man"²⁰². Consequently, no reason is provided to suggest their account should be judged as unfaithful. In this degree, *The Great God Pan* seems to explicitly embrace an acceptance of the supernatural.

Vincent Starrett viewed Machen as a writer of the frontier between reality and mystery. He wrote, "Machen is a novelist of the soul. He writes of a strange borderland, lying somewhere between Dreams and Death"²⁰³. According to Starrett, Machen in his work was striving to unveil a view of those mysteries of the world, which are not marvellous but awful²⁰⁴. In fantastic texts, eventually the reader is asked to pick a decision with respect to the events. In this way they inevitably leave the category of the Fantastic, to enter either of two categories that Todorov called the *Fantastic Uncanny* and the *Fantastic Marvellous*. Critic Kathryn Hume argues that

literature is the product of two impulses. These are mimesis, felt as the desire to imitate, to describe events, people, and objects with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience; and fantasy, the desire to change givens and alter reality²⁰⁵.

When the natural laws of prosaic reality remain unvaried, and what earlier appeared as supernatural finally receives an explanation, a text comes to belong to the category of the Uncanny. If, instead, empirical truth gives way to the truth of myth²⁰⁶, the category of the Marvellous is entered. In late nineteenth century, fantastic literature witnesses an orientation

²⁰² Machen, 27

²⁰³ V. Starrett, *Arthur Machen: a novelist of ecstasy and sin*, Arthur Machen: a novelist of ecstasy and sin, Chicago : W. M. Hill, 1918, 11

²⁰⁴ Goho, *Journeys into darkness: Critical Essays on Gothic Horror*, Lanham, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, 58

²⁰⁵ K. Hume, *Fantasy and Mimesis*, New York, 1984, 20

²⁰⁶ T. J. Shinn, *Worlds Within Women: Myth and Mythmaking in Fantastic Literature by Women*, Westport, Greenwood Press, 1986, 2

towards the supernatural in the direction of a rereading in a psychological key. The most memorable example of this turn in Fantastic literature is provided by Stevenson's *Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, in which incredible events are explained by a mental condition of the main character. Talking about one of his later works in his autobiography, Machen states that *The Three Impostors* "testifies to the vast respect I entertained for the fantastic, 'New Arabian Nights' manner of R. L. Stevenson, to that curious research in the byways of London which I have described already, and also, I hope, to a certain originality of experiment in the tale of terror"²⁰⁷. Arguably, Stevenson supplied Machen with thematic inspiration for *The Great God Pan* as well, and this becomes evident from the very first chapter, which reports how Dr Raymond, by means of altering Mary's brain, causes the woman's mental insanity. Moreover, later in the story, a sort of mental control is exerted by Helen on her victims. For all these reasons *The Great God Pan* is a tale that talks about psychology from its beginning and throughout the whole narration. Helen's power, besides, as the outcome of Dr Raymond's experiment on Mary's brain, is constantly perceived as more than merely psychological – and hence as merely human – but rather as supernatural.

As Todorov pointed out, the element of doubt is supported by the coexistence of two poles, namely the presentiment of the supernatural and the possibility of a rational explanation²⁰⁸. When Villiers exits from the house in Paul Street he experiences a confusion of the senses, notwithstanding he is the first to suggest that the effect might be imputed to strange substances he inhaled in the abandoned house. The very basis of the Fantastic is that it always admits two solutions, in which one is realistic and the other involves the supernatural. It is in this space of doubt that the Fantastic comes to existence, and from the moment the author confirms either as right, or as soon as the reader decides which explanation they choose to believe, the Fantastic enters either of two categories precedingly named as the *Fantastic Uncanny* and the *Fantastic Marvellous*. In Fantastic Uncanny narratives, apparently supernatural events receive a rational explanation. If the author confirmed Villiers's suggestion to be true by explicitly affirming that intoxication was the only reason why he felt ill after his visit in Number 20 Paul Street, the story would belong to the first category. In the opposite case scenario, the author, by confirming it was a supernatural presence to cause Villiers's illness, would proclaim the story as written in the tradition of the Fantastic Marvellous. As a matter of fact, *The Great God Pan* never enters either of these categories and continues until the end to accept both possible explanations. In

²⁰⁷ Machen, *Things near and far*, 103

²⁰⁸ Todorov, 49

both cases, doubt destabilizes normal paradigms of familiar reality, providing the very basis of nineteenth century Fantastic literature²⁰⁹.

The main element which ensures the permanence of doubt in Fantastic literature is the particular use the genre makes of certain linguistic features. Expressions as “It was as if...”²¹⁰ and “I had a feeling that...”²¹¹ never affirm or deny the veracity of the situations and instead maintain the reader in that space of uncertainty which constitutes the nucleus of the Fantastic. The absence of such linguistic structures would assert the text as written in the tradition of either the Fantastic Marvellous or the Fantastic Uncanny. To some extent, language is therefore the main theme of fantastic texts, and these formulas resume the spirit of fantastic literature²¹². Unconditional faith or absolute incredulity would conduct the reader out of the fantastic sphere²¹³. It is this hesitation to bring the Fantastic to life. The perception of the events as “strange” is another major element which comes to play in the definition of a fantastic tale. The events are always filtered through the deceived eye of characters. Reluctancy to present definitive versions of the truth establishes the modern Fantastic as a kind of literature which draws attention on its own linguistic practices²¹⁴. Fantastic narratives in late nineteenth century result from a long period of experimentations in the literary field. Starting from the eighteenth century, all the possibilities of narration start to be exploited reaching the limit of parody, notably with Sterne in Great Britain. On the one hand, authors display the power to capture the reader into the story, while on the other hand they also have the pleasure to remind their public that what they are reading is a work of fiction²¹⁵. In fantastic literature the reader is drawn into the narrative by means of identification with the characters, with whom they share a limited knowledge of the reality of facts. In this way the reader is maintained in a state of uncertainty whether the narrated events are the product of invention – hence constituting a Marvellous text – or of strange coincidences – hence resulting an Uncanny work. The impression that a reader of a fantastic tale has is of being constantly exposed to a deceiving and limited understanding of the events. Such suspension of the reader, who is denied the attainment of the key to understand the events, can be considered itself as one of the main features of nineteenth-century fantastic literature²¹⁶.

²⁰⁹ Fusillo, *Teoria e storia del doppio*, Modena, Mucchi, 2012, 198

²¹⁰ Machen, *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 33

²¹¹ Machen, 40

²¹² Todorov, 34

²¹³ Ibidem

²¹⁴ Ceserani, 77

²¹⁵ Ceserani, 76

²¹⁶ Fusillo, 70

As it emerges from Edgar Allan Poe's *William Wilson*, certain fantastic tales can lend themselves to allegorical interpretation. One element that in *William Wilson* suggests an allegorical meaning of the tale is represented by the curiously low voice of the protagonist's double, symbolically standing for the murmuring voice of conscience. In order to justify the adoption of an allegorical reading to *The Great God Pan* as well, a similar hint should be identified in the tale. Meaningful to this respect could be Todorov's comment on Cazotte's *The Devil in Love*. The critic interestingly proposes an interpretation of the figure of the devil as symbolic of the woman as object of desire²¹⁷. The same interpretation could easily apply to Helen Vaughan in Machen's novella: a sensual woman who comes to be the object of desire of several men. Although such interpretation is not immediate with respect to *The Great God Pan*, it can be applied to it inasmuch as Helen embodies a major phobic dread in Victorian patriarchal society, namely a sexually empowered woman. Helen's threatening femininity could furthermore be associated with deviation, hence with a form of insanity. Insanity or madness is a prolific theme which situates in a long literary tradition, connected in turn with the problems of perception. Due to ambiguity of perception, which also represents a characteristic element of the Fantastic, all neat distinctions between the normal man and the mad one dissolves. Madness is a descent into the depth of being and sometimes causes a laceration²¹⁸, as in the case of *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, where schizophrenic division tears apart the protagonist's self-unity. In certain cases, the madman becomes a visionary who can see monsters and spirits, as Helen was said to have the power to summon unearthly creatures at her will. Moreover, this would have sufficed to judge a woman as devilish in *fin-de-siècle* Victorian society. Such interpretation, however, should keep into account also the other themes present in the story, as literary contents – even the most unusual – should not always be understood as allegories. Psychology could once again support this interpretation. Neurosis in ancient times – and still, to some extent, in late nineteenth century – presented itself in the guise of daemonic possession. Considering that in those times a sexually liberated woman as Helen Vaughan would have also normally been considered, if not diabolical, certainly mentally neurotic, the allegorical interpretation is reinforced. Allegorical meaning can turn the fantastic tale into a vehicle for a moral teaching²¹⁹.

²¹⁷ Todorov, 133

²¹⁸ Ceserani, 90

²¹⁹ Fusillo, 277

2.2 The Gothic

Machen's work situates in one of the great periods of fantastic literature, namely the Gothic tale of terror. A hybrid genre subverting the paradigms of realism and rationality, the Gothic was pioneered in England by the anonymous publication of Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* in 1764. The novel sparked a flourishing of horror stories endowed with an impetus fostered by a Gothic revival in architecture and a renewed interest in medieval subjects²²⁰. Among the greatest representatives of the generation of Gothic authors that follows, Ann Radcliffe embodies the perfect synthesis of the principal features of the genre. A geographical predilection for remote settings, such as Italy or Spain, and a portrayal of violence and threatening entities, figure prominently in her narratives. It is not surprising that the flourishing of supernatural themes in literature was registered in an epoch characterised by rationalism, intellectualism, scientific discoveries and technological development. What literature provides is above all a mean to express what is normally repressed²²¹. Gothic novels offered readers the possibility of directing outward unconscious anxieties and repressed desires in a controlled manner, experiencing a sort of cathartic release²²². In Victorian times, the Gothic tale of terror witnessed a prosaic turn in its content. Domestic, familiar, ordinary contexts came to be the privileged settings of the genre. Distressing situations and uncanny presences started to inhabit the new landscape that the largest part of readers had by then become accustomed to: the city. Recent discoveries in the scientific field of neurology and psychiatry fostered an interest also in the field of literature for the functioning mechanisms of the brain. As a result, terror came to be set in the mind. The most emblematic example of this kind of literature is Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*. After this turn, Gothic comes into being a subgenre of that literary category which Todorov in his classification calls the *fantastic uncanny*.

The Great God Pan inscribes in the gothic literary tradition for several reasons, starting from its settings. The first chapter, in which the terrifying scene of the experiment is presented, takes place in the laboratory of a visionary scientist. The framework immediately echoes the most recent tradition in the gothic, in which human psychology and science are regarded as sources of great terror. In the following chapter, Machen makes a step backwards in the tradition of the gothic and sets the narration of terrifying events in the natural landscapes of the countryside and the forest. Here children are the protagonists of eerie encounters with supernatural beings, with disastrous consequences. Lastly, from the third chapter onwards, it is witnessed a return

²²⁰ Vanon, *Haunted Minds, Studies in the Gothic and Fantastic Imagination*, Verona, Ombre Corte, 11

²²¹ Fusillo, 266

²²² Vanon, 12

on the scene of the prosaic modernity, which remains the setting for the story until its conclusion. Modernity is represented not by a minor cityscape, but by one of the major metropolises in nineteenth century, namely the city of London, which at the time was a symbol of progress, industrialization and well-being. The city, however, becomes a spectral locus in Machen's novella. London is portrayed on the one hand as a place full of life, where any desire can be satisfied by the company of friends or accommodating women. It is a place of sociality, in which every walking expedition bears the possibility to make lucky encounters with old friends and enjoy a pleasant chat in a fancy café. On the other hand, it is a place where suspicion hovers among the inhabitants. Odd happenings taking place under sinister circumstances spread a strange fear over something unknown among the people who meet along the streets and consequently "men looked at one another's faces when they met, each wondering whether the other was to be the victim of a fifth nameless tragedy"²²³. This atmosphere of mystery and suspicion is fostered precisely by London's net of sociality. The story itself proceeds through the spreading of the news of a wave of suicides committed by respectable men, and parallelly by the spreading of gossip concerning a certain Mrs Herbert.

The second great theme that Machen draws from the gothic tradition is the motif of the sensual, enchanting, mysterious and hence threatening woman who enthralls men by means of her seductive powers. Such powers are felt as malignant. Helen is perceived as a devil incarnate who has come on earth with the only purpose to destroy men. This frightful woman is therefore the centre of the story, the character who sets the events in motion, albeit she is actually extremely passive in the narration in a narrow sense. As a matter of fact, she has no voice in this story. Helen's portrayal in the narration seems to some extent parodical. The whole city of London speaks about her, while she is never given the possibility to provide her version of the events. The only version the reader is given is that of a chorus of male voices, all belonging to the same social group, namely the well-being male bourgeoisie of London.

Helen reflects the stereotypical image of the woman in the early gothic tales about vampires in which voracious women were perceived as terrifying specifically because of their unchecked sexual appetite. These women exerted a combination of antithetical reactions in the contemporary reading public of both nineteenth and twentieth century, by which they were beheld with a mixture of attraction and repulsion. Never before as much as in Victorian England, strong women were regarded at the same time as charming and threatening creatures. As Clive Bloom explained, Gothic exemplifies a passion of fear and torment into a distorted

²²³ Machen, 38

eroticism which is portrayed as a sadistic ritual²²⁴ performed by a witch-like female at the expenses of men. Excess itself contained in these stories is a hallmark of the Gothic. Helen's story, as narrated by the gossip spreading in London, is a story of sexual nightmare²²⁵. The *fin-de-siècle* was a time of the morphing of gender roles. Women started rejecting prescribed standards of behaviour to display independence and nonconformism. Some men rebelled against such a shift²²⁶. At the time, Bram Stoker portrayed the vampire women in *Dracula* as sexual aggressors, just as Machen portrayed Helen Vaughan. The woman in these narratives is a siren whose call echoes through the interior of her male victims' psyche. Helen's house is "one of the pleasantest houses of the season"²²⁷ and men enter it with the promise of enjoying themselves, only to exit as destroyed souls. Among the joviality of the community of London's bourgeoisie, Helen is perceived as an obscure presence that mingles with the members of high society, luring in the most unsuspected attire. Notwithstanding, although it was suggested that through this tale Machen yearned to be a protector of Victorian culture, by means of a story which appears as a cautionary tale, the author in this work explored taboo areas of that culture, not assuming a judgemental attitude towards female sexuality²²⁸. As a matter of fact, the tale can be understood as a critique of Victorian society's strict values and discriminatory attitudes towards women²²⁹.

Machen's tale is a perfect representative of *fin-de-siècle* Gothic literature for its blanks, ellipses and representational problems. What is most frightening in this novella is the unsaid²³⁰, an element which is brilliantly used by the author to arouse the most vivid form of dread in the reader. Finally, *The Great God Pan* involves the typical *fin-de-siècle* rhetoric of horror²³¹ and notably two specific themes which are characteristic elements of the Gothic, namely the Uncanny and the Double.

2.3 The Uncanny

The term was famously conceptualised by Sigmund Freud in his eponymous work *Das Unheimliche* in 1919. The German word *Unheimliche* is etymologically more straightforward

²²⁴ Goho, 61

²²⁵ Goho, 57

²²⁶ Goho, 65

²²⁷ Machen, 34

²²⁸ Goho, 61

²²⁹ More on this subject will be discussed in the third chapter of this dissertation

²³⁰ Françoise Dupeyron-Lafay, *Fin-de-siècle Malaise, Urban Gothic and the Crisis of Value and Judgement in Arthur Machen's "The Great God Pan" (1894)*, Bucharest, University of Bucharest Review, Literary and Cultural Studies Series, 2006, 53-59

²³¹ Ibidem

than the English *uncanny*, the latter being an imperfect translation and therefore unable to enclose the same etymological value. The root *Heim* can be translated as home, and by extension it means anything which is perceived as familiar, homely, and reassuring. The prefix *Un-* denotes by opposition what is strange, eerie, mysterious and unfamiliar, and therefore introduces a contrasting sense of unease. The adjective *Unheimlich* can be used henceforth to refer to a situation, an object, or even a person that is both perceived as known and unknown at the same time. Although the conceptualisation of the term originated in psychoanalytic discourse, Freud first applies it to a literary subject. In fact, in order to help his readers to understand the concept, he presents as a case study a fictional work written in 1815 by German author E. T. A. Hoffmann entitled *Der Sandmann*. In the tale, the protagonist – a young student named Nathanael – makes two incredible encounters which, although apparently very different, share the same nature. The first encounter involves a man who is almost identical in name and appearance to another man whom Nathanael had met in his childhood and who had been the source of a trauma the protagonist is at that point forced to relive. Evidently the encounter causes a great distress to Nathanael, who is at the same time convinced to be in the presence of the same man, albeit not being entirely sure. The second appalling encounter concerns the beautiful daughter of his professor, whom is finally revealed, to Nathanael's greatest astonishment, to be an automaton.

German philosopher Jentsch made some considerations as well on the subject. In his 1906 essay he suggests that in order to understand the essence of the uncanny one should “not ask what it is, but rather investigate how the affective excitement of the uncanny arises in psychological terms, how the psychical conditions must be constituted so that the ‘uncanny’ sensation emerges”²³². Among all the psychical uncertainties that can become a cause for the uncanny feeling to arise, he presents one in particular that is able to develop a powerful effect, namely the “doubt as to whether an apparently living being really is animated and, conversely, doubt as to whether a lifeless object may not in fact be animate”²³³. Freud dissents from Jentsch and affirms instead that the uncanny emerges from far deeper experiences than the mere revelation of the animation or non-animation of an object. The *Unheimliche* is the comeback of a traumatic experience that has been repressed as well. The doubt concerning the character of Coppola, whom Nathanael meets in his early adulthood and who is identical to Coppelius, his father's colleague of alchemical experiments, is the doubt as to whether a situation he thought was a product of his imagination, was actually a memory he had removed. As a child, Nathanael had

²³² Jentsch, *On the psychology of the uncanny*, Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift, 1906, 3

²³³ Jentsch, 8

come to identify his father's friend as the *Sandmann*, a frightening figure and the protagonist of a traumatic experience in Nathanael's childhood that he eventually removes. The uncanny feeling that arises from the revelation of Olympia's real nature as an automaton functions in the exact opposite way. While Coppélius, by reappearing, reveals what was believed to be unreal as real, Olympia on the other hand demonstrates that something believed as real can actually be inconsistent. The doubt that arises in Nathanael concerns his very capacity to discern the reality of situations and therefore it bears the question whether the whole reality as he knows it is not instead a product of deception. Hoffmann's narration proceeds together with several allusions to instruments that are able to condition sight, such as glasses and telescopes. The different ways of seeing are at the core of the uncanny, and they are highlighted by the author in order to suggest Nathanael's gaze as filtered. It is Nathanael's way of looking at the situations he is presented to which charges them with an uncanny aura. Therefore, the uncanny concerns perception and can be consequently understood as the shocking revelation that one's senses have been tricked. Thus, the uncanny is strictly connected with the feelings of a specific subject and does not necessarily apply to a material event defying reason²³⁴.

According to Freud, the *Unheimlich* with respect to the fictional world needs to be treated separately as it embraces a larger field of application than what can be experienced in everyday reality. The fairy tale, openly professing its animistic convictions and including an acceptance of the supernatural, is a territory where impossible situations in the real world are actually possible²³⁵. Even in a less fantastic and fictitious universe, some differences from the real world can be found. These situations can have the upsetting force of the uncanny over characters – and readers with them. Uncanny presences in a more or less credible fictional world could include daemons, ghosts, superior spiritual beings. Such entities do not always and not necessarily have to be felt as uncanny presences. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, for instance, Ariel is not ghastly, as it was generally accepted in the author's writings that superior spiritual beings were a normal presence in the world his plays reproduced. What makes a situation uncanny is still the perception of the events by the characters, which is transferred in turn to readers.

Hoffmann's tale includes all the main themes of the fantastic, such as the eye and ways of seeing – which go along with the theme of subjectivity of point of view and personality – and the doubt for what the veracity of the situations is concerned. The latter is one of the most suited tools in order to affect the reader directly and conveying to them the feeling of the uncanny.

²³⁴ Todorov, 50

²³⁵ Freud, 111

Arthur Machen employs the same strategy in *The Great God Pan* when describing, in the chapter entitled “*The discovery in Paul Street*”, the effect that the sight of Helen’s portrait produces on Clarke. The vision of the small pen-and-ink sketch is evocative of the feeling of the uncanny as it represents the return of the woman whose destruction Clarke had witnessed many years earlier and who has come back in order to persecute him. The woman of the portrait’s face is identical to Mary’s face and it has remained unvaried although several years have passed. The only difference Clarke can find in it is something which does not concern her physical appearance and which he cannot fully explain. The image has an extremely powerful uncanny charge for him as he does not find a mere similarity between Mary and the woman in the portrait, but he recognises in it the very same woman, who has returned after many years in order to persecute him. What Machen shows in the passage is not reality of facts, which as it will be learned in the epilogue, is that Helen is actually Mary’s daughter. What is portrayed is the cognitive confusion of the character, which is transmitted to the reader together with strong sensations in order to convey terror. What emerges in the passage is that Clarke is neither entirely sure to be looking at the same woman, nor to be in front of the portrait of a different person as such. No further examination on the part of an omniscient narrator is provided. Consequently, the reader can only share Clarke’s doubt.

Analysing Hoffmann’s tale, Freud displaces the triggering element of the effect of distress from the encounters themselves and identifies the real origin of the feeling of the uncanny in the traumatic experience Nathanael lived as a child. In the same way, the disconcert that Clarke experiences when looking at Helen’s portrait, making him look, according to Villiers, “as white as death”²³⁶, does not originate from the sight of Helen as such, but from what Helen’s face represents to him. As learned in Dr Raymond’s letter, which constitutes the epilogue of the novella, Clarke never asked any information for what the unfortunate fate of Mary was concerned. Seeing Helen’s face, hence, represents a return of something he had repressed for many years – or at least which he had been trying to repress – namely the traumatic experience of helping Dr Raymond perform a surgical operation that went terribly wrong, permanently deforming a young innocent girl. Clarke immediately associates Helen’s traits to Mary, resulting in the resurface of a sense of guilt that for the past years had lured silent in his subconscious. This guilt that had been repressed now represents under a new guise, resulting strange and perturbing. What arises in Clarke’s consciousness is a sort of repressed personality, the one of his past self who took part in a horrible crime by means of remaining silent while

²³⁶ Machen, 31

Doctor Raymond ruined a young girl, and this repressed personality returns in the form of a sinister double to obsess and torment the character who sees it.

Clarke's sense of guilt arguably places into question his very status as a reliable narrator in the epistolary passage he writes in the closing chapter of the novella to relate to Doctor Raymond the events that concern Helen Vaughan's death. It is from Clarke that Doctor Raymond learns that Helen has committed suicide. Admitting that the authenticity of Clarke's relation of the events should be put into question, consequently involves the possibility that Helen did not really die for her own choice, but was actually murdered.

2.4 The Double

The Double motif is a recurrent theme in all Western literature. In the theme of the Double, two alternative incarnations of the same individual coexist in one fictional universe²³⁷. The Double theme openly undermines the dominant logic in common understanding of the world, based on Aristotelian principles of identity and non-contradiction. The possible outcomes are twofold: either euphoric in the case of comic pieces, or dysphoric in the case of works infused with an uncanny aura, although intermediate possibilities are infinite²³⁸. Classical antiquity is a crucial moment in the history of the Double motif in literature. In this case, doubling is generally ascribed to the intervention of the gods in the life of human beings. The most famous case in which doubling verifies in classical literature, and in which for the first time a character is seen in the uncanny scene par excellence, that of the encounter with someone's own double, is Plautus' most original comedy, *Amphitruo*. In the play, Zeus and Mercury respectively metamorphose to assume the appearances of Amphitruo and his servant Sosia, as Zeus has decided to pursue the purpose of deceiving Amphitruo's wife Alcmena and consequently be able to possess her. When he encounters Mercury in his own features, Sosia falls into a profound dismay and he even starts to consider being actually dead. Standing in front of another individual who shares his same own appearance and name causes such distress to his principle of identity so as to bring the character even to doubt his own very existence. Although the systematic attack to the principle of identity is an element that bears in itself a dense uncanny charge, the effect results comic in Plautus' comedy as the public is immediately provided with the key to the events²³⁹.

²³⁷ Fusillo, 10

²³⁸ Fusillo, 12

²³⁹ Fusillo, 70

The Double motif encounters the theme of twins in another play by the same author, *Menaechmi*, one of his most spirited farces. Together with *Amphituro*, the latter serves the inspiration for Shakespeare's *Comedy of errors*²⁴⁰, in which Shakespeare adds another set of servant twins to Plautine's plot. A series of mishaps deploy as a result of confusion caused by the two sets of twins, who are unaware of one another. In the closing scene the twins's final encounter reveals the truth, solving all misunderstandings.

The theme of the Double acquires a tragic connotation instead in the case of Euripides's *Helen*. The tragedy popularized an alternative version of the myth of Troy, first provided two centuries earlier by Greek lyric poet Stesichorus. According to the legend, Stesichorus was affected by blindness after insulting Helen in a precedingly written composition. He therefore retracted his previous affirmations in a new poetical work, the *Palinode*, in which he flattered Helen's fidelity towards Menelaus and stated that Helen never went to Troy in the first place. In the new version of the myth, the woman who left with Paris causing the outbreak of the war was actually an *eidolon*, a ghost made by the gods to take their revenge over the human world, as frequently happened in Classic myths. Euripides's *Helen* features a recurring trait in the theme of the Double which still survives in contemporary narratives, namely the opposition between positive and negative patterns of behaviour²⁴¹. While Helen's double sent on earth by the gods embodies the essence of evil and becomes the scapegoat for all the violence and destruction resulting from the war, the real Helen is instead a model of morality, virtue and innocence. Differently from Plautus's comedy, in Euripides's *Helen* the two doubles never meet. The disquieting encounter with the look-alike instead makes its return at the centre of the intrigue in the second great period of the literature of the Double, namely the Romantic period.

Romantic period, notably the one developing in Germany, witnessed the flourishing of doubles in literature as a result of a growing interest towards the subject of madness as linked to the emerging scientific field of psychiatry and to contemporary philosophical thinking which featured among its central themes the relationship between the self and the world, and the construction of identity²⁴². This is also the period of the great turn produced by the Industrial Revolution, which imposed in turn a different kind of revolution, namely an ideological one, apart from a remodelling of material life.

As a result of the new industrial society, in the passage between eighteenth and nineteenth century, a radical mutation of cultural patterns is produced. Sacral and religious understandings

²⁴⁰ Watt, *Plautus and Shakespeare. Further Comments on "Menaechmi" and "The Comedy of Errors"*, The Classical Journal Vol. 20, No. 7, The Classical Association of the Middle West and South, 1925, 401

²⁴¹ Fusillo, 40

²⁴² Fusillo, 104

of the world collide with a growing scepticism, although never entirely disappearing²⁴³. Ancient ideas concerning transcendental reality, along with the limits of human knowledge start to be questioned. In the literary field a turn produces as well, sentencing the rupture with a millenary continuity of *topoi*, among which can be counted the Plautine archetype as well. Starting from this moment, the narrative situation of the stolen identity gains new configurations²⁴⁴.

Between 800 and 900 the Double becomes the expression of the split identity of the modern individual. In 1923, Freud's psychoanalytic theory suggests that there are three competing forces within the human mind that are battling against one another for dominance. These forces are the Id, the Ego and the Superego²⁴⁵. The case of the main characters in Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* can be held as an example to the structural theory of the mind propounded by Freud²⁴⁶. Dr Jekyll, a well-respected, wealthy Victorian gentleman, can be understood as a manifestation of the ego, while Mr. Hyde would seem easily recognizable as the Id, seeking instant gratification, following an aggressive instinct, and rejecting any form of moral or social codes that need be followed²⁴⁷. Additionally, Showalter proposes an interesting reading of Stevenson's novella as a tale about repression of homosexual drives in fin-de-siècle British society. According to the critic, "the reaction of the male characters to Hyde is suggestive of the almost hysterical homophobia of the late nineteenth century"²⁴⁸. He adds that "they find something unspeakable about Hyde, something *surprising* and *revolting*"²⁴⁹. What Showalter observed with respect to Stevenson's narrative, arguably might apply to Machen's tale as well. In the case of the latter, it is a woman's sexuality to be questioned, not as a result of being considered a deviation, as in the case of homosexuality, but as the effects of Victorian sexual repression were far worse for unmarried women of all social classes than for men²⁵⁰. Helen can be therefore understood as Mary's Id, embodying the drives that were frowned upon in Victorian society.

Not only does the doubling produce between two people, it can also involve an external object, as in the case of *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, whose plot is tied up with an extremely ancient anthropological tradition related with the magic power of images. Together with the portrait,

²⁴³ Ceserani, 108

²⁴⁴ Fusillo, 104

²⁴⁵ S. Freud, *Standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud*. London: Hogarth Press; pp. 1953–66

²⁴⁶ S. M Singh., S. Chakrabarti, *A study in dualism: The strange case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, Indian J Psychiatry, 2008, 221-3

²⁴⁷ Ibidem

²⁴⁸ E. Showalter, *Dr Jekyll's Closet*, in *The Haunted Mind: The Super-natural in Victorian Literature*, ed. Elton E. Smith and Robert Haas, London, Scarecrow Press, 1999, 9

²⁴⁹ Ibidem

²⁵⁰ Showalter, 16

the mirror also belongs to the same tradition. Perceived as a symbolic object infused with magic powers, ancient cultural traditions associated the mirror with the power of capturing the figure of the one looking at their own reflection in it. The reflected image could be stolen thanks to magic powers the mirror was endowed with. It is what happens in Stellan Rye's *The Student of Prague*. In the 1913 silent horror film, Balduin, a student at the University of Prague, is approached by a sinister old man called Scapinelli, who offers him wealth upon the signing of a contract that will permit him to take from Balduin's room whatever he pleases. Balduin laughs as in his room there is nothing valuable and signs the document. At this point, the man decides what he wants is Balduin's mirror-image, which detaches itself from the mirror and follows the old man through the door. The absence of Balduin's reflection in mirrors and the apparition of his alter ego in several situations proves disconcerting for the young man and especially for Margit, his woman beloved. Exasperated by these tormenting apparitions, Balduin shoots his alter ego, only to find that in the act he has shot himself²⁵¹. In his comment upon the film, Otto Rank proposes an allegorical reading according to which Balduin's alter ego represents a person's past, that inescapably clings to them and that becomes their fate as soon as they try to get rid of it²⁵².

The symbolic value of the mirror still survives in contemporary literature. It is still immediately understandable and it has maintained its connotation of magic and mystery. Since ancient culture the Double is linked with magic – particularly the kind concerning the power of transformation. When facing his own double, Sosia asks himself whether he has been transmuted. He thinks being the victim of a magic spell. Oblivion, loss of self, the fear of being under the power of someone else are feelings that characterize the experiences of encounters with doubles.

In *The Great God Pan*, when Helen is mistaken for Mary by Clarke, she seems transformed:

There certainly was Mary's face, but there was something else, something he had not seen on Mary's features when the white-clad girl entered the laboratory with the doctor, nor at her terrible awakening, nor when she lay grinning in bed. Whatever it was, the glance that came from those eyes, the smile on the full lips, or the expression of the whole face, Clarke shuddered before it in his inmost soul, and thought, unconsciously, of Dr Philips's words, 'the most vivid presentment of evil I have ever seen'²⁵³.

²⁵¹ O. Rank, *The Double, A Psychoanalytic Study*, Chapel Hill, The University of North Carolina Press, 1971, 5-6

²⁵² Rank, 6

²⁵³ Machen, 31

The double can have several meanings, often opposite to each other. In Maupassant's *The Horla* it is the forerunner of danger. In Poe's *William Wilson* it symbolizes conscience. In Du Maurier's *Don't Look Now* it announces death. Generally, it is an omen of bad luck. In the passage, however, what emerges on Clarke's part is the acknowledgement that Mary is still alive, although going by a different name and being thought responsible of triggering a series of suicides. This revelation presents a reality of facts in which Mary was not completely ruined by the experiment which he assisted to. Although shocking, the crimes allegedly committed by Helen arguably relieve Clarke from his guilt for taking part in the ruin of an innocent girl by remaining silent in front of the injustice she had been victim of. Helen's crimes, superseding Clarke's crime of silence, absolve the latter and affirm Helen as an evil creature that must be stopped.

Chapter 3

The Victorian New Woman in *The Great God Pan*

3.1 Society in Victorian England

Lasting from 1837 until the death of Queen Victoria in 1901, Victorian period witnessed a succession of several generations, as well as significant changes in politics, law, economics and society²⁵⁴. In 1837, when eighteen-year-old Victoria became queen, the majority of England's population still lived in villages or on farms in the countryside²⁵⁵ and little more than half of the population was alphabetised²⁵⁶. Industrialization – a process which had started in the eighteenth century – set extensive changes into motion, both enduringly changing the English landscape, as bridges and tunnels were built, and making a strong impact on people's everyday life as well. The coming of railways, in particular, revealed as a crucial technological revolution, both providing work for thousands of labourers, and encouraging further development in engineering and technology²⁵⁷. Within half a century, the face of the nation had undergone through deep changes. Once a feudal and agricultural society, England had turned into an industrial democracy²⁵⁸. New waves of labourers moved from the countryside to the cities²⁵⁹. By 1901, most people were settled in urban areas²⁶⁰, which by that time had been furnished with subway trains and electric streetlights²⁶¹. From the middle of the century, England enjoyed a time of stability, progress and prosperity²⁶². “The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations” of 1851, inaugurating the period, celebrated British progress and invention²⁶³. Its central building, the “Crystal Palace” was a triumph of engineering and design, and an imposing symbol for British supremacy in world markets²⁶⁴. Technical progress that had lead the Industrial Revolution also fostered more experimentation and scientific breakthroughs in every field: scientific, medical, surgical, technological.

²⁵⁴ S. Mitchell, *Daily life in Victorian England*, London, Greenwood Press, 1996, xiii

²⁵⁵ Mitchell, 6

²⁵⁶ Mitchell, xiii

²⁵⁷ Mitchell, 6

²⁵⁸ Mitchell, xiii

²⁵⁹ Mitchell, 13

²⁶⁰ *Ibidem*

²⁶¹ Mitchell, xiii

²⁶² Mitchell, 7

²⁶³ Mitchell, 8

²⁶⁴ *Ibidem*

Such sudden and profound changes inevitably resulted in reshaping the population, and consequently sparking social and political turmoil²⁶⁵. The social organization rested on a structure which although starting to blur continued to be determined by social class distinction, and in which each class lived according to its own standards²⁶⁶. On top of the social ladder were the upper classes, that included the aristocracy and the landed gentry²⁶⁷. Class belonging did not depend on the amount of money these people had, but rather on birth and family connection²⁶⁸. As inherited land or investments provided their income, they would not work for money²⁶⁹. The opposite pole of the social ladder was represented by the working classes. People belonging to this category earned their living by doing physical and often dirty labour, showing their class belonging in their clothes and their hands²⁷⁰. Manual workers were about three people out of every four²⁷¹. The largest number were agricultural labourers, domestic servants and factory hands²⁷² – impersonal term condemned by Charles Dickens in *Hard Times*²⁷³. Other employments for people belonging to this social class included mining, fishing, building, transportation, the garment industry and other manual jobs²⁷⁴. Life conditions of these people were precarious as they earned just enough to survive and could be thrown into poverty by illness or a sudden accident, namely a factory fire, producing even short-term unemployment²⁷⁵. Working-class women earned their living as domestic servants or agricultural labourers, and after the Industrial revolution, they had entered the chain of production and started working in factories, playing an active role in the economic life of the country. As a result, in the 1840s the first organized movements for women's rights began to form²⁷⁶. A new self-awareness for what their role in society was concerned, is what lead middle-class women as well to challenge the strict codes in which they had been confined during the past century. The middle classes did clean work, usually involving mental rather than physical effort²⁷⁷. The only middle-class career open to women was that of governess²⁷⁸. Nevertheless, women desire to extend the range

²⁶⁵ Mitchell, 6

²⁶⁶ Mitchell, 17

²⁶⁷ Mitchell, 18

²⁶⁸ Mitchell, 17

²⁶⁹ Mitchell, 18

²⁷⁰ Ibidem

²⁷¹ Ibidem

²⁷² Ibidem

²⁷³ L. Davidoff, *Class and Gender in Victorian England: The Diaries of Arthur J. Munby and Hannah Cullwick*, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Women and Power: Dimensions of Women's Historical Experience, 1979, 89

²⁷⁴ Mitchell, 18

²⁷⁵ Ibidem

²⁷⁶ Mitchell, 7

²⁷⁷ Mitchell, 18

²⁷⁸ Ibid.

of their employment²⁷⁹ brought them to look for more serious education than painting, piano playing, social graces and general knowledge, that were taught in girls' schools. Women's colleges were built in Oxford and Cambridge, although the two universities did not award degrees to women until after World War I²⁸⁰.

The middle classes' social relationships were, more than for the working classes, strictly defined by gender divisions. Men and women had to adhere to specific codes of behaviour. The figure of the woman, in particular, was crystallized in a virtuous stereotype propagated by much Victorian literature and resumed in 1854 poem written by Coventry Patmore entitled "*The angel in the house*". In the poem the ideal Victorian woman is depicted as a patient, sacrificing, self-abnegating wife. Upper and middle-class women represented the emotions, the Heart, or the Soul, seat of morality and tenderness. Their function as the keepers of the hearth in the home figured widely in the Victorian world view²⁸¹. The emphasis is on the word "wife", as a woman who remained unmarried and consequently unable to bear children was not considered a productive member of society. Remaining single and unmarried was therefore not conventional and frowned upon. For this reason young women were brought to marriage as soon as they reached marriageable age, often not for love, but according to financial interests and social status. Once married, women were expected to bear and nurture children, and to provide unconditional support and obedience to their husbands. In order not to ever deviate from their prescribed roles of nurturing mothers and supporting wives, and to be able of accomplishing their duties, ladies were expected never to make display of any kind of passionate and impetuous behaviour. To preserve their virtue of temperance, these ladies were considered asexual beings, unsusceptible to carnal desire. Prostitution played a paramount role in preserving values and lifestyle of the respectable civil society. Defenders of prostitution saw it as a necessary institution, allowing gentlemen to dispose of a mean to release their repressed sexual energy outside of marriage, leaving the middle-class household and middle-class ladies pure and unsullied²⁸². In this way the proper Victorian lady, remaining untouched, could still figure as a light of temperance and virtue²⁸³. Religion is a powerful force influencing Victorian life and establishing monogamy and family life as its main virtues. Inspired by their queen who promoted her own image as that of mother of the nation, Victorians considered their society as

²⁷⁹ Mitchell, 7

²⁸⁰ Mitchell, 11

²⁸¹ Davidoff, 89

²⁸² Ibidem

²⁸³ While appearing almost paradoxical, this principle represents a key to understand the profound differences in the attitude towards the two sexes in Victorian society.

a large family built on decency and morality. Christian moral teaching, puritan moralizing and repressive sexual morals were the pillars of Victorian society. The fact of resolving to exploit prostitution to sustain the façade of virtue and morality reveals both the hypocrisy of a society whose rules are loose towards men and strict towards women, and the fragility of a system built on huge contradictions. Not only did society deny women their right to be passionate beings. Inequalities between men and women also concerned legal rights. As a matter of fact, discriminatory laws forbid women to dispose of their money and even of certain rights after marriage. Additionally, John Stuart Mill's proposed amendment to the 1867 Reform Bill failed once again to secure votes for them²⁸⁴. An increasing dissatisfaction with these conditions was reflected in struggles for freedom, independence, and equal rights. Literature contributed to the cause abandoning representations of ideal wives to give women modern roles. Anti-normative examples of femininity can be found in the work of female authors like Emily Brönte, Charlotte Brönte and George Eliot, and male authors like Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens and, as the following considerations in this chapter will demonstrate, Arthur Machen. Although not embodying an example of virtuous modern femininity in a strict sense, Machen's female characters are perfect representatives of the struggle that second half of 19th century women had to endure while asserting their right to lead an existence in contrast with Victorian female standards. Rejecting all easy categorization, Helen Vaughan in spite of the accusations she is addressed by men in the story, can be understood as an arguably positive example of the New Woman, whom emerges as a central figure in the literature of Victorian period. The term "New Woman" was introduced and popularized in 1894 in a debate between Sarah Grand and Ouida on the pages of the *North American Review*²⁸⁵ and refers to a trend among Victorian emancipated women to explore the frontiers of new, more satisfactory definitions of womanly behaviour²⁸⁶.

3.2 The angel and the monster in *The Great God Pan*

Not only does the novella call into question the central to 19th century issue of women's condition in Victorian society. Machen's tale also touches upon a series of matters, highly discussed at that time, namely the risks and fears connected to vivisection, consent and an apparently unstoppable scientific progress. The novella features only two women, only one of

²⁸⁴ Mitchell, 11

²⁸⁵ I. Jusova, *The New Woman and the Empire*, Ohio State University Press, 2005, 183

²⁸⁶ Jusova, 26

whom barely utters a few words through the course of the whole narration. The condition of being unvoiced of the other is arguably symbolic of the condition of the woman in Victorian society, being relegated to prescribed roles of submission, and whose individuality was a characteristic to be repressed and not encouraged. Additionally, the fact she is not given any lines to speak constitutes a first hint suggesting a more complex reading of her character, involving a profound critique of a particular aspect of contemporary society. Both unrounded characters, these two women could easily be ranged into a typical categorization which appears to be recurrent in Victorian literature and is widely discussed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their work of feminist criticism entitled "*The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*". In this work the two authors argue that all female characters in male-authored writing during Victorian period can be categorized as either "angel" or "monster"²⁸⁷. Mary, the first woman whom readers are introduced to in *The Great God Pan*, can easily be reckoned as the pure, dispassionate and submissive "angel", an ideal female figure in male-dominated Victorian patriarchal society. Foil to this angel-like female, the other woman in the novella can be resumed as what Gilbert and Gubar call the "monster". This second kind of female character is embodied in Machen's tale by the sensual, passionate, rebellious and uncontrollable Helen Vaughan. In their essay, however, Gilbert and Gubar reject this dualistic opposition and argue instead that as every woman's individuality is the result of an inner warfare between the two opposing forces embodied by the angel and the monster, the latter often can be recognised as a double of the former. Female characters in the second half of 19th century increasingly deconstructed dualistic images of angel and monster inherited from male literature, often doing so not by overtly criticising patriarchal paradigms, but by means of their own quest for self-definition²⁸⁸.

As it has already been said with respect to the figures of the angel and the monster, Mary and Helen, although apparently opposite, could arguably be understood as each other's double, embodying the inner tension in the new woman between her duties as a proper lady and the urge to express her own individuality. Similarities between the two women, in fact, supersede their differences. Not only do Mary and Helen share, as it will be revealed in the final lines of the novella, a family bond, being mother and daughter. They also share the exact same fate, dying, in typical gothic fashion, of a violent death, as sacrificial beings in the male attempt to preserve social order. In patriarchal culture, the female, angry revolt against male domination

²⁸⁷ S. Gilbert, S. Gubar, *The Madwoman In The Attic, The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1984, 26

²⁸⁸ Gilbert, Gubar, 54

is inevitably considered daemonic²⁸⁹, hence Helen's uncanny association with the God Pan. However, a different reading would instead reveal Helen as an angry woman, locked into a self-tormenting vengeance which while increasing her helplessness also determines her growing isolation. In the male point of view, women of this kind are inevitably identified in the paradigm of the witch²⁹⁰, and the terrible death Helen faces at the end of the novella is the price women have been told they must pay for attempting to reject traditionally prescribed roles. This is what Carolyn Kizers suggests as the secret message that women in literature hide, which eventually is nothing more than "the private lives of one half of humanity"²⁹¹. In a patriarchal society a life of feminine rebellion can only tell a terrible story, and hence must be silenced²⁹². For this reason, Helen Vaughan as well emblematically never speaks throughout the whole narration. However, in Machen's favour it must be noted that the only real action in the story arises from the very presence, in a male context, of these two women: the one sweet, ignorant, passive, the other awful and active. The one a sort of angel, the other a witch – or a monster²⁹³.

Mary is a seventeen-year-old innocent orphan. Her orphanhood, while reflecting a 19th century literary fashion deriving from a particular interest in the theme of unfortunate childhood, draws further connection with Helen, who is revealed at the end of the novella as Mary's own orphan daughter. Having no relations and because of having been rescued "from almost certain starvation"²⁹⁴ by Doctor Raymond, as he affirms, Mary's life is to be considered his own property. Although today a similar implication would sound unacceptable, in Victorian historical context it would have represented a mere exaggeration not too far from reality. As it has already been noted, Victorian women were denied several rights which are today considered fundamental human rights. Until The Married Women's Property Act of 1870 was introduced, for instance, wives could not dispose of their own earnings, which were controlled entirely by their husbands²⁹⁵. A similar lack of control concerned their bodies as well, as marriage was still frequently a matter of economic decisions between their fathers and husbands, rather than chosen out of love. This being said, Doctor Raymond's attitude towards Mary is far from the one of a father to her daughter. The scene is, in fact, explicitly sexualised²⁹⁶. As we learn from

²⁸⁹ Gilbert, Gubar, 34

²⁹⁰ Ibidem

²⁹¹ Gilbert, Gubar, 53

²⁹² Gilbert, Gubar, 34

²⁹³ Gilbert, Gubar, 34

²⁹⁴ A. Machen, *The Great God Pan and Other Horror Stories* (1890), Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2019, 12

²⁹⁵ Mitchell, 11

²⁹⁶ S. Morse, "Her life is mine, to use as I see fit": *The Terror of Consent in Arthur Machen's The Great God Pan*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018, 490

certain observations in the point of view of Clarke, a friend of Doctor Raymond whom the latter called as a witness to the experiment, Mary is an attractive, sexually innocent girl dressed all in white²⁹⁷. Her looks and the way she “crossed her arms upon her breast as a little child about to say her prayers” build up her image as the “angel in the house”. Not only is Mary pure and innocent: she also appears to be ready to sacrifice for Doctor Raymond, a man who claims to own her life. The angelical nature of Mary is highlighted in Kostas Boyiopoulos’ interpretation, according to which, Mary should be associated with the Biblical figure of the Virgin Mary. Apart from their name coincidence²⁹⁸, further elements support this connection. Mary’s absolute faith in Doctor Raymond recalls the Virgin Mary’s devotion to God and the fact she appears to miraculously become pregnant during the experiment is akin to an immaculate conception. Quite explicit in this sense is the inscription Clarke added at the end of the account relating the episode concerning Helen’s childhood friend, Rachel, in his collection of ‘Memoirs to prove the Existence of the Devil’: “Et diabolus incarnatus est, et homo factus est”²⁹⁹. Meaning “And the devil was made incarnate, and was made man”, the sentence is a travesty of the Christian formulae in which Christ became incarnate from the Virgin Mary and was made man. This last point, however, calls in two different lines of interpretation. The first, accepting the miraculous conception which supposedly takes place during the experiment, forcibly goes into the direction of the fantastic mode, providing basis for subsequent interpretation of Helen as the figure of the antichrist. The final scene featuring Helen’s shape shifting transformation leaves few doubts concerning Machen’s request to his readers of an acceptance of the supernatural. However, the opening scene might accept a different interpretation. As it has already been noted, the scene is highly sexualised. Apart from being a typical feature in gothic literature, in which female victims of violence are often eroticised³⁰⁰, the sexual connotations of the scene arguably also suggest that, while anaesthetised, Mary is sexually assaulted by Doctor Raymond. This would mean that her consent to the brain procedure actually masqueraded consent to a sexual encounter – the scalpel penetrating her cranium indeed providing an emphatic metaphor for sexual penetration³⁰¹. Another parallelism has been drawn between Mary and a second biblical figure, namely Eve. As Eve, who is doomed after acquiring forbidden knowledge, Mary similarly is ruined after seeing the Great God Pan during the

²⁹⁷ Morse, 495

²⁹⁸ K. Boyiopoulos, “Esoteric Elements”: *The Judeo-Christian Scheme in Arthur Machen’s The Great God Pan*, 2009, 365

²⁹⁹ Machen, 21

³⁰⁰ M. Vanon Alliata, *Haunted Minds, Studies in the Gothic and Fantastic Imagination*, Ombre Corte, 2017, 17

³⁰¹ Boyiopoulos, 365

experiment. Nonetheless, there is a wide difference between the two women, since while Eve is lured by way of argument, Mary is clinically raped³⁰².

The real source of terror in this scene, has been argued by Samantha Morse to be connected with the issue of consent. A heatedly debated topic in the final quarter of 19th century, consent was closely associated with the issue of vivisection for scientific purposes. The 1876 Cruelty to Animals Act, which stipulated that “anybody may anywhere make an experiment causing pain on a live animal, provided that it be only for the purpose of new scientific discovery”³⁰³, paved the way to fears of exploitation of the human body. Anti-vivisectionist discourse speculated that accepting vivisection as an ethical practice cleared the path for its application on the weakest people in society, namely the infant, the ignorant peasant, and the feeble woman³⁰⁴. Ann Radcliffe in *On the Supernatural in Poetry* made a distinction between horror and terror, on which Devendra Varma expands, pointing out that “horror resorts to a cruder presentation of the macabre [...] by an exact portrayal of the physically horrible and revolting”³⁰⁵. Keeping this consideration into account, Morse suggests that if Doctor Raymond had physically overpowered Mary to make her undergo the operation, the scene would have been shocking and horrifying³⁰⁶. The fact she actually gives her consent is what makes the scene even more disturbing, providing that “union of grandeur and obscurity”³⁰⁷ that is, in Radcliffe’s words, a source of terror. Moreover, readers at that time would have immediately drawn a connection between the scene and the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885, that had recently raised the age of consent from thirteen to sixteen years old³⁰⁸. Mary in the scene is seventeen, and therefore legally able to give her consent. However, she appears completely unaware of the risks of the operation³⁰⁹. Machen in this chapter arguably dramatizes contemporary fears connected to the efficacy of the law to protect the innocent. Failing to keep into account determining variables, namely the degree of information of people and their social status and gender, the Criminal Law Amendment Act also raised fears towards medical procedures. Henceforth the scene created by Machen turns into reality anti-vivisectionists’ prediction that the weakest people in society would no longer be safe. This being said, any kind of sexual

³⁰² Boyiopoulos 366

³⁰³ F. P. Cobbe, “*The Vivisection Bills*”, 648

³⁰⁴ F. P. Cobbe, “*Cruelty to Animals*”, 54

³⁰⁵ S. Chibnall, P. Julian, *British Horror Cinema*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002, 28

³⁰⁶ Morse, 493

³⁰⁷ A. Radcliffe, “*On the Supernatural in Poetry*.” *Gothic Readings: The First Wave (1764-1840)*, London, Leicester University Press, 2000, 190

³⁰⁸ Morse, 490

³⁰⁹ Morse, 492

intercourse happening during the operation should not be considered as consented at any rate, Mary being anaesthetised for the entire length of the procedure. The final lines of the main narrative eventually confirm that something sexual certainly did take place during the operation, as nine months later a baby is born from Mary.

Although Doctor Raymond assured Clarke there was no danger in the operation, Mary is deformed by the brain surgery and dies nine months later, after giving birth to a child. The tragic fate of Mary ultimately consecrates her as a sacrificial victim, exploited by Doctor Raymond to pursue his evil purpose of lifting the veil that hides the transcendent reality from the prosaic world³¹⁰. The scene of the experiment is emblematic of the oppression and subjugation that women had to endure in the second half of 19th century. Doctor Raymond's attitude towards Mary is openly misogynistic, revealing the imbalance of power between the two sexes in Victorian society.

Apparently opposite appears to be Helen's attitude towards men, albeit she is eventually turned into a sacrificial victim too, for a quite similar reason to the sacrifice of Mary. Like Mary, who sacrificed to absolve her duty as an obedient Victorian lady towards the man who claims to own her life, Helen is required as well to sacrifice at the end of the novella to re-establish social order after subverting the rules of patriarchy by means of her very existence. Notwithstanding, Helen's sacrifice is able to strike one final blow to that same patriarchal society that is trying to tame her. Although some critics disclosed a dissatisfaction with Helen's suicide, judging it improbable with respect to her character throughout the novella³¹¹, as a matter of fact, her death is not a quiet and submissive surrender, but actually the most disturbing scene in the whole story. Helen does not easily give away her life. The terrifying spectacle of her death is incredibly disconcerting for the gentlemen witnessing it and it is probably able to leave a permanent mark on their consciences. Her suicide is the ultimate act of rejection of her role as a proper Victorian lady, and a gesture of assertion of her freedom and power over the controlling Victorian patriarchal society.

³¹⁰ This is an imperative that in Decadent culture is felt by perverse intellectuals to be pursued whatever the cost. In decadent culture, dissatisfaction with contemporary society – characterised by an excessively positivistic attitude and bourgeois lifestyle – brought decadent intellectuals to cultivate a belief in a transcendent reality. Albeit allegedly forming part of the reality we live in, such reality would not be visible to human eyes. This belief was accompanied by the hope that, through cultivation, the decadent intellectual could attain the ability to access the view of this transcendent reality. Decadent literature features several examples of this quest, for instance in chapter 9 of the possibly most emblematic work in Decadentism, namely Huysmans' *Against Nature*, and in the entire work of Arthur Rimbaud.

³¹¹ J. Goho *Journeys into darkness: Critical Essays on Gothic Horror*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2014, 64

The particular features Machen uses to render Helen are specifically chosen to prevent readers from easily empathising with her³¹². Never uttering a single word, Helen is constructed as a flat character, only seen from the male perspective of the other characters in the story. She is treated not very differently, then, than Mary, who appears in the opening chapter as a defenceless object³¹³, being even grammatically connoted as one³¹⁴. The fact that, in the opening scene, Mary is alone and oppressed by men that outnumber her, arguably anticipates Helen's fate at the end of the novella. Mary and Helen should be read as complementary characters, and Helen's monstrosity thus be understood as being, at least partly, manufactured by the male-dominated point of view the reader is exposed to. As it has already been stated, the fact that the two women are blood-related, provides further basis to a reading of their characters as being complementary, each of them representing the opposite polarities in the inner warfare of the 19th century woman, divided between passions and the virtue of temperance which society imposed to her. Helen's daemonic nature could then be read as Mary's imprisoned anger, even more so since Helen is Mary's daughter and is born from Mary's exploitation by Doctor Raymond. When she first appears in the story, the young Helen V. – as she is called in Clarke's memoirs – is "reticent as to her former life and her adopted father"³¹⁵. Helen enters the scene as a desire for revenge made flesh. Notwithstanding, although she appears as the villain of the story, she should be seen rather as a complex character who does not crystallize into easy categorization and serves instead the purpose of advancing a critique of a society that oppressed women, viewing them as monsters when they displayed passionate, unconventional behaviour.

As it has already been noted, Mary's name is symbolically meaningful. Likewise, Helen's name has symbolic meaning, being evocative of a particular female figure in Greek literature, namely Helen of Troy³¹⁶. Brought back to fashion by several Decadent artists, including Gustave Moreau with his painting "*Helen on the ramparts of Troy*", Helen represents a specific kind of femininity that Decadent aesthetic – to which Machen's novella has been linked³¹⁷ – was particularly fascinated with. Representative figures of this specific kind of femininity can be found in various artistic fields, peopling acclaimed literary, theatrical and artistic works of the end of the century. Among these female figures, one of the most influential was Salome, the Biblical princess whose sensual dance is the cause of John the Baptist's decapitation, and who

³¹² More on this can be found in S. Keen, *Empathy and the Novel*, Oxford University Press, 2009

³¹³ Goho, 62

³¹⁴ Morse, 488

³¹⁵ Machen, 17

³¹⁶ Renye, 8

³¹⁷ Morse, 484

was the protagonist of Oscar Wilde's fortunate eponymous theatrical piece. Similarly modelled by a misogynistic gaze over womanhood, Helen of Troy, due to her influence over men, has always been considered the only responsible of the Trojan War and of all the violence and destruction resulting from it. Helen of Troy embodies the same kind of femininity as Salome, namely a deadly one, in which sensuality and death are intertwined. Similarities between Machen's Helen Vaughan and Helen of Troy firstly include their extraordinary good looks, as the one was described by the Greek poet Sappho as "she who surpassed all human kind in beauty"³¹⁸ and the other as "a girl of the most wonderful and most strange beauty"³¹⁹. Neither of them conforms to traditional prescribed feminine roles – of wife, daughter and mother³²⁰. They both embody instead a particular vision of femininity that, filtered through the eyes of men, is considered dangerous and able to bear destruction over the patriarchal world in which the story is set. The strong connotation of doubleness associated to Helen, figuring also in her very appearance as she was judged by people who had seen her to be "at once the most beautiful woman and the most repulsive they had ever set eyes on"³²¹, arguably reinforces the idea that Machen's Helen is a double to Mary, expressing the inner tension in the New Woman between duty and rebellion.

3.3 Helen: The New Woman

In a sense Machen's novella might appear as a cautionary tale, warning readers against a series of contemporary issues that were being debated at the time of its publication. Such issues included the underside of science, society's responsibility to protect the innocent, the loss of religion and dangers of excess. According to 19th century critique, Machen offered a model for understanding degeneration and the horror associated with it³²². In recent times, certain contemporary critics as well developed their critique from this line of interpretation, viewing Helen's crimes as unspeakable³²³, and associating her to the figure of the antichrist³²⁴. Machen's work undoubtedly provides a lens for seeing developments of ideas on sexuality in the late Victorian period. However, the critique's attention should arguably not be focused on her supposedly daemonic nature and on her unspeakable crimes, but rather on her power to disrupt

³¹⁸ J. Powell, *Sappho: A Garland, The Poems and Fragments of Sappho*, New York, Noonday Press, 1993, 4

³¹⁹ Machen, 22

³²⁰ M. Fusillo, *L'altro e lo stesso, Teoria e storia del doppio*, 40

³²¹ Machen, 26

³²² Morse, 483

³²³ Goho, 64

³²⁴ Boyiopoulos, 365

the carefully constructed equilibrium of Victorian patriarchal society. Helen Vaughan is a vital force that enters a mortal, prescribed world, a society with a repressive structure³²⁵, a zone of firmly-defined sexual behaviours³²⁶. Throughout the narrative she crosses gender barriers, and emblematically the final image men witness of her is of sexual indeterminacy.

I saw the form waver from sex to sex, dividing itself from itself, and then again reunited³²⁷.

Helen's demeanour is unsettling because of her defiance of convention. Threatening to subvert the established order of society – in which the relationship between the two sexes is strictly defined by laws of superiority and male power – Helen's status of unfixed gender imperils Machen's gentlemen³²⁸. The latter's privileged status is eventually revealed by the mere presence of this powerful unconventional woman as extremely precarious³²⁹.

Helen is above all characterised by her independence. She has wealth, travels the world – she is met for the first time by those friends of Herbert's who introduce her to him, while in Florence and, once she reappears under the name of Mrs Beaumont, she is said by rumours to come from South America – and has several lovers³³⁰. She openly rejects to play conventional female roles. Not conforming to a narrow identity, entirely defined by relation to male figures – such as the wife, mother and sister – Helen is ranged by the critique into the category of the *femme fatale*. This particular female figure embodies a phobic dread in late 19th century of external and internal loss of control. While Kostas Boyiopoulos in his interpretation beholds Helen's monstrosity as literal, an alternative interpretation suggests such monstrosity should be interpreted in a figurative sense, as resulting from Helen's sexual deviance from the moral standard. In late 19th century, science played a determinant part in establishing heteronormative sexual life, for the only purpose of engendering children and not for self-pleasure, as the rule outside of which all is perversion³³¹. The active expression of desire of an adult woman did not find tolerance in this perspective³³². Helen's innate ability and sincere desire to commune with ancient forces is an authentic drive, unmediated by the prudence of custom and self-restrained artifice. However, such sexual relationships lead to infertility and not to procreation.

³²⁵ Renye, 189

³²⁶ Renye 195

³²⁷ Machen, 50

³²⁸ Renye 190

³²⁹ Renye, 181

³³⁰ Goho 64

³³¹ Renye 198

³³² Renye 29

Emblematically, in the first memoir gathered by Clarke in his collection of anecdotes concerning Helen V., the young girl is reported to have been found after a supposed encounter with Pan “in the middle of a glade or open space left by charcoal burners”³³³. The symbolism of the place, evoking an image in which both nature and life are lacking, is evident. Such relationships were not considered acceptable in a society in which the only reason women should have sexual intercourse was to engender progeny and such duty had to be fulfilled with the prerogative of never abandoning themselves to strong passions. Helen’s disinhibited, scandalously open sex drives do not respect heteronormative borders established by society³³⁴, and for this she must be punished³³⁵. Not only is her behaviour considered reproachable. In his account to Villiers to inform his old friend of what caused his ruin, Herbert, Helen’s husband, while mentioning his wife uses these words: “that woman, if I can call her woman”³³⁶. For her deviation from the norm, Helen is not to be even considered a woman. In a way which appears similar to what Stesichorus did in his *Palinode*, affirming it was in actual fact a double who went to Troy and caused all the evil Helen of Troy was thought responsible for, Helen Vaughan is hardly to be considered a human being. Herbert in his account also adds:

The name she passed under when I met her was Helen Vaughan, but what her real name was I can’t say. I don’t think she had a name. No, not in that sense. Only human beings have names³³⁷.

Subsequent interpretations in this sense, including the one provided by Kostas Boyiopoulos, propose Helen Vaughan as a remodelling of an evil inhuman creature, namely the Judaic figure of Lilith. A daemonic archetype of feminine horror, Lilith shares with Helen the same familiar bond with a supernatural entity – the devil in the case of the former, Pan in the case of the latter. Further connection is drawn by the fact that their victims die by a similar death cause, involving in both cases asphyxiation. Helen, like Lilith, is a dangerous monster that must be stopped. Interestingly, her monstrosity does not emerge from the awareness on the other characters’ part of her familiar relationship with the god Pan – since this revelation is not made public until the final lines of the novella, the reason must be a different one. Helen’s monstrosity is to be associated with her unconventional nature and her supposedly deviant sexuality. These are

³³³ Machen, 18

³³⁴ Renye 17

³³⁵ Renye 16

³³⁶ Machen, 22

³³⁷ Machen, 23

sufficient reasons for the male protagonists of the novella to be sure that she must be in league with the devil³³⁸.

A group of vigilant men intervenes in the defence of social order as preservers of their established modes of existence from the danger of collapsing under the threat of a monstrous outsider³³⁹. Helen's sexual power is held capable of driving gentlemen "of very good position"³⁴⁰, "of good family and means"³⁴¹ and "to all appearance in love with the world"³⁴² to commit suicide, by draining away their will to live. After marrying Helen, Herbert is left as a "wreck of a man"³⁴³, a "ruined man, in body and soul, [...] a man who has seen hell"³⁴⁴. The scenes Helen has these men assist to are assumed by Villiers – a friend of Herbert's and one of the gentlemen who will track Helen down in the final epilogue – to be "evil beyond the power of words"³⁴⁵. Machen could not be too explicit in his account of the activities in which Helen entertained men who turned out to be her alleged victims. Certain topics were problematic to be treated in literature due to a repressive censorship still effective at that time. The author skilfully avoided such risks by means of omissions, the latter being employed at the same time to increase the effect of horror. Omitting certain passages, in fact, requires the reader to fill the gaps with what they judge as most dreadful, superseding whatever the author would have written in terms of vividness and affect. A clear example can be found early in the novella, in the account reported by Clarke in his memoirs concerning the unfortunate fate of Helen's childhood friend Rachel.

As soon as she saw her mother, she exclaimed, "Ah mother, mother, why did you let me go to the forest with Helen?" Mrs. M. was astonished at so strange a question, and proceeded to make inquiries. Rachel told her a wild story. She said—³⁴⁶

The anecdote concerning the repercussions that Helen's strange activities had on Rachel suddenly interrupts, leaving the reader's imagination free to attribute the most dreadful possible ending to the story. Several are, however, the hints suggesting the nature of Helen's encounters with the "strange naked man"³⁴⁷ in the woods when she was a child and with gentlemen of

³³⁸ Goho, 64

³³⁹ Renye, 182

³⁴⁰ Machen, 24

³⁴¹ Machen, 25

³⁴² Machen, 38

³⁴³ Machen, 22

³⁴⁴ Machen, 23

³⁴⁵ Machen, 24

³⁴⁶ Machen, 20

³⁴⁷ Machen, 18

London later in her adulthood as sexual. The latter are suspiciously seen leaving her house at late hours in the night, and Helen herself is seen “entering a house in one of the meanest and most disreputable streets in Soho”³⁴⁸. Helen’s dark sexual appetites are felt to have disrupted the carefully fabricated social and psychic equilibrium of the respectable society of London. After seeing the god Pan, these gentlemen cannot escape without punishment of physical torture or social and spiritual damnation. Herbert synthesizes the horror he is experiencing in this way:

“I have seen the incredible, such horrors that even I myself sometimes stop in the middle of the street, and ask whether it is possible for a man to behold such things and live”³⁴⁹.

Notably, Helen does not kill them directly. She causes them to murder themselves and, according to Samantha Morse, she does so in such a way to call attention to their consent and participation³⁵⁰. Arguably, the action of Helen on these men could be associated to what Doctor Raymond did to Mary in the novella’s opening chapter. Having her consenting to take part in an experiment that ultimately would cause her serious brain deformation and ultimately death, could to some extent be linked to Helen’s action on men. After seeing the god Pan, Mary is turned into “a hopeless idiot”³⁵¹. Likewise, the men Helen has sexual intercourse with are revealed an uncanny view of reality that impels them to commit suicide. Exerting her control over them and driving them to commit suicide could henceforth be seen as a pursuit of a plan for revenge. Nevertheless, it must be noted that these men are not in the presence of Helen when committing suicide and consequently they are freer than Mary in disposing of their lives, as Mary was instead anesthetised during the operation, and therefore completely inert. The stress in this distinction is on free will, or rather the loss of control over it, that constitutes the real source of terror for these gentlemen. What is really unsettling is the erosion of individual agency³⁵². The control Helen exerts over these men is mental. Her victims are wealthy, respectable men, with no apparent reason to kill themselves. Notwithstanding, Helen, who does not kill them directly and drives them instead to commit suicide, is able to prompt them do what was thought unbelievable.

The Great God Pan was for Machen’s first reading audience, above all a psychological haunting narrative. Since the 1840s, when a prosaic turn in Gothic fiction occurred, terror had come to

³⁴⁸ Machen, 44

³⁴⁹ Machen, 23

³⁵⁰ Morse, 498

³⁵¹ Machen, 15

³⁵² Morse, 497

be set, no longer in haunted castles and supernatural occurrences, but in the mind³⁵³. Being focused on the inner warfare between the hero-villain and her victims, the novella reveals the issues connected with uncertain male identity and Victorian constructions on gender, reflecting contemporary anxieties with issues of control³⁵⁴. Helen, similarly to Bram Stoker's vampiric females is a lethal seducer, an agent of disorder, degeneration, and transgression, reflecting male anxieties about the unknown territory of femininity and threatening to disrupt middle-class established values³⁵⁵. She embodies the Gothic topos of the "primitive", that has the power to erode Victorian's optimistic confidence in science and the inevitability of progress³⁵⁶. Helen's monstrosity is a powerful metaphor to articulate inner conflicts regarding uncertain identity and a tempestuous relationship between the two genders³⁵⁷. Helen uses her sexuality in order to exert a form of mental control over men, reversing typical roles and turning into reality widespread fears in Victorian period about the dangers of unrestrained sexuality and excess. Helen, for Machen's contemporary audience, was perceived as a frightening antagonist as she was able to show the precariousness of the established social equilibrium that had until then been founded on specific roles assigned to each member of society and persisted under the vigilant eye of an oppressive patriarchy. Rejecting her prescribed social role of proper Victorian lady and making display of non-normative sexuality and subversive behaviour instead, Helen wreaks havoc long-established social positions³⁵⁸. The disastrous effects of her unconventional behaviour reveal the precariousness of a system built on wide contradictions. What is to be considered as Helen's most despicable wrongdoing is having debased conservative moral values, common virtue and established social organisation³⁵⁹. Strikingly, Machen's contemporary critique viewed Helen's character almost entirely from a misogynistic standpoint. Another parallel can be traced between Helen Vaughan and Helen of Troy with this respect. Both being crystallised in the figure of the femme fatale, they are entirely held accountable instead of their male sexual partners, the latter excused as just being following impulses as sexual appetites enthrall them³⁶⁰. It is part of these men's privilege as Victorian gentlemen to be absolved from all responsibility deriving from indulging in carnal pleasure, and consequently being able to enter and leave Helen's house in Soho without any shame, while Helen on the

³⁵³ Vanon, 13-15

³⁵⁴ Vanon, 17

³⁵⁵ Vanon, 22-23

³⁵⁶ Ibidem

³⁵⁷ Vanon, 17

³⁵⁸ Renye 188

³⁵⁹ Renye, 178

³⁶⁰ Renye, 8

other hand is entirely blamed for her lovers' unfortunate destinies. Helen Vaughan, like Helen of Troy, is a scapegoat for her male sexual partners' sins³⁶¹. For this reason, men in the novella unite in the effort of defending their community from the threat that Helen, as *femme fatale*, is felt to represent. What these men are actually fighting, consequently is not a monstrous entity, but the risk of losing the modes of existence they are used to. Fighting Helen Vaughan and having her committing suicide is a means for them to preserve imperial values and domestic moral standards assuring their position of privilege, while relegating women to their condition of oppression and restraint.

³⁶¹ Renye, 186

Conclusion

In 2009, an article of The Guardian referred to Machen by the epithet of “the forgotten father of weird fiction”³⁶². Yet *The Great God Pan* continues being reprinted and contemporary writers and directors such as Stephen King and Guillermo del Toro claim beholding it as a source of inspiration for their works³⁶³. As already said, the fascination exerted by the tale crossed British borders and reached the States, where critic H. P. Lovecraft wrote extensively on the Welsh author and his novella, consecrating the former as a writer of the supernatural and the latter as a weird tale³⁶⁴. Recently another author re-opened the discourse on weird literature, namely Mark Fisher. In his essay entitled *The Weird and the Eerie*, Fisher defines the weird by associating it with a sensation of wrongness deriving by the perception of a weird entity or object as so strange to be felt as it is not supposed to exist³⁶⁵. In Fisher’s definition what can be recognized is a similar reaction to that which is evoked by the figure of Helen in *The Great God Pan*, whose deviation from traditional gender standards causes her to be similarly perceived as *something* that should not exist. The weird is summarized by Fisher as something which is out of place³⁶⁶. The abominable tentacular bodies in weird literature written in the historical context of Victorian economic and industrial supremacy can be understood as representing everything that had been suppressed by urban good taste, namely the esoteric, the anomalous, the vulgar sublime, and yet exerted great fascination on the reading public due to a newly arisen need for escapism³⁶⁷. However, what represents the ultimate source of weird charge in *The Great God Pan*, namely Helen’s transformation, can arguably be understood as a metaphor for Helen’s psychological, and not physical, deviation from the norm.

Fisher in his essay discussed a second mode, or affect, namely the eerie. The latter is conceptualized by the critic as a peculiar kind of aesthetic experience which is triggered by particular cultural forms and shares with the weird the feeling of that “something that does not belong”³⁶⁸. As an example of the eerie, Fisher proposes Daphne Du Maurier’s *The Birds*, where the conscience developed by the birds – who uncannily start acting together in their attacks against humans – constitutes the eerie element in the novel. The eerie, in Du Maurier’s novel’s case, can be summarized as the fear of ‘something’ – namely the birds – that shouldn’t have an

³⁶² D. G. Walter, *Machen is the forgotten father of weird fiction*, The Guardian, 2009

³⁶³ Machin, 1065

³⁶⁴ Roberts, 353

³⁶⁵ M. Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie*, London, Repeater, 9

³⁶⁶ Fisher, 15

³⁶⁷ Fisher, 16

³⁶⁸ Fisher, 27

independent and free conscience³⁶⁹. Similarly, Helen's deviation from the standard in *The Great God Pan* is perceived as eerie, as it represents the development of a new self-conscience by an individual whom in repressive late nineteenth century Victorian society was only supposed to adhere to strict standards, namely a woman. Fisher himself in his essay assimilates the birds' conscience in Du Maurier's novel to class conscience, reinforcing this association³⁷⁰. Actually, the new self-conscience displayed by Helen was not a late nineteenth century achievement. The novelty whence the eerie charge derives was rather represented by the fierce display of such self-conscience. Moreover, Fisher underlines a lack of an adequate explanation of the events in Du Maurier's *The Birds* as contributing to building up an eerie charge³⁷¹. Likewise Helen's power exerted on men is perceived as an eerie Thanatos – what Freud, in *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*, calls a death drive – in which the psychological is produced by mysterious forces from the outside which cause her victims to inexplicably commit suicide³⁷².

The eerie is represented not so much by what is stated by the author, as Fisher notes with respect to Priest's *The Affirmation*, as by a confabulatory process³⁷³. In the same way in *The Great God Pan*, the perception of Helen's deviation from the standard as a manifestation of supernatural evil forces dwelling in her is the result of rumours and conjectures, rather than of an objective analysis of the events. As it has been stated in the third chapter, instead, Helen should rather be understood as the physical embodiment of the female angry revolt against patriarchal conception of womanhood in Victorian society and as the incarnation of male anxieties towards the female body and female freedom, both resumed in the figure of the femme fatale. To the men that gravitate around her, she seems “a sort of enigma”³⁷⁴ and a “mystery”³⁷⁵. Yet her motives seem clear. The femme fatale, the demonic Helen, daughter of Mary and Pan, returns later in the story to avenge her mother³⁷⁶. Arguably, Helen's actions throughout the novella and her final death could be understood as a vengeance carried against patriarchy in general. Although it has never been openly stated by Machen as his intention, Helen can be understood as the real victim of the story. The failure of recognition of the conscience of the New Woman in Helen, alongside the motives behind her actions, are what creates in *The Great God Pan* that sense of the eerie which results from what Fisher describes as the *not seeing what is there*. The

³⁶⁹ Fisher, 29

³⁷⁰ Ibidem

³⁷¹ Ibidem

³⁷² Fisher, 36

³⁷³ Fisher, 31

³⁷⁴ Machen, 27

³⁷⁵ Machen, 30

³⁷⁶ Mydla, 45

gap of unseen which is produced results even stranger than that which would have been evoked by the *seeing what is not there*³⁷⁷. Finally, Helen's uncanny nature and the effects she produces on the other characters are both similarly recognizable in Fisher's considerations on the encounter with the unknown. The fascination resulting by the latter, as a reaction which entails the inextricability of pleasure and pain³⁷⁸, arguably reminds of the doubleness in Helen, both fascinating and revolting, terrible and alluring. Helen overwhelms, cannot be contained, but still she fascinates³⁷⁹. Through the figure of Helen, Machen's novella both provides an alternative vision of femininity and confirms the New Woman as the victim of a patriarchal society in which there was no place for liberated women, whose fight against conventions however was boldly carried even through her death.

³⁷⁷ Fisher, 32

³⁷⁸ Ibidem

³⁷⁹ Fisher, 9

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