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# Decadence and Gothic in Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales by Vernon Lee

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Université de Bretagne Occidentale



Decadence and Gothic in *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*  
By Vernon Lee

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# Contents

Introduction	4
I. The beginnings of "[a] more [...] flexible model of society"	8
1. The changing context of Britain: a response to industrialization	8
a) The social aftermath of the Industrial Revolution	8
b) The rise of education	13
2. The fear of the "new"	18
a) A Sense of anxiety and collapse	18
b) Decadent literature : definition and birth of the movement	21
c) A movement seen as a threat	24
II. The appropriation of traditional codes of Decadence	28
1. Hauntings: when the format and nature of the text serve the plot	29
a) The short story: brevity and confusion of genres	29
b) Men's diaries or letters	33
c) "One really sees with the eyes of the body and the eyes of the spirit"	37
2. Beauty: "the main interest of the artist, and [...] his highest aim"	41
a) From Plato's metaphysical beauty to the synaesthesia of Edmund Burke	41
b) Major sources of inspiration: Walter Pater, the Pre-Raphaelites	44
c) "[B]eauty exists in many forms": Vernon Lee's appropriation	48
3. Mythical characters who convey new messages	53
a) The myth: a universality Decadents have appropriated for themselves	53
b) Lee's inspiration: Medusa and Pater's Gods in exile	56
c) Lee's deconstruction of myths	59
4. The theme of love in Hauntings	63
a) Pessimism: Schopenhauer's breeding ground for impossible loves	63
b) "'Decadence' was also a fin de siècle euphemism for homosexuality"	66
c) Hysteria and violence cannot lead to love	69
III. Hauntings' ambivalence: a criticism and a product of the society	74
1. Hauntings and its relation to the Gothic genre	74

a) A "combination of 'high culture' and 'low culture'"	74
b) The Gothic genre reflecting our cultural selves	78
2. Death: the appropriation of an elusive event	83
a) Between certainty and uncertainty	83
b) The ills of the society highlighted through the theme of death	87
3. "Imaginative suggestiveness": a strategy to manipulate the reader's mind	94
a) "[T]his vague we know not what"	94
b) A sense of reality which challenges the content of the stories	97
c) "[C]'est le lecteur qui fait le texte"	102
Conclusion	107
Bibliography	110

## Introduction

"I absolutely prohibit any biography of me. My life is my own and I leave that to nobody<sup>1</sup>." By writing these testamentary instructions, Lee summed up her whole personality: as a matter of fact, the chosen words mirror someone who was determined, who lived her life according to her principles while assuming her choices; and she wanted her identity untouched after her death.

This upper-middle class woman, whose real name was Violet Paget, was born in 1856 in France from a Welsh mother and a French father. Because of her mother's inheritance, the family travelled a lot through Europe, especially in France, Germany and Italy, where they finally settled down in 1873. She developed a real connection with this country that she considered as "her home<sup>2</sup>" and where she lived, until her death in 1935. As she was fond of the past, history and aesthetics, she found in Italy a combination of all these notions. Inspired by these areas of interest, she acquired a strong knowledge about the country and more specifically about the Italian Renaissance, her favorite period. This love for Italy took an official form when she published her first work, *Studies of the Eighteen Century in Italy*, in 1880 under the pseudonym of Vernon Lee. Later, she published *Euphorion* (1884) and *Renaissance Fancies and Studies* (1895) on the same topic. Besides, during her literary career she wrote many essays and only a few fictions among which the short stories collected in *Hauntings*<sup>3</sup>. Although she favored the writing of essays, her interest in Italy can also be found in her fictional work. Thus, having Italy as a setting for her short stories allowed her to use her knowledge to write about the country she loved while "the growing interest in Italian history and culture offered a large market for her studies<sup>4</sup>." Indeed, in a context in which British people had more spare time, the culture of reading developed and the *fin de siècle* was a time when newspapers and the short stories they contained really developed. Therefore,

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<sup>1</sup> Gunn, Peter. *Vernon Lee-Violet Paget, 1856-1935*. London: Oxford University Press, 1964. p.ix

<sup>2</sup> Zorn, Christa. *Vernon Lee: Aesthetics, History, and the Victorian Female Intellectual*. Ohio University Press, 2003. p.2

<sup>3</sup> *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, published in 1890 and was composed of four short stories ("Amour Dure", "Dionea", "Oke of Okehurst" and "A Wicked Voice"). The book used for this study, *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*, also contains three other short stories ("Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady", "A Wedding Chest", "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers").

<sup>4</sup> Zorn, Christa. *Op. cit.* p.2

standing out from other authors while dealing with a topic enjoyed by a British audience was a way to make her work special and at the same time to ensure more sales.

What made Lee a special author is the fact that Violet was used to going to her mother's salons from her childhood. There, she met "an illustrious set of international artists and intellectuals<sup>5</sup>" by whom she was considered a very clever person with independent ideas. Nevertheless, although it was the status of her family that allowed her to encounter these people, she had mitigated feelings about the "lazy stagnation<sup>6</sup>" of Victorian middle class. Indeed, if these salons were an opportunity to meet the intelligentsia, to share thoughts and to speak about societal and political issues (resulting from the progress and improvement of the industrial revolution) she was also aware of the "snobbery and complacency<sup>7</sup>" one could find in these meetings. This duality can be found in her writings: they were destined to a middle class readership while they criticized this very same class.

Thus, although she was introduced to literary circles because of her background, it was thanks to her intelligence and determination that she had been able to continue to be part of these circles. Even if she lived in Italy, she chose to write in English for British people. Consequently, most of her trips to England were made to maintain a network in order to be remembered because she was not there physically. It was during those trips that she met famous British writers such as the one she will be considered a disciple of, Walter Pater, as well as the leader of the Decadent Movement, Oscar Wilde. Indeed, during the two last decades of the nineteenth century, the Decadent Movement emerged in Europe, especially in France (where it had its roots) and in England (where it greatly developed). It valued "art for art's sake" at the expense of moral and ethical values. Its members thought that the society they lived in was not only boring but that it had also come to the end: the Industrial Revolution and the development of science meant that the world they knew was no longer the same. As a result, as the end of the century literally approached, they were not able to see the positive side of a new era, but only the pessimistic side of this transitional period. Therefore they thought it was useless to grant importance to morality and they preferred to focus on art because it was the only thing able to relieve their *malaise*. However, in their sombre vision of

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.* pp.6-7

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* p.8

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p.8

the world, only death remained certain, being both an inevitable event and the climax of their pessimism. The reader will find these aspects in Lee's *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*; indeed, aesthetics figures prominently in her works, whether in the characterization of the setting of the short stories or the characters. Furthermore, the theme of death is present in almost all the narratives while perversity and *ennui* are a backdrop for the stories.

She thought that "art [...] is born of certain inevitable tendencies in human nature, and [...] grows in accordance with certain necessary phenomena of mental change, and action, and reaction<sup>8</sup>." Thus, as a form of art, literature is subject to change: Vernon Lee did not want her stories frozen in the past because they live in the present as evidenced by her use of Gothic themes and patterns for instance. As a matter of fact, she took advantage of the Gothic revival at the end of the nineteenth century to give her narratives a mysterious atmosphere in which ghosts from the past can revive and influence the present of the characters. She combined the mood of anxiety of the late nineteenth century with features from the Decadent and Gothic movements. Actually, the complexity of her work went even further: she appropriated these codes and subverted them, creating her own style to denounce an oppressive and patriarchal society.

In the first part of the essay, we will take into account the context of the era: as a period of transition, it was bound to influence Lee. The Victorian society was shaped by the effects of the Industrial Revolution and classes started to mix for better or for worse. This implied social changes among which the development of spare time which went hand in hand with the growth of reading time, especially for the working and middle classes. Then, in the second part, we will focus on how she used the themes discussed by her contemporaries while subverting them to make her work original (and sometimes controversial). Because the Pre-Raphaelites<sup>9</sup> and the Decadents<sup>10</sup> inspired her, she chose to explore themes linked to their aesthetic movement such as beauty, myths or love. Yet, for each source of inspiration she borrowed elements while keeping a certain distance in order to be able to develop her own ideas. Indeed, as many other artists, she did want to denounce the failings of the Victorian society but also the patriarchal nature of this society—an aspect not dealt with by other authors since they were mostly men. At last, in the third part of the essay, we will examine a

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<sup>8</sup> Lee, Vernon. 'Comparative Aesthetics'. *The Contemporary Review* XXXVIII (1880): 300–326. p.326

<sup>9</sup> She was inspired by Gabriel Dante Rossetti and John Ruskin.

<sup>10</sup> Walter Pater and Oscar Wilde were also sources of inspiration.

paradox at the heart of *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*: indeed, her work is simultaneously a product and a criticism of the society. If on the one hand the collection of short stories is inspired by the Victorian society, on the other hand, the author has subverted this inspiration and turned it into a weapon to criticize this period, making her work ambivalent.



## **I. The beginnings of "[a] more [...] flexible model of society<sup>11</sup>"**

The end of the nineteenth century corresponds to the period following the Industrial Revolution. In order to understand the meaning of this revolution and more specifically its consequences, we have to consider the word *revolution* in itself and the concept it represents. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary: in astronomy, revolution is "the action by a celestial body of going round in an orbit" or "the time taken by a celestial body to make a complete round in its orbit". In these notions of cyclical and regular movement, we find the idea that a revolution is something which always comes back to the same point.

The philosopher Hannah Arendt was interested in such a notion and published, in 1963, *On Revolution*. According to her, the process of astronomical revolution can be applied to human affairs. The idea of coming back to the same point makes reference to the notion of ensuring peace since this idea is the ultimate aim of social life. But because a revolution is a process it means that it has a beginning and an end. Thus, the end of the process corresponds to the end of an old system which did not work. This will inexorably lead to a new system; that is to say in our societies to a new world and to the emergence of liberty.

The 1880s and 1890s were precisely a period of transition from an old system to a new one. Indeed, not only did the Industrial Revolution reach its climax during this period, but more importantly, the British population had to begin to cope with its societal and cultural effects. This transitional era brought not only newness but also anxiety among the British society, which had difficulty to deal with these modifications.

### **1. The changing context of Britain: a response to industrialization**

#### **a) The social aftermath of the Industrial Revolution**

The evolution the Victorian era (1857-1901) had to face was actually the result of the Industrial Revolution which occurred between 1780 and 1830. This revolution started with the invention of the steam-machine and of machinery for cotton work. Then, Britain moved rapidly from an agricultural economy to an industrial one. These changes brought modernity:

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<sup>11</sup> Thompson, Michael. 'The Landed Aristocracy and Business Elites in Victorian Britain: Actes du colloque de Rome, 21-23 Novembre 1985'. *Publications de l'École Française de Rome*. Vol. 107., (1988): 267-279. p.278

indeed, the "set of structures, institutions, ideas and techniques which have emerged<sup>12</sup>" had enabled the country to develop. According to the Marxist point of view of Engels, on the one hand, this industrialization led to the prosperity of the country by "the sudden multiplication of capital and national wealth<sup>13</sup>". On the other hand, the process led to the multiplication of the poor—or, in Engels' words "proletariat"—and to "the destruction of all property-holding and of all security of employment for the working-class, demoralization, [and] political excitement<sup>14</sup>".

Therefore, the economic situation of the country was improved at the expense of the workers' living conditions. People had to work hard in order to keep their jobs and to earn their meagre wages. Even if the earnings had increased in a first time, the cost of life had increased faster than the wages. So people became poorer than before and the ones who could not work were starving in the streets: they had no other choice than crime or robbery to survive. Thus, even if the country developed, there was a part of the population who did not improve its situation and as a result, disparities rose.

For those who could work, a range of Factory Acts led to the decrease of daywork hours and made safety and basic working conditions required. To mention but a few examples, the Factory Act of 1833 followed a report on the employment of children in factories. It prohibited the work of children under the age of nine in factories and night work for people under eighteen. Another important Factory Act was the one of 1844: it lowered the hours of work for children under thirteen (at the most six and half hours a day) and women (no more than twelve). Then, the Factory Act of 1878, followed a series of extensions of the previous acts mentioned before and it ended up putting all these laws together. Moreover, it guaranteed that no child under the age of ten should work and instead they must be educated. The Act also provided for the decrease of working hours for children from the age of ten to fourteen and for women. These steps allowed people to gain time off and increased the quality of living habits. In addition, innovations such as the telephone or the water and gas networks in cities also contributed to the improvement of life.

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<sup>12</sup> Definition of modernity proposed in Carnevali, Francesca, Julie-Marie Strange, and Paul Johnson. *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change*. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009. p.27

<sup>13</sup> Engels, F. *The Condition of the Working-Class in England In 1844*. (1845). Cosimo, Incorporated, 2009. p.7

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p.7

Moreover, transports evolved thanks to the development of the steam turbine. Thus, cities were rapidly connected to each other thanks to the expansion of the railway—even if for some people, such as John Ruskin<sup>15</sup>, it also disfigured the British landscape. For example, the cities of Liverpool and Manchester (the first to be connected) were linked to other big cities of the country, including London. People transportation was also facilitated within the capital with the inauguration of the first line of the London Underground in 1863.

These changes induced by the Industrial Revolution brought social problems during the end of the century. Thus, the development of means of transports added to the development of the industry drew people to cities. There were a huge increase of the urban population especially the London one:

At the beginning of the 19th century less than 1 million lived in London, by the 1850s the capital's population had doubled and, by the end of the 19th century 6.5 million lived in an ever expanding Greater London. London was now home to one in five of the UK population<sup>16</sup>.

This growth was not without consequences. While diseases such as tuberculosis, smallpox, cholera or typhoid spread among the population, cities became the reflection of the dark side of the Victorian era. The poor were the first victims of the lack of health of London. They suffered from malnutrition (they could not afford healthy food because of their low or nonexistent wages) and the bad quality of the air affected their lungs. Moreover, their poor hygienic conditions and the smell associated to them, separated them even more from the middle-class. Indeed, maintaining a respectable appearance was very important for members of the Victorian society, especially for the upper middle-class. Physical appearance was important: it was part of the codes people had to follow in order to control their image.

The law and social norms "defined respectability, virtue, [and] good reputation (reflecting wider social norms)." [...] The social code stressed that men were to engage in discipline, self-control, frugality, and moderation in all things, including enjoyment of alcohol. [...] And, "There was an ideal woman as well as an ideal

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<sup>15</sup> John Ruskin (1819-1900). British writer, poet, painter and art critic.

<sup>16</sup> Cook, Beverley, and Alex Werner. 'Breathing in London's History: From the Great Stink to the Great Smog'. *Museum of London*. 24 Aug. 2017. Date accessed 30 Jan. 2020 <<https://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/discover/londons-past-air>>.

man." [...] The ideal woman was expected to be married, a mother, loyal to her family, and more virtuous than any man<sup>17</sup>.

Yet, this way of life was difficult to follow. And, at night, a part of this respectable population fell by the wayside. Thus gambling, drugs and alcohol became a routine for a part of the upper-class population.

The reputation of men who governed, who set the tone and the example for the rest, was the reputation of society in general. And this reputation was based on external appearance, on outward behavior. It was, as it were, a kind of costume or dress<sup>18</sup>.

Surprisingly, this change of behaviour between day and night afforded a sort of complementarity. It even allowed a certain stability within the society. It was called the "Victorian Compromise". This compromise is embodied, for instance, by the famous character of M. Hyde in Stevenson's novel, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and M. Hyde*.

From a political point of view, the problems society had to face were taken into account by the Liberal Party more than by the Conservative Party. Indeed, the Liberal Party denounced the conditions of the working-class and were concerned with national health. This can explain the popularity of the political group. Thus, the Liberal government (with William Gladstone as Prime Minister<sup>19</sup>) started to make interventionist reforms. For instance, they recognized for the first time the right of the workers to defend themselves by legalizing trade unions in 1871<sup>20</sup>. Also, they improved the Public Health Act 1848<sup>21</sup> with a range of other Acts in order to enhance the cleanliness of cities but also to limit the spread of diseases.

Nevertheless, by helping to enhance the living conditions, the government also contributed to blur the borders between social classes. Indeed, all these changes redefined the social classes. As we have seen previously, there was a split within the poorest part of the population: some people became poorer than before while a part of the working-class had its working conditions improved. But the Industrial Revolution also impacted the aristocracy—a part of the population who never had to work to earn its wages. Suddenly, with the expansion of new

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<sup>17</sup> Schwartz, Paul M. 'From Victorian Secrets to Cyberspace Shaming'. *Chicago Law Review*. 76 (2009): 1407–1448. p.1409

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Friedman in *Ibid*. p.1410

<sup>19</sup> William Gladstone (1809-1898), liberal politician. He served four times as Prime Minister: 1868-1874 / 1880-1885 / 1886 / 1892-1894

<sup>20</sup> Trade Union Act 1871

<sup>21</sup> The Public Health Act 1848 created local boards of health. Their missions were to control sewers, to clean the streets and to guarantee the supply of water. They existed from 1848 to 1894.

industrial fields, their condition and their privileges were threatened by new rich people. That is what Michael Thompson explains:

It is conceivable that cultural assimilation of industrialists and businessmen to gentlemanly values and attitudes, and adoption of a pseudo-gentry way of life, took place while at the same time the social gulf between the two groups, in terms of inter-personal contacts or shared activities, and in terms of generally perceived status recognition, grew wider and wider<sup>22</sup>.

Thus, the limits between the aristocracy and the upper middle-class became confused. Before the Industrial Revolution, the aristocracy was synonym of nobility and bourgeoisie rank after it within the society. But, with the Industrial Revolution, some members of the bourgeoisie became as wealthy as some aristocrats. Therefore, they could afford almost the same way of life. Yet, their money did not come from the same sources. On the one hand, for industrialists and business men, their money was the result of their efforts. They had to work, to run a business, to manage people in order to earn this wealth. On the other hand, the aristocracy did not know anything about business. For aristocrats, money was rather the result of an ancestral heritage and of landowning than the result of their labour. Therefore, even if these people can be considered equals from a financial point of view, their state of mind was radically different. Because aristocrats wanted to keep their prestige and exclusive privileges and in order to show their superiority of rank, they enhanced their image: hunting, horse breeding and racing, parties and education were theirs. In opposition, the bourgeoisie highlighted the value of work and effort and it condemned aristocrats for their lack of morality. This led to a deep uneasiness which spread through the whole society. People had difficulty finding their position within society. It is part of this uneasiness that we find in Vernon Lee's works. She expresses it through her short stories, mentioning for instance the difficulties of her main characters to settle in the world they live in. They have to find solutions to cope with this world which is not entirely theirs anymore—even if sometimes their way out is to retreat in themselves, a world to which other people do not have access.

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<sup>22</sup> Thompson, Michael. 'The Landed Aristocracy and Business Elites in Victorian Britain: Actes du colloque de Rome, 21-23 Novembre 1985'. *Publications de l'École Française de Rome*. Vol. 107., (1988): 267–279. p.268

## **b) The rise of education**

In contrast to this uneasiness, England was in a healthy economic situation at the end of the nineteenth century. On one side, it was at the head of an "Empire on which the sun never sets" and on the other side, it started to enjoy the benefits of the Industrial Revolution, that is to say prosperity—at least for a part of the British population. Even the working-class, which went on working hard, started to see improvements in its working conditions due to the different actions taken by the government. Indeed, the state believed in the redistribution of wealth and in the creation of a basic welfare state. During the second half of the nineteenth century, it interfered in the field of factories, as we have seen, and went on years later by creating minimum wages<sup>23</sup> and introducing unemployment insurance and pensions for old workers<sup>24</sup>. Accordingly, living habits changed and people started to have free time.

Moreover, in 1880, the William Edward Foster's Education Act of 1870 (first act to deal with education) was expanded: primary education became compulsory before becoming free<sup>25</sup>, eleven years later. In addition, the gathering of people in cities deeply changed the way of entertaining: people coming from the countryside and used to practicing forms of sports had to deal with the lack of space for instance. Sometimes, they had to turn to different entertainments. Thus, the development of spare time, the progress of education and city life contributed to the rise of interest in culture in many forms, including reading.

Furthermore, the removal of the "taxes on knowledge" made the spread of newspapers easier. These taxes concerned the advertisements printed in the newspapers and the paper they were printed on. After their abolition in several steps (1853, 1855 and 1861) the production price of newspapers became cheaper and so did the selling price. It became easier for people to have access to information: "[t]he cheap press expanded social consciousness here as it had done in higher levels of society<sup>26</sup>". This burgeoning press not only provided information but it also mirrored the interest of people in leisure activities. Indeed, local or national newspapers did not only relate the news, but they also published stories in order to entertain their readers.

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<sup>23</sup> See Trade Boards Act of 1909

<sup>24</sup> See Old-age Pension Act of 1908

<sup>25</sup> The Elementary Education Act of 1880 made school compulsory for children from five to ten for instance. Then, the Elementary Education Act of 1881 made primary education payed by the state.

<sup>26</sup> Bailey, P. *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: Rational Recreation and the Contest for Control, 1830-1885*. London: Routledge, 1978. p.81

Thus, the short story was the best format: it totally fit the newspaper format but also the tastes of readers. *The Strand Magazine*<sup>27</sup> knew great success with the publication of Sherlock Holmes' adventures each month, as well as *MacMillan's Magazine*<sup>28</sup> which published detective stories too but also realistic ones such as "A Street" by Arthur George Morrison<sup>29</sup>. The fame of these magazines shows the diversity of the readers' interests and illustrates the popularity of the short story at that time.

The word *Short-story*<sup>30</sup> (with a capital letter and a hyphen in order to make a difference with a short story) was coined by Brander Matthews who refers in his work to Poe's concept about this kind of writing, that is to say : "unity of impression," "totality," "single effect"<sup>31</sup> and the fact that the plot comes first. The shortness of the story implies that it did not take too much space in the newspaper. These stories could be read quickly, like an article. Moreover, the reader did not have to wait to read the rest of the story because the whole plot was contained in a few pages.

In the same vein, *The Yellow Book*, founded in April 1894 by Henry Harland and Aubrey Beardsley (and published by John Lane until 1897) published many literary and artistic genres such as poems, essays, portraits and obviously short stories. This periodical was intended rather for the *bourgeoisie* and *avant-garde* audience because of its high selling price of five shillings. Thus, the short story impacted each social class even if the medium used was different.

Consequently, the rise of education, and more widely the interest in culture, made late Victorian citizens' minds evolve. Indeed, people started to have questions about religion, although the Church of England still dominated. Science, through the Industrial Revolution and its technological improvements, but also through literature, started to challenge the Church and its principles. By publishing *On the Origins of Species*<sup>32</sup> in 1859, Charles Darwin questioned the well-established idea, that human destiny would be governed by God.

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<sup>27</sup> *The Strand Magazine*: founded by George Newnes, published in the United Kingdom from January 1891 to March 1950.

<sup>28</sup> *Macmillan's Magazine*: monthly British magazine. Published from 1859 to 1907 by Alexander Macmillan.

<sup>29</sup> Published in *MacMillan's Magazine* in October 1891, it related the life in the East End, a district of London.

<sup>30</sup> Brander, Matthews. *The Philosophy of the Short-Story*. London: Longman, 1901.

<sup>31</sup> Poe, Edgar Allan. 'Twice-Told Tales'. *Selected Writings*. London: Penguin, 1967. 437–447.

<sup>32</sup> Darwin, Charles. *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*. London: J.Murray, 1859.

According to him, human beings evolve in a system based on a process of natural selection. In such a scheme, he asserted that only the fittest could survive. Thus, human beings could be at the center of a scientific process governed by scientific rules and not only at the center of a metaphysical one, headed by God. As a result, even though people were still committed to God, they started to be more critical towards His representatives and their power and means of action.

At the same time, as people started to understand that they were living in a world not only governed by God but also by scientific rules, a new interest in the psychology of the mind arose. People realized that they had a part to play in their destiny, they were no longer just God's subjects. The evolving views about the way the world worked added to the awareness of man's impact on this world enhanced the interest for human beings as a whole. In other words, people were no longer considered only through their body; their mind was also taken into account. The interest in psychology is deeply representative of the state of mind of this *fin de siècle*; for the subject is at the crossroad of science and mind.

For a very long time, scientists have been trying to find to find and to explain the links between the mind, its dysfunctions and their causes. In the Antiquity, Galien's works<sup>33</sup> already sought to establish the connection between mind and anatomy. Later, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries:

[...] distinguished figures as the psychophysicists Ernst Heinrich Weber (1795–1878) and Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801–1887), [who] pioneered the application of mathematical tools in the study of the human mind. Similarly, discoveries by the neuroanatomists Paul Broca (1824–1880) and Carl Wernicke (1848–1905) laid the foundation for a physiological approach to understanding the human mind<sup>34</sup>.

As a result, people were progressively convinced that illnesses of the mind could be originated by physical disorders and not purely the consequences of the possession by the Devil.

At the end of the nineteenth century, the interest in psychology reached a new step: Wilhelm Wundt was breaking new ground by introducing experimental psychology, that is to say the

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<sup>33</sup> Galien, Claude. *Oeuvres médicales choisies*. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.

<sup>34</sup> Schwarz, Katarina A., and Roland Pfister. 'Scientific Psychology in the 18th Century: A Historical Rediscovery'. *Perspectives on Psychological Science* 11.3 399–407. p.399



study of observable behaviours. He also created the first laboratory for psychological research in 1879 in Leipzig, and the first academic journal about psychological research<sup>35</sup>. His works contributed to make psychology a full-fledged science.

It is in this context that the British author and parapsychologist Frederic William Henry Myers founded the Society for Psychical Research in 1882 in London. In her work *Fantastique et Décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*, Catherine Rancy explains the Society's project: "Cette Société se place dans une perspective scientifique, et se fixe pour but de rassembler et d'analyser des cas de phénomènes rares, ou dont l'existence est contestée par la science officielle."<sup>36</sup> The goal of the Society was to bring a scientific light on what could be called non-scientific facts. Actually, its members wanted to fight the feeling of strangeness which could arise from paranormal facts. These scientific studies of facts that were difficult to be rationalized were a great source of inspiration for many writers whose short stories involved the mind. In the same way, there is a parallel between rationality and mind which is omnipresent in Lee's work. The reader always has to question his own feelings. For instance in the short story "Amour Dure", the reader has two possibilities about the main character. Either he decides to follow Spiridion Trepka's reasoning and, in this case, he agrees to fall with him into a fantastic world. Or he chooses to believe that this fantastic world is in fact a part of Spiridion's mind; a part of his mind which brings him hallucinations and precipitates his fall into madness. Therefore, through this swing between reality and fiction, we find in the short story the trace of the Society for Psychical Research in the same way the latter oscillated between scientific basis and supernatural stories.

Nevertheless, while scientific advancements fed a part of the literary scene, social advancements were not to be outdone. We have seen how the living habits of the working class started to improve. But there was another part of the late Victorian society who wanted to see its status improved: women. They started to revolt against their status in a society where the ideology was the summary of Schopenhauer's pessimistic philosophy<sup>37</sup> and Darwin's principle. Indeed, in his work the latter establishes a hierarchy between human beings and he thought for instance that women were intellectually inferior to men.

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<sup>35</sup> *Philosophische Studien*, published from 1881 to 1902.

<sup>36</sup> Rancy, Catherine. *Fantastique et Décadence En Angleterre 1890-1914*. Paris: C.N.R.S Editions, 1982. p.17

<sup>37</sup> Schopenhauer's theory will be discussed later on this essay.

Thus, between the children's education, the patriarchal society and the lack of financial independence, the destiny of the late Victorian women was well set. Yet, at the end of the nineteenth century women worked, unlike in previous centuries. In addition, a set of laws in favour of their emancipation got them some freedom in regard to their husband and to society. For instance, the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act (1857) allowed them to ask for divorce (although female adultery was considered as a crime and male adultery was not). Ten years later, in 1867, the first campaign in favour of the women suffrage was led by John Stuart Mill. And in 1893, the property right to married women became the same as the one for unmarried ones. These evolutions in favour of women's rights encouraged them to question their status within the society they lived in. Consequently, women started to draw men's attention about their condition. This was also true in literature and a new genre called "New Women" emerged. Led by women writers such as Olive Schreiner or George Egerton these female writers played an important role in literature. Using the short story as a medium to tell their stories, they brought innovation and modernity to British literature. As the feminist literary critic Elaine Showalter explains in her analysis:

For late-nineteenth century women writers, the short story offered flexibility and freedom from the traditional plots of the three-decker Victorian novel, plots which invariably ended in the heroine's marriage or her death. In contrast to the sprawling three-decker, the short-story emphasized psychological intensity and formal innovation<sup>38</sup>.

The short story medium, then, provided a space for both structural and thematic innovation; for the first time, women writers felt free to focus on their own personal stories in a new way. New Women's writings brought newness to the literary creation while creating a bond between their lives and fiction. They started to believe in the fact that willingness could allow them to transcend their condition.

In this quest for freedom and emancipation, they found an ally in *The Yellow Book*. In the introduction of their book, Emma Young and James Bailey point out : "*The Yellow Book* did not place word count restrictions upon pieces, meaning 'New Women' authors, including George Egerton and Ella D'Arcy, were free to experiment<sup>39</sup>". Then the authors resume : "With

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<sup>38</sup> Showalter, E. *Daughters of Decadence: Women Writers of the Fin de Siècle*. UK: Virago Press, 1993. pp.xiii-ix

<sup>39</sup> Young, E, and Bailey James. *British Women Short Story Writers: The New Woman to Now*. Edinburgh University Press, 2015. pp.1-14

Ella D'Arcy on the editorial board, *The Yellow Book* also provided a welcoming space for women writers of the period to publish, especially for those whose politically challenging work was not always well received<sup>40</sup>. Vernon Lee herself, had her short story "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" published in this magazine in 1895.

## **2. The fear of the "new"**

### **a) A Sense of anxiety and collapse**

In such an ambiguous society, a part of the population tended to reject the old traditions in favor of creation. The idea of creation (which implies newness) was reflected in the use of the label "new" by miscellaneous social trends and movements such as "New Woman, the utopian New Life, New Drama [...], the New Poetry and even the New Humour<sup>41</sup>" as the authors of *Twentieth-century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change* detail. Looking closely at the desire for newness, one realizes that this aspiration has actually two sides. On the one hand, it advocates creation, which can be linked to a feeling of fresh start bringing hope, or in the words of the journalist and philosopher Hannah Arendt: "[And] it is the nature of beginnings that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before<sup>42</sup>." On the other hand, novelty or *new beginning* as Hannah Arendt calls it, induces fear. Indeed, when people experiment something that never happened before, they cannot refer to a past experience. Therefore, they cannot anticipate the consequences which could derive of what they are living. There is a part of obscurity, of unknown. And it is this hidden side which can generate fear and anxiety about what is going to happen in the future. Still according to the philosopher, a cultural crisis can also be considered as a crisis of memory. The modernity characterized by the newness would be perceived as a loss of tradition and memory by people; as if they were betraying their past. This was exactly what the British society experimented in the 1880s and 1890s.

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<sup>40</sup> *Ibid* pp.1-14

<sup>41</sup> Carnevali, Francesca, Julie-Marie Strange, and Paul Johnson. *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change*. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009. p.31

<sup>42</sup> Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958. pp.177-178

As we have seen, the end of the Victorian era was a period of redefinition, whether on the cultural level or on the political one. Actually, these two sides were connected. By playing a part in the improvement of living and working conditions of people, the government contributed to the redefinition of the well-established limits of the Victorian social classes. In other words, to use Hannah Arendt's ideas:

Political interaction introduces [...] the newness of unexpected and therefore unpredictable events and states of affairs. Words and deeds evoke responses and reactions, leading, because of the plurality of agents, to an open-ended and unpredictable web of consequences. The events, states of affairs, and facts resulting from political interaction are therefore not simply contingent, but rather unpredictable and sometimes spectacularly or horrifyingly new<sup>43</sup>.

This blurring of boundaries (partly induced by the help of the British government and partly being the consequence of the Industrial Revolution) created a feeling of aimlessness. As social classes were not as well defined as before, the upper-classes felt threatened. They feared to lose the privileges they had enjoyed until then.

In addition, the beginning of women's emancipation questioned men's position in a society governed by males. Indeed, they were used to seeing women evolve indoors. The Victorian woman was the submissive guardian of home which was a sacred place for men who had to evolve in the public sphere<sup>44</sup>. Although not being an early feminist, Vernon Lee was opposed to this vision of women. Not only was she against Darwin's idea according to which women would be less intelligent than men, but she also thought that women should gain their independence not just by denouncing the inequalities of this patriarchal society but by gaining financial independence for instance.

This transformation of women's status and the visibility they gained brought fear among men, who saw a danger in these women and in the power they started to obtain. Besides, the *femme fatale*, which was very popular at that time, characterized perfectly this threatening side of women; an issue discussed later on this essay.

Consequently, it was a whole part of the population who felt an anxiety linked with the potential loss of its position within the society, while another part of the population enjoyed

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<sup>43</sup> Schües, Christina, Dorothea E Olkowski, and Helen A Fielding. *Time in Feminist Phenomenology*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011. p.142

<sup>44</sup> This idea is developed by John Ruskin in his essay: 'Of Queens' Gardens'. *Sesame and Lilies: Three Lectures*. London: J. Wiley, 1879.

its privileges, newly gained. Nevertheless, this new kind of freedom can also convey a feeling of angst<sup>45</sup>. Indeed, if there is no theological determinism (that is to say if human beings' lives are not strictly in the hands of God, as people tended to believe until then) that means that people are at the center of their existence. The idea that God exists but not necessarily rules our existence was already advocated by philosophers of the Enlightenment such as Diderot or Voltaire. Vernon Lee agreed with these ideas and she thought that people can transcend their condition and find their place within society. According to this idea, people are the actors of their lives, the ones who decide of the future: their own future but also the one of the society they inhabit. According to Jean-Paul Sartre, the freedom gained by this will of taking control of one's life leads people to question themselves: What am I going to do with my life? Now that I have the choice, which choice is the best? Thus, the philosopher thought that the notions of freedom and angst are connected<sup>46</sup>.

From this point of view, we can say that the anxiety and the fear felt at the end of the nineteenth century were in reality the result of several causes. Besides, although these two feelings are very close, we have to make a distinction between them:

La peur est une émotion ressentie généralement en présence ou dans la perspective d'un danger, c'est-à-dire d'une situation comportant la possibilité d'un inconvénient ou d'un mal qui nous affecterait.

L'angoisse serait une inquiétude, à certains égards semblable à la peur, mais dans laquelle le danger qui caractérise celle-ci reste indéterminé<sup>47</sup>.

To put it in the *fin de siècle* context, the fear could be the result of the modifications of society such as the blurring of class boundaries for instance; consequently, people belonging to the privileged classes would see their fellows as a threat to the preservation of their privileges. In parallel, the anxiety could be generated by the freedom gained, and in this case, the feeling of anxiety would come from within the people themselves. The meeting of these two sensations could be another way to explain the uneasiness felt by the whole society.

Although put in a different background, we do find these aspects of uneasiness and inner self questioning in Vernon Lee's characters. Most of the time, they are not very comfortable within

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<sup>45</sup> "[A]ngst [...] suggests an existential condition which seems to have to do with a long term state of deep-seated anxiety and alienation": Wierzbicka, A. *Emotions Across Languages and Cultures: Diversity and Universals*. Cambridge University Press, 1999. p.123

<sup>46</sup> Sartre, Jean-Paul. *L'être et le néant. Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*. Paris: Gallimard, 1943.

<sup>47</sup> Natanson, Jacques. 'La peur et l'angoisse'. *Imaginaire & inconscient*. 22.2 (2008): 161-173. p.161

the society they inhabit, they struggle to find their place like Dionea, one of her heroines<sup>48</sup>. Sometimes, the difficulty to cope with the world they live in leads them to turn to another world, created by their own mind. Such is the case of Mrs Oke in "Oke of Okehurst; Or, The Phantom Lover<sup>49</sup>" as well as Magnus, the narrator of "A Wicked Voice<sup>50</sup>".

## **b) Decadent literature : definition and birth of the movement**

According to literary critics, the period associated with the Decadent Movement in England goes generally from 1880 to 1900. *A Rebours*, written by J.K Huysmans<sup>51</sup>, was a key work of the movement. This book was published in 1884 and was considered as one of the most important of the trend. It was the first time that androgyny was used to discuss homosexuality—a theme prized by Decadent artists.

The Decadent Movement was significant in Europe and so in England, but it was born in France. Its birth can be partly explained by the defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. From this failure resulted the exile of Napoleon III and the loss of the Alsace-Lorraine. In reaction to this defeat, a rebellion against the French government took place in Paris: the Paris Commune of 1871. Because of the barricades, cannons and executions of hostages within Paris itself, these events pictured an end-of-the-world. Thus, this vision combined to the end of the century, could have been at the origin of the Decadent Movement. Nevertheless, if the pessimistic side of the trend was perhaps the most obvious, one does not forget that the movement did have a hoping side too. Actually it is this mix which makes its specificity.

As we have seen earlier, the end of the century corresponded to a time of transition. A transition which went hand in hand with paradoxal feelings. "La génération *fin-de-siècle* est consciente de vivre la fin d'une époque, et elle est hantée à la fois par des images d'agonie et d'espoir, de dégénérescence et de régénération<sup>52</sup>" asserts Catherine Rancy in her essay, *Fantastique et Décadence en Angleterre 1890-1914*.

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<sup>48</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2006. pp.77-104

<sup>49</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst; Or The Phantom Lover". *Ibid.* pp.105-153

<sup>50</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wicked Voice". *Ibid.* pp.154-181

<sup>51</sup> Huysmans, Joris-Karl. *A rebours*. Paris: G. Charpentier et Cie, 1884.

<sup>52</sup> Rancy, Catherine. *Op. cit.* p.4

On the one hand, skepticism about progress and science brought a nothing-to-loose feeling. A part of England started to reject the strictness of the Victorian codes and to look for the unknown, the new, the elsewhere<sup>53</sup>. There was a desire to break with what could be called the old century. For this side of the population, the morality advocated during the nineteenth century became boring. In the same way, they perceived every-day life as tiresome. Decadent artists despised reality because they thought it was ugly. There was a disgust towards the real life. To counter these feelings, they looked for a means to render their lives more tolerable. Thus, some of them found a way to counter this dissatisfaction about reality in alcohol and drugs while others tried to escape it by finding refuge in the past, the beauty and luxury. In quite a Manichean point of view, one can argue that the Decadents used art, beauty and luxury to counter boredom and ugliness.

On the other hand, with the new century ahead, a sentiment of liberation appeared. As implied in Hannah Arendt's words, the newness has always a part of expectation; from the rupture with the Victorian codes freedom emerged. As we have seen, working conditions were improved with the help of the British government. It was also the very beginning of the recognition of women as active human beings with potential, and not only as merely beautiful and passive wives. This freedom was reflected in art. In the same manner painters departed from the rules established by the Royal Academy of Arts with the advent of the Pre Raphaelite Brotherhood, the Decadent writers promoted a new vision of life which had nothing in common with the Victorian one. The freedom they gave to themselves allowed them to express their feelings in a new way and a new kind of literature emerged: either it dealt with new aspects of themes already considered by the previous generations of writers or it discussed totally new themes.

Although the movement was seen as something completely new considering the ideas it expressed or the way it expressed them, it nevertheless had roots in Romanticism. As Catherine Rancy points out:

Il s'agit jusqu'à ce stade d'un cycle de type romantique, caractérisé par une rébellion contre la raison, la norme, la tradition. Le mouvement esthétique et décadent est en effet l'indice de la faillite du matérialisme et de la croyance au progrès et cette révolte contre la raison amène un renouveau religieux et mystique,

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<sup>53</sup> "l'inconnu", "le nouveau", "l'ailleurs": translated from Rancy, Catherine. *Op. cit.* p.2

une revalorisation de l'univers intérieur, de l'irrationnel et de l'imaginaire, et un désir d'élargir les limites de l'expérience humaine<sup>54</sup>.

Thus, in the same way Romanticism was an answer to the rationalism of Enlightenment, the Decadent Movement was a revolt against materialism and progress. Besides, ideas such as the importance of the inner self, the individual subjectivity or the connection with senses, are themes already evoked by the Romantics. They privileged emotions over the intellect in the same manner Decadents focused on the quest of ideal through beauty at the expense of morality.

In addition, another characteristic of the Romantic movement was the quest of elevation of the mind through the experience of the sublime. Linked with fear, terror and danger, this state of mind is considered to be beyond normal experience and even beyond the reach of human understanding. It is seen as conveying greatness and intensity. Therefore the experience of the sublime brings the feeling of being fully alive. This sentiment is emphasized by the possibility of dying at any time because of the dangerousness of the experience. This research for dangerous experiences was also one of the characteristics of Decadence, even if the reasons of their pursuit were different.

As a result of this near-to-death experience, reflections about death were discussed by Romantics as well as they were by Decadents. Yet, the approaches were different: while the quest of Romantics was punctuated by the notions of joy and ideal, Decadent artists tended to neglect these aspects to focus on death itself. Relating the words of the Italian literary critic Mario Praz, Catherine Rancy wrote:

[...] le goût du macabre ou la sexualité pathologique, ne sont pas des éléments nouveaux apparus en 1880, mais font partie intégrante du romantisme, et vont de pair avec les idéaux de liberté, d'humanité et de pureté, expressions du même élan d'esprit. A partir du moment où cet élan s'est scindé en deux tendances opposées et où la sensibilité a pris le parti du "démoniaque" aux dépens de l'action et de l'idéalisme militant, on est en droit de parler de véritable décadence<sup>55</sup>.

Therefore, the Decadent Movement borrowed some ideas from Romanticism but, by deliberately narrowing their point of view and by erasing the ideal aspect, they kept only the pessimistic aspect of it. This pessimistic note which dominated Decadent literature inspired authors who wanted to write about the dark side of life: this is naturalism. It also inspired

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<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.* p.4

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* p.5



authors who wanted to focus on aesthetics, emphasizing refinement in order to curb this pessimism. At last, there were authors who wanted to use this pessimism as a way to explore the inner self (through the fantastic short story for instance). However, in either genre we do find the lack of moral preoccupations and the contempt of the social norms. Thus, authors did not hesitate to shock people in their writings using themes such as religion, morbidity, perversity and artificiality.

### **c) A movement seen as a threat**

The Decadents wanted to break with a well-established culture and more precisely they wanted to live beyond this culture. This was the reason why they focused only on the aspects (moral or not) they were interested in. In brief, the Decadents asserted that the individual *per se* was actually all the culture he needed. They wanted to emphasize the individual itself in all its complexity. Keeping this in mind, Decadent artists allowed themselves to discuss homosexuality in their works. But raising homosexuality (considered as a disease) in this way was seen as a threat for society.

The term *homosexual* was introduced in England during the 1890s as the result of an analysis by an Austro-Hungarian psychiatrist, Richard von Krafft-Ebing. In his forensic study *Psychopathia Sexualis*, he studied sexual perversions and homosexuality was considered as one of them. Thus, in a British society which was in the midst of change, being homosexual was something abnormal and shocking. It represented something unnatural, perverse and scary. It was even criminally punished, as reflected the Labouchere Amendment<sup>56</sup> which made illegal private homosexual act. This expressed how the emergence of sexuality in the public sphere was considered as a social issue.

In the same way, New Women thought that new paths should be opened: they were linked by this aspect to the Decadents. According to Elaine Showalter:

The decadent or aesthete was the masculine counterpart to the New Woman and, to some Victorian observers, 'an invention as terrible as, in some ways, more shocking' than she. In the conservative mind, the two were firmly linked as a

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<sup>56</sup> Section 11 of the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885. It was named after its promotor, Henry Labouchere (a liberal Member of Parliament). It was because of this amendment that Oscar Wilde was arrested and sentenced to life imprisonment in 1905.

couple sharing many attributes. Both were challenging the institution of marriage and blurring the borders between the sexes<sup>57</sup>.

Indeed, by assuming their sexuality, the Decadents were considered as the embodiment of a cultural degeneration. This sentiment was strengthened by the requests of New Women which insisted on sexual equality and self development.

Although the two movements were two different ones, they had in common the will to challenge the old Victorian culture and the wish to redefine the sexual codes. By claiming new ideas such as free union, they "[b]oth inspired reactions ranging from hilarity to disgust and outrage, and both raised as well profound fears for the future of sex, class and race<sup>58</sup>." Moreover, "[they] were widely felt to oppose [...] the values considered essential to the survival of established culture<sup>59</sup>." These artists not only put marriage in danger but they also threatened breeding by endorsing such new ideas and behaviours. That is why a parallel was established between the two movements.

Until then, woman was perceived as a source of inspiration and as a guardian of the Victorian civilization. But, grasping the opportunity brought by the wind of newness and freedom of this *fin de siècle*, New Women boosted the feeling that the society as it was could not work anymore. They wanted to control their own lives and not only to suffer the patriarchal society. Therefore, as Decadents expressed their feelings through their writings, New Women asked for education and equality through the heroines of their novels. Like the ideas of the Decadents, these demands were not welcomed by the society. There was an uneasiness (not to say an irritation) towards female writers who were considered as invaders in a male domain.

For all these reasons, anxiety grew among male intellectuals. They feared that a forthcoming destruction of the old society, so dear to them, could rise from these ideas. Indeed, as we have seen, the spread of newspapers contributed to the quick dissemination of news but also of ideas. Moreover, the increasing spare time added to the rise of wages led to mass consumerism. This new mass market also concerned the field of literature: there were

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<sup>57</sup> Showalter, Elaine. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. London: Virago Press, 1990. p.169

<sup>58</sup> Dowling, Linda. 'The Decadent and the New Woman in the 1890's'. *Nineteenth Century Fiction* (1979): 434–453. p.436

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* p.436

more readers than before. In addition, readers were tired of reading Victorian novels: this could be an explanation for the success of these new types of literature. Yet, opponents to these movements raised the problem that the diffusion of concepts dear to the Decadents (like sensuality, experience, pleasure, art, intellect, beauty, the fascination for the morbid, the strange, the unnatural) represented a danger to the readers as there was no mention of morality anywhere. Or rather, the point was that morality was not something required to enjoy the pleasures of life. Here again, a link has to be made with New Women: their requests about their status were not considered in line with morality. Indeed, their demands for meaningful works, sexual equality or control of fertility, made them unable to be good wives or mothers in the eyes of men<sup>60</sup>.

Therefore, the intellectuals who did not adhere to these ideas considered them not as open mindedness but as egotism. As the words of Richard Le Galiennie sum up: "the real core of decadence is to be found in its isolated interests<sup>61</sup>." Consequently, according to the intelligentsia, the proliferation of these thoughts represented a threat for English culture.

Due to this threat, it was not surprising that the opponents tried to counter the development of the movements. The journalist and critic Max Nordau was one of the most famous challenger of the Decadent Movement. He wrote a virulent publication, *Degeneration*, which was made public in 1893. In this book, he uses and expands the degeneration theory of the French psychiatrist Benedict Morel<sup>62</sup>. Nordau's text is meant to be a scientific study, with the aim to show the dangers of what he calls an illness. As Catherine Rancy has noted:

[...] la dégénérescence affecte non seulement l'individu, dans ses caractéristiques physiques et mentales, mais aussi la civilisation, en particulier dans le domaine des arts et des lettres. Le concept de dégénérescence [...] a été formulé par le psychiatre Morel : c'est 'une déviation malade d'un type primitif'. Une des caractéristiques du dégénéré est qu'il ne comprend pas la différence entre le bien et le mal ; une autre caractéristique est son émotivité [...]. Les autres symptômes de la dégénérescence sont le dégoût de l'action, le pessimisme de Schopenhauer, la prédilection pour la rêverie, bref toutes les caractéristiques de cette fin-de-siècle<sup>63</sup>.

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<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> Le Galiennie, Richard. *Retrospectives Reviews: A Literary Log*. London: John Lane, 1896. p231

<sup>62</sup> Morel, Benedict-Auguste. *Traité des dégénérescences physiques, intellectuelles et morales de l'espèce humaine et des causes qui produisent ces variétés malades*. Paris: J.B. Baillière, 1857.

<sup>63</sup> Rancy, Catherine. *Op. cit.* p.6

As a result, Nordau explains that Decadents represent a threat for society but he also predicts that they are going to be destroyed by their fascination for morbidity and death; what makes them good candidates for suicide. To this pseudo-scientific attack, Vernon Lee answered a few years later that:

[...] we may be tempted to destroy Max Nordau's books as pestilent rubbish, and forget his theories as insane ravings. But it is better that Nordau's absurdities and furies should serve rather as a deterrent than an example; that our abhorrence of his ways should teach the discrimination and justice of which he is incapable<sup>64</sup>.

The book from which this quotation was taken did not go unnoticed. Actually, after its publication, the *New York Times Saturday Review of Books* wrote about Lee that "[s]he writes with masculinity of thought and femininity of expression." Through these words, the author embodies perfectly the threat that the Decadents represented. The satirist British magazine *Punch* evoked the same idea several years before: the threat for the society emanated from the male effeminacy and female masculinity. This was going to make no development possible for future generations.

Therefore, the society of the end of nineteenth century felt threatened by these movements but there was also concerns about the spread of these ideas, considered harmful, and the consequences on the future generations.

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<sup>64</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Gospels of Anarchy and Other Contemporary Studies*. London: 1908. p.21

## II. The appropriation of traditional codes of Decadence

"[W]e have but a narrow conception of life if we confine it to the functions which are obviously practical, and a narrow conception of reality if we exclude from it the Past<sup>65</sup>". This quotation sums up her sources of inspiration: aesthetics and the past. She was convinced that the past can help people understand the present, not only in terms of history but also in terms of feelings. According to her, the past is the source of inspiration for the present; "and unless it be gathered up into the present and there revived<sup>66</sup>", it will shrink and disappear. That is why she actually conceptualized the term and wrote the word with a capital letter. Indeed, what was important for Vernon Lee were the feeling, the experience and the emotions brought by a work of art. This is why she also thought that aesthetics had a major importance because it contributed to extend people's vision of life. This interest for aesthetics is an aspect of her work which connects her to the Decadent Movement. Indeed, the movement is well-known for valuing intense refinement, artificiality and beauty above everything—including morality:

"[...] the task of defining the word *decadence* is the most difficult because unlike other literary designations, it arouses inescapable pejorative associations. Decadents [...] have a bad reputation. Exactly what the badness consists of we are not sure, but clearly some kind of perverted notion or action is expected of the decadent<sup>67</sup>".

Although she is faithful to some of the Decadent standards—such as the themes she explores—she manages to step back from the movement and from her sources of inspiration and make traditional codes hers in order to create her own path. That is where her art lies: she borrows from her predecessors or from her contemporaries what she needs in order to make her work the best it can be: a work which corresponds to her ideas and her values. Thus, *Hauntings* is a work mixing Lee's interest in the past with aesthetics. Actually, she goes even further by using these themes: she wants to make women's voices heard in an attempt to change mentalities.

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<sup>65</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Renaissance Fancies and Studies: Being a Sequel to Euphorion*. London: Smith, Elder and Co, 1895. p.238

<sup>66</sup> Lee, Vernon in Semon, Richard. *Mnemic Psychology*. London: George Allen & Unwin, 1923. p.21

<sup>67</sup> Kaminsky, Alice R. 'The Literary Concept of Decadence'. *Nineteenth-Century French Studies* 4.3 (1976): 371–384. p.371

# 1. *Hauntings*: when the format and nature of the text serve the plot

## a) The short story: brevity and confusion of genres

As we have seen previously, the short story was flourishing at the end of the nineteenth century. The development of newspapers and literary magazines such as *The Yellow Book* or *The Savoy* widely contributed to its expansion and its popularity. These periodicals (linked to the Decadent Movement because of their sometimes contentious content) published literary and artistic works. They were not dedicated to a specific genre: they printed poetry, essays, portraits and also short stories. Yet, short stories were not only famous because of the materials they were printed on, but also for their own well-defined characteristics. First of all, in a short story, the plot comes first. Indeed, all the devices are used to serve the plot. This focus on the achievement of the plot can be one of the reasons why short stories were so trendy at that time: people needed to be entertained and stories with well-chiseled plots fulfilled this requirement. Moreover, the short story is a kind of hybrid genre. In *Introduction à l'étude de la nouvelle littérature contemporaine de langue anglaise*, Liliane Louvel and Claudine Verley explain that this genre has the capacity to absorb different characteristics of other genres. This is what they call the polysynthetism of the short story. On the one hand, it can be compared to a novel because of its narrativity. Yet, on the other hand, the authors suggest that:

Ce polysynthétisme [...] s'exerce aussi vis à vis du théâtre et de la poésie. La fréquente unité de lieu et d'action, l'immersion du lecteur dans le monde fictif sans "exposition" et souvent sans épilogue, [...], l'importance significative du décor sont des caractéristiques qui rappellent le théâtre [...]. Et bien sûr, au nombre des traits proprement poétiques, on peut citer la trame sonore des mots, le jeu des tropes et des métaphores, les motifs répétitifs<sup>68</sup>.

Thus, the use of figures of speech helps to create images (such as in poetry) which contribute to making the story interesting. Also, the brevity of the text reminds us of the poetic structure. The description must be short and, as in poetry, the use of images and metaphors allows the

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<sup>68</sup> Louvel, Liliane, and Claudine Verley. *Introduction à l'étude de la nouvelle : littérature contemporaine de langue anglaise*. Presses Universitaires du Mirail. 1995. pp.25-26

reader to create the setting in his mind, as in the description of Mr Oke's house in "Oke of Okehurst":

Out of the huge hall, with its immense fireplace of delicately carved and inlaid grey and black stone, and its rows of family portraits, reaching from the wainscoting to the oaken ceiling, vaulted and ribbed like a ship's hull, opened the wide, flat-stepped staircase [...]. It seemed to me that I was being led through the palace of the Sleeping Beauty<sup>69</sup>.

The reader has no difficulty to imagine the place thanks to the narrator's accuracy. Yet, the atmosphere of the place is established by the comparison with the "palace of the Sleeping Beauty". Indeed, this parallel implies, on the one hand, a very beautiful setting: a mansion full of expensive and refined things while, on the other hand, a feeling of immobility, as if the house was frozen in time. Moreover, the allusion to the tale of Sleeping Beauty implies a kind of derealization of the setting because it refers to an imaginary world. This feeling is emphasized by the unreal dimensions of the mansion. Indeed, by using adjectives such as "huge", "immense" or "wide" to describe the mansion's elements, Lee makes the reader experience a feeling of littleness. Therefore, not only does the size of the house seem unreal to him but he can easily imagine the characters lost in this large house, as if it was not fit for its inhabitants.

Thus, the importance granted to the setting is as important as in a play since it involves the immediate immersion of the reader in the story. As the spectator of a theatrical representation, the reader is not *prepared* to dive into the plot. The story begins straight away after the title. The very first beginning of "A Wicked Voice" is a good example to illustrate this aspect. Indeed, it starts with this sentence: "They have been congratulating me again to-day upon being the only composer of our days<sup>70</sup>". The reader does not know who is "they" nor when is "today" or "our time". He is immersed in the story from the first line. This immediacy can be explained by the fact that the short story always focuses on a key moment in its main character's life, it is actually a slice of life story. As a matter of fact, Louvel and Verley point out that: "Il s'agit le plus souvent de *moments-clé*, moments de crise ou de resolution de crise<sup>71</sup>." Therefore, it implies that there is a before and an after that the reader is invited to guess. Nevertheless Vernon Lee gradually gives the reader references by providing him clues

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<sup>69</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst". *Op. cit.* p.111

<sup>70</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wicked Voice". *Op. cit.* p.154

<sup>71</sup> Louvel, Liliane, and Claudine Verley. *Op. cit.* p.18

throughout the story. In the case of "A wicked Voice", the story is told by an homodiegetic narrator. The indications provided are the result of the narrator's will. Thus, in the first paragraphs, the narrator reveals himself using an indirect approach. Quoting his "old nurse, far off in Norway<sup>72</sup>" suggests not only that he is from Norway, or at least lived there when he was young, but that the place where he was when he wrote the story is far away from Norway. Indeed, a few lines further on, he tells frankly the reader that he was in Venice.

Moreover, because of its brevity, the plot has to be contracted in time and space. Thus, as Louvel and Verley have noted, there are hardly more than two or three different places evoked. This is also true in Vernon Lee's works. For instance, the plot of "A Wedding Chest" is mostly set in the city of Perugia and the story of "Oke of Okehurst" fully takes place in the Kentish house of Mr Oke. In addition, with the aim of saving time (and space) the setting can also characterize the characters. Indeed, Vernon Lee thinks that from each place emerges something which defines its nature and gives emotions to the visitor. This is what is called the *Genius Loci*. This concept asserts that everything has a genius, a sort of guardian spirit; this spirit gives life to people as well as places. As a consequence, when a visitor meets the *Genius Loci*, a connection is made between him and the place: "places, localities [...] become objects of intense and most intimate feeling [...] they can touch us like living creature; and one can have with them friendship of the deepest and most satisfying sort<sup>73</sup>." The *Genius Loci* is therefore something that prowls and sneaks in places and one can meet it only with his soul. In "Dionea", the link between the place and the character is created by Doctor Alessandro De Rosis describing the sight from his window in his first letter:

Looking up from my desk, I see the sea through the window, deep below and beyond the olive woods, bluish-green in the sunshine and veined with violet under the cloud-bars [...]. [A] wicked sea, wicked in its loveliness, wickeder than your grey northern ones, and from which must have arisen in time gone by [...] a bellyful goddess of beauty, a Venus Verticordia, but in the bad sense of word, overwhelming men's lives in sudden darkness like that squall of last week<sup>74</sup>.

Not only does his depiction picture the landscape, it is also a metaphor describing the character of Dionea herself. The landscape becomes a full character and one might wonder if it is not the place that influenced Dionea's nature. Indeed, the narrator draws a parallel

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<sup>72</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wicked Voice". *Op. cit.* p.155

<sup>73</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Genius Loci: Notes on Places*. London: John Lane, 1907. pp.3-4

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.* pp.77-78



between the sea—from which Dionea comes—and the nature of the character. Thus, the reader is warned that the plot will revolve around wickedness—embodied by a beautiful young girl and by the sea. The fact that "[t]he short story deals with a single character, a single event, a single emotion or the series of emotions called forth by a single situation<sup>75</sup>" is pointed out by Brander Matthews. Indeed, as Louvel and Verley concede, analysis and retrospectives are not usual in short stories because they require explanations which would add length and would jeopardize the flow and the directness of the story. On the contrary, authors of short stories tend to emphasize ellipses and juxtapositions. It does not bother them to cut weak moments in order to focus on what is really important for the plot. Thus, the reader has to accept a certain degree of mystery within the narrative. In the preface of *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories*, Vernon Lee explains why she grants importance to mystery:

[W]e were talking of a certain castle whose heir is initiated [...] on his twenty-first birthday to the knowledge of a secret so terrible as to overshadow his subsequent life. It struck us, discussing the various mysteries and terrors that may lie behind this fact or this fable, that no doom or horror conceivable and to be defined in words could ever adequately solve this riddle; that no reality of dreadfulness could seem aught but paltry, bearable, and easy to face in comparison with *this vague we know not what*.

There are gaps which need to be filled with imagination because no words would be adequate enough to describe the situation. In fact, according to Lee, the undefined is what makes the story alive in the reader's mind. This undefined part is to be found in each of us and if she tried to "give shape to the vague [...] it [would] cease to exist<sup>76</sup>." The vague cannot exist outside of the mind. Similarly, still bearing in mind the idea of undefined, the end of the story is rarely a concluding one. The enigma is not always solved or, if it is, the author can give a hypothetical conclusion to the reader, as is illustrated by the last sentences of "Dionea": "Some say they have seen her, on stormy nights, wandering among the cliffs: but a sailor-boy assures me [...] that [...] he met at dawn [...] a Greek boat [on which] leaned Dionea, singing words in an unknown tongue<sup>77</sup>". The reader has to deal with the possibility of the existence of another world, a supernatural one in which Dionea would go on with her life: the story of Dionea does not end with the last word of the written story.

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<sup>75</sup> Brander Matthews in Louvel, Liliane, and Claudine Verley. *Op. cit.* p.19

<sup>76</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*. (1881). London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887. p.75

<sup>77</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.104

## b) Men's diaries or letters

The brevity of the short story can be seen from two different aspects. It results either of a compression of the events or of a fragmentation; in each case the narrative is incomplete. In *Hauntings*, Vernon Lee uses the two processes. Yet, this feeling of incompleteness is even more emphasized in two short stories: "Dionea" and "Amour Dure". Indeed, the first one is a collection of letters and the second one is a diary. Although different, these two narrative forms also have similarities. Indeed, both induce a temporal fragmentation, time passes by between two letters. For instance, in "Dionea", the second letter from the Doctor to Lady Evelyn Savelli was written on July 10, 1873 while the third was dated from December 21, 1879. Thus, although letters—as well as the diary—guarantee the chronological aspect of the story, they also create a constant interruption within the narrative. In this case the short story appears like a whole, composed of different parts and not like a part of a whole. Indeed, as Liliane Louvel and Claudine Verley have explained, the short story cannot stand by itself: "Aucune nouvelle ne peut en effet constituer un volume, elle doit être associée à d'autres [...] pour accéder au statut de livre. Son manque d'autonomie semble la condamner à être le parent pauvre, incapable de revendiquer une existence à part entière<sup>78</sup>." Here, however, the process is reversed. Indeed, the different parts of the short story create a sort of unity. What is left out is part of this unity and it is actually during these time intervals that important things happen. Indeed, not only must the events have taken place in order to be recounted in a letter, but they must be deemed important enough by the author of the letter to be mentioned. Consequently, it implies a certain reflection from the author, which renders narrative time slower than action time. Besides, the difference between these two times affects the narrative:

"On pourrait utiliser ici, de façon légèrement détournée, la célèbre métaphore de l'iceberg d'Hemingway : ce qui surnage, c'est la réalité objective mais elle n'a d'existence que par la masse—subjective—cachée<sup>79</sup>."

Catherine Rancy explains that the reader reads only a thin report of the real events. This record is addressed either to an addressee—in the case of letters—or to the writer himself—in the case of a diary. Again, the reader is immersed in the story from the very beginning because of this writing process. Indeed, from the very first lines of the story the reader is

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<sup>78</sup> Louvel, Liliane, and Verley Claudine. *Op. cit.* p.15

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* p.24

given clues about the narrator and about his relationship with the addressee, if there is one. Thus, the style used and the things or events shared testify of the degree of intimacy between them.

Pour ce qui est du monde environnant les épistoliers, ces derniers, même s'ils aiment à rapporter des nouvelles ignorées de leurs correspondants, écrivent néanmoins sur un fond de connaissances qui leur sont communes. Leurs références, parce qu'elles sont partagées, peuvent demeurer implicites : inutile de répéter à l'autre ce qu'il sait déjà. C'est dire que l'écriture épistolaire fonctionne en grande partie sous le régime de l'allusion<sup>80</sup>.

This degree of common knowledge is partly determined by the status of the two protagonists. Thus, in "Dionea", the Princess is only an acquaintance of the Doctor: the writing style of the Doctor is in accordance with hierarchy and their relationship is strictly based on the character of Dionea. Indeed, both the Princess and the Doctor contribute to her education: the first one by her money, the second by taking care of her. Yet, there is a lack of information about Lady Evelyn Savelli, the reader does not have access to her answers, he only has access to the letters written by the doctor. These narrative gaps add incompleteness to the narrative. Consequently, these letters cannot be considered as a dialogue—as in traditional correspondence—but rather as a monologue.

In the case of a diary, the reader knows from the beginning that it will be a monologue. This also provides information about the author. Because the reader has access to the author's deepest thoughts, it even creates intimacy. By unveiling himself, the author creates a connection with the reader. In the same way there are gaps in mail exchange, the diary favors ellipsis. In fact, its non-completion goes even further, as Dominique Kunz Westerhoff has noted:

Le journal est donc essentiellement une *forme ouverte marquée par l'interruption*, même s'il tend à une continuité idéale. Il est rythmé par la scansion du passage des jours, par l'ellipse des instants vitaux.

Dès lors, rien ne semble pouvoir permettre sa clôture en une œuvre: qu'est-ce qui peut mettre fin à la succession journalière, sinon une circonstance extérieure au

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<sup>80</sup> Ferreyrolles, Gérard. 'L'épistolaire, à La Lettre'. *Littératures classiques* 71.1 (2010): 5–27. p.17

texte lui-même, c'est-à-dire, le plus souvent, la mort de l'auteur? Le journal intime est voué à l'inachèvement<sup>81</sup>.

Thus, the diary is the perfect device in order to create an open-ended short story. The form by itself brings a degree of mystery: as a matter of fact, if the diary comes to an end because of the author's death, this very event is left unexplained precisely because the narrator cannot report it. For this reason, there is an anonymous ending *note* in "Amour Dure", which is supposed to explain to the reader why the diary ends:

NOTE. — Here ends the diary of the late Spiridion Trepka. The chief newspaper of the province of Urbania informed the public that, on Christmas morning of the year 1885, [...] Professor Spiridion Trepka [...] had been discovered dead of a stab in the region of the heart, given by an unknown hand<sup>82</sup>.

Although the whole story is narrated by Spiridion, another narrator intervenes, through a note, at the end of the story in order to clarify the tragic end of the character. The mention of "the chief newspaper of the province of Urbania" indicates that the author of the note relies on trustworthy sources. If one refers to what is reported, one can assume that investigation had been conducted to determine the cause of the death. Yet, this note does not provide much information except the assertion that Spiridion is dead. The information about his death are blurry: he was stabbed "in the region of the heart [...] by an unknown hand." Despite the probable reliability of the source, this note does not give precise answers: its only aim being to make Spiridion's death real while leaving the reader to wonder about the reasons of this death.

This invites us to consider the status of the narrator. Interestingly, he is the author of the diaries and letters and yet, he is not necessarily the main character. This dissociation might have allowed the narrator to have an objective perspective, nevertheless this is not the case in *Hauntings*: the narrator's point of view is often biased. This is why, despite an apparent objective report of facts, emotions and feelings leak through the narrator's writing style: "Dionea's strange influence seems to be extending in a terrible way. I am almost beginning to think that our folk are correct in their fear of the young witch<sup>83</sup>." Thus, if at first his opinion of

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<sup>81</sup> Kunz Westerhoff, Dominique. 'Méthodes et Problèmes, Le Journal Intime'. *Département de français moderne - Université de Genève*. 2005. Date accessed 29 Mar. 2020 <<https://www.unige.ch/lettres/framo/enseignements/methodes/journal/index.html>>

<sup>82</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.76

<sup>83</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.86

Dionea is almost objective and based on an empirical perspective, then there is a progression in his point of view, which is reflected in the text. Similarly, in "Amour Dure", the narrator is a historian, used to looking at facts with a scientific point of view. Yet, at some point of his story, he starts to question himself: "Am I mad? Or are there really ghosts? That adventure of last night has shaken me to the very depth of my soul<sup>84</sup>." The narrator's report which had been clear until then gradually shifts towards mystery. On the one hand, he questions his mental health but on the other hand he starts to consider the possible existence of ghosts; what he is experiencing leads him to reconsider his point of view. In the words of Ferreyrolles:

[...] l'instance narrative est déléguée à chaque personnage épistolier, qui par définition ne peut pas dire plus que ce qu'il sait et qui ne sait pas tout ; le lecteur à son tour ne sait que ce que le personnage sait et doit construire un sens global à partir de l'entrelacs des lettres<sup>85</sup>.

Therefore, there is no way for the reader to agree or not with the narrator because he can only rely on his point of view. Besides, this point of view is not omniscient, the narrator does not know everything. Again, this adds mystery and gaps to fill for the reader.

However, the use of ellipsis in the story does not concern the spatial setting: it is usually well set, and clues are given to the reader, as we have just seen. Yet, although these two short stories are very different either in their structure or in their style, they do have a common point: they are only narrated by upper-class male characters, like the rest of the texts collected in *Hauntings*. Indeed, in "Dionea" the narrator is a doctor and in "Amour Dure", the story is told by Spiridion, a "doctor of philosophy<sup>86</sup>".

There are two reasons for this common feature. First, it can be explained by the author's background. Indeed, Vernon Lee was an upper middle-class girl and her mother held salons in which she met personalities from the intellectual world and followed inspiring and intelligent conversations. According to Christa Zorn, Lee's writings "furnish us with many biographical details<sup>87</sup>". Thus, people she had met could have inspired her in the creation of her characters. But why did she choose exclusively male narrators? According to Zorn: "[i]n general, Vernon Lee's texts appeal to a similar audience: educated middle-class readers who partake in the

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<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.* p.65

<sup>85</sup> Ferreyrolles, Gérard. 'L'épistolaire, à la lettre'. *Littératures classiques* 71.1 (2010): 5–27. p.23

<sup>86</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.42

<sup>87</sup> Zorn, Christa. *Op. cit.* p.1

intellectual debates about art and literature<sup>88</sup>." Thus, the audience targeted by Lee was mainly composed of male intellectuals. Indeed, at that time, more credit was given to men: getting their recognition for the work done was not only a sign that the work was a good one but also a sign of respect. This was precisely what Lee wanted. Therefore, the stories and their heroes must appeal to these people. In such a patriarchal society, women's voice was not heard in the same manner as men's. Vernon Lee was aware of that when she wrote that "no one reads a women's writing on art, history or aesthetics with anything but mitigated contempt<sup>89</sup>". Although this idea probably concerned her pseudonym, it also fits her fictional texts.

**c) "One really sees with *the eyes of the body and the eyes of the spirit*<sup>90</sup>"**

In order to understand Vernon Lee's writings and the importance descriptions have in her texts, we have to study more closely the concept of description itself. According to the essayist and literary critic Philippe Hamon<sup>91</sup>, description is not a genre but a speech type: it is actually a variant of the argumentative speech. He adds also that its definition is not a grammatical one. Indeed, a description is not recognizable by its words, by a specific vocabulary or by a particular use of language. It is rather a set of logical operations. Moreover, the description depends on the genre of the text it belongs to because it has to adapt to a literary text, its purpose is to explain the reality the narrator has in front of him, most often listing what the descriptor sees<sup>92</sup>. Bearing in mind these characteristics, the reader must remember that:

Tout comme on ne peut pas tout voir, on ne peut pas non plus tout dire. Le langage ne représente pas la réalité telle quelle, entière. Une description, aussi fidèle soit-elle, n'est pas une copie conforme de la réalité, il y a toujours un écart entre une description et ce qui est décrit<sup>93</sup>.

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<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.* p.38

<sup>89</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Vernon Lee's Letters*. London: Privately printed, 1937. p.59

<sup>90</sup> Vernon, Lee. *Limbo and Other Essays*. London: Grant Richards, 1897. p.45

<sup>91</sup> Hamon, Philippe. "La description de l'indescriptible". Groupe Hugo. 19 May 1990. Date accessed 28 Apr. 2020 <<http://groupugo.div.jussieu.fr/Groupugo/90-05-19hamon.htm>>.

<sup>92</sup> This requires the involvement of the reader and it will be discussed later on this essay.

<sup>93</sup> Ruth Canter Kohn in Adam, Jean-Michel, and André Petitjean. 'Les enjeux textuels de la description'. *Pratiques : linguistique, littérature, didactique* (1982): 93–117. p.94

Here this is not the syntactical aspect of the description which is highlighted but the fact that the description is, to some extent, distorted by the descriptor. The reader has to keep in mind that he *sees* something through someone else's eyes; he can choose to trust or to question this gaze according to what is implied by the rest of the narrative, for the narration and the description are complementary. Thus, Ross Chambers argues that the description can act as a transition, as a border to limit the different parts of the story, if it is placed strategically in the text. Thus, it becomes a narrative tool to articulate the story<sup>94</sup>. The description is also synonymous with suspension, since it is generally placed between two narrative sequences. On the other hand, it constitutes a timeout in the plot of the story. The plot is interrupted, the action is suspended while the character who describes fades away. Hamon even writes about this blurring of the character that: "[à] la limite, il devient un "on" anonyme, et peut n'être représenté métonymiquement que par un 'regard'<sup>95</sup>". The narrator disappears for the benefit of what is described. For instance, in the "Virgin of the Seven Daggers", it is through "Don Juan's gaze<sup>96</sup>" that the Princess is described. Throughout the story, Don Juan is a character who takes up space in every sense of the word. Not only is he "tall, of large bone<sup>97</sup>" but he also has an outgoing behaviour, crying and being very impatient and contemptuous. Yet, Don Juan who is not used to fading, does not appear in the description. Indeed, the description is quite objective because it expresses beauty, using adjectives such as "wondrous<sup>98</sup>", "delicate<sup>99</sup>" or "exquisite<sup>100</sup>": these words are too refined to convey the point of view of Don Juan, who is a great sinner with little consideration for his mistresses. Thus, it is only when the narrative resumes that the reader knows that "Don Juan stood silent in ravishment<sup>101</sup>".

Moreover, the complementarity between narration and description resides also in the fact that the description is given by the gaze of one character. According to Hamon, it is the easiest way to include it in the narration. Yet, in order to make the description as natural as possible, the narrator has to be legitimate.

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<sup>94</sup> Chambers, Ross. 'Reviewed Work: Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif by Philippe Hamon'. *Dispositio* (1983): 179–181. p.180

<sup>95</sup> Hamon, Philippe. *Introduction à l'analyse du descriptif*. Paris: Hachette, 1981. p.189

<sup>96</sup> Lee, Vernon. "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers". *Op. cit.* p.268

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.* p.253

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.* p.268

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.* p.269

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.* p.269

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.* p.269

Le regard [...] assumant la description doit être lui-même justifié, car la description doit être sentie comme tributaire d'une compétence du personnage délégué à la vision, personnage focalisateur, et non de l'étendue du savoir du descripteur. [...] Le descripteur, ainsi, délègue sa compétence à des personnages-truchements<sup>102</sup>.

This implies that the reader must trust the narrator and his capacities to depict him *the real* ; the legitimacy of the narrator must be built by the narrative part of the story. For, the description depends on the descriptor himself, but also on several other aspect. The description depends also on the mood and the feelings of the viewer. Likewise the accuracy of the description is also linked to what the character knows: "[...] quant à la précision du vocabulaire descriptif lui-même, éventuellement "technique", il devra être justifié par la notation du savoir, de la compétence, ou de la spécialisation professionnelle du regardant<sup>103</sup>." This justification of the character's skills will also help the reader to understand the hierarchy which could be given to some aspects of the description. Indeed, the focalizer is supposed to see simultaneously all the details of the picture he is describing; yet, he has to prioritize some aspects in his report and his choices can be partly explained by his psychology or his abilities. Similarly, the description requires a degree of understanding and knowledge from the reader. For instance, in *Hauntings*, Vernon Lee uses many artistic references. To make the description livelier, she refers to foreign painters, musicians or writers and so suggests that the readers share the same knowledge. For instance, to introduce the description of Medea da Capri , she compares the type of miniature Medea is painted on to "[t]he type [...] most admired by the late Renaissance, and, in some measure, immortalized by Jean Goujon and the French<sup>104</sup>." The reader can truly figure out what the miniature is like only if he knows the works of the artists mentioned. In fact, her descriptions are sometimes ekphrasis because of their accuracy, as described by Françoise Desbordes:

[L'ekphrasis] *fait voir* des personnes, évènements, moments, lieux, animaux, plantes, selon des règles précises concernant les aspects à examiner et l'ordre dans lequel les examiner. Le style sera adapté au sujet, et, surtout, on s'appliquera à *mettre sous les yeux* de l'auditeur ce dont on parle<sup>105</sup>."

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<sup>102</sup> Hamon, Philippe. *Introduction à l'analyse Du Descriptif*. Paris: Hachette, 1981. p.185

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.* p.187

<sup>104</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.51

<sup>105</sup> Desbordes, Françoise. *La Rhétorique Antique*. Paris: Hachette, 1996. p.135



In this definition, there are two aspects of the gaze which are important. The fact that the process *fait voir*, that is to say through someone else's gaze, and the fact that the copy of this gaze has to be projected in front of the reader. In order to make the best copy, the descriptor must be extremely accurate. This is precisely what Vernon Lee does, giving a wealth of details through Spiridion's gaze when he describes the picture of Medea:

The face is a perfect oval, the forehead somewhat over-round, with minute curls, like a fleece, of bright auburn hair; the nose a trifle over-aquiline, and the cheek-bones a trifle too low; the eyes grey, large, prominent, beneath exquisitely curved brows and lids just a little too tight at the corners; the mouth also, brilliantly red and most delicately designed, is a little too tight, the lips strained a trifle over the teeth. [...] The complexion is dazzling fair, the perfect transparent roses lily of a red-haired beauty; the head, with hair elaborately curled and plaited close to it, and adorned with pearls, sits like that of the antique Arethusa on along, supple, swanlike neck<sup>106</sup>.

Thus, Medea is described with great care and an extreme accuracy. Each part of her face is examined and depicted with exactitude by the narrator, a narrator who is spellbound, enthralled before the perfect beauty of the painting. Indeed, the narrator notes that her face is "perfect" as well as the roses she wears in her hair; that her brows are exquisite and her mouth is "delicately designed". The adjectives chosen to describe Medea da Capri reflect the narrator's subjectivity and at the same time the perfectness of the model. This flawlessness also creates something almost mesmerizing for the reader. Indeed, not only the perfection of her physical appearance hypnotizes the reader, but the narrator uses comparisons to link Medea with nature ("roses lily", "swanlike neck") but also with mythology (comparing her to the nymph Arethusa), which gives the description a poetical dimension. In spite of that, the repetition of adverbs such as "a trifle" or "a little" suggest near-perfection: while the profusion of details about Medea physical beauty makes her appear as an object of almost unreal beauty, these adverbs make her more human, they suggest that she is not totally perfect. Medea was not only an unrealistic beauty but she was also an imperfect human being.

Despite the extreme accuracy of the descriptive project, it is impossible to reveal through words the *absolute reality* of the thing described. Thus, details are inevitably lost by passing from what is seen to what is written. Aware of this loss, Vernon Lee actually uses—and even emphasizes—it, in "Oke of Okehurst" for instance, when the narrator describes Mrs Oke:

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<sup>106</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* pp.51-52

Let me try and give you some notion of her: not that first impression, whatever it may have been, but the absolute reality of her [...] She was very tall; and I suppose people would have called her thin. [...] She was straight—I mean she had a little of what people call figure—as a bamboo [...] I wish I could describe her. I wish, alas!<sup>107</sup>

Although the character tries to describe what is indescribable, his attempt only highlights the insufficiency of words. Consequently, he can only try to establish parallels with what "people" could have say about Mrs Oke. Yet, he has to admit that this does not reflect the reality, even if it seems close to it. He ends by apologizing for not finding the words to characterize the lady. In fact, the narrator admits that he is unable to portray Mrs Oke correctly. Besides, among the aspects that cannot be properly described by the narrator is the great beauty that emanates from Mrs Oke. However, although Lee wants to leave some mystery about the character, she sows clues about the character's beauty through the description of her physical characteristics, thus revealing her interest in beauty and aesthetics.

## **2. Beauty: "the main interest of the artist, and [...] his highest aim<sup>108</sup>"**

### **a) From Plato's metaphysical beauty to the synaesthesia of Edmund Burke**

In order to understand Vernon Lee's conception of beauty and the way she breaks with the traditions in *Hauntings*, I will briefly come back on the aesthetic theories that have defined the notion of beauty. One of the first major philosophers who wrote about beauty was Plato. To sum up, his opinion was that beauty characterizes what is useful and what pleases the spectator. "[T]hat ideal Beauty still manifests itself under the same aspects: suitability, advantageousness and pleasure of sight and hearing<sup>109</sup>." The notion of beauty is linked to the fact that the object serves its function well, and the sentiment of pleasure follows. Consequently, to represent the concept of beauty, the object has to be useful on the one hand and, on the other hand, has to be "pleasant to eye and (or) ear<sup>110</sup>." Filling these functions

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<sup>107</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst". *Op. cit.* pp.113-114

<sup>108</sup> Lee, Vernon. 'Comparative Aesthetics'. *The Contemporary Review* XXXVIII (1880): 300–326. p.318

<sup>109</sup> Grube, G. M. A. 'Plato's Theory of Beauty'. *The Monist* 37.2 (1927): 269–288. p.273

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.* p.279

renders the object beautiful. The capacities of fulfillment of the object coupled with an avoidance of excess (measure) even linked it to what Plato called the Good. Because "[w]e cannot conceive or explain the Good, except in terms of Beauty, Measure and Truth<sup>111</sup>." Thus, Beauty being one of the components of the Good, the two elements are inseparable. This is Plato's definition of Beauty, according to G. M. A. Grube:

Such is then the Platonic idea of beauty: it is the harmony of the world which is the result of an introduction of measure or number by intelligence; it is inseparable from Good, and it is perhaps best described as the cause of it, though the two are but aspects of the Ultimate Truth, and the contemplation of it gives the most real pleasure, because the most lasting, and the most "pure"<sup>112</sup>.

He actually emphasizes several aspects: first, Beauty is part of "the harmony of the world", the world being envisioned as a perfect divine creation. It is precisely because God has acted in a reasonable and proportionate way that he has created the most beautiful world possible. Thus, the Beauty of the world is balanced; this is what makes the world harmonious. Next, Beauty is also considered as the source of Good; consequently, it has a good impact on the spectator. As a result, to be beautiful the object has to be a combination of usefulness and measure which will convey a feeling of pleasure.

In the eighteenth century, this traditional concept of Beauty drawn from Greek Antiquity was still a reference. Yet, the Irish philosopher Edmund Burke was convinced that "beauty is [...] acting [...] upon the human mind, by the intervention of the senses<sup>113</sup>." Thus, he thought that because the senses play a role in the concept of beauty, the traditional notion needed a rethinking. Hence, in *A philosophical enquiry into the origin of our ideas of the sublime and beautiful*, he examines the criteria that had made the notion of Beauty until then :

He first considers three theories widely held in the mid-century: those theories which connect beauty with proportion, with fitness (or utility), and with goodness or perfection. Each of these had existed since the time of Plato but none, so far, had been subjected to a searching examination in the early eighteenth century<sup>114</sup>.

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<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.* p.278

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.* p.283

<sup>113</sup> Burke, E. *Philosophical Enquiry Into The Origin Of Our Ideas Of The Sublime And Beautiful*. London: A. Robertson & Co., 1824. p.196

<sup>114</sup> Note by James T. Boulton in Burke, E. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful*. (1824). Taylor & Francis, 2009. p.xxxvi

Burke was not convinced by these notions which did not correspond to his idea of beauty. Therefore, he deconstructed them one by one. For instance, he did not think that architecture was built on man's body because "men are very rarely seen in this strained posture [arms raised and extended]; it is not natural to them; neither is it at all becoming<sup>115</sup>." Then, he countered the idea that fitness was part of beauty and provided examples to demonstrate this point, such as "the great bag hanging to the bill of the pelican<sup>116</sup>" or the hedgehog and "its prickly hide<sup>117</sup>." Indeed, these animals are beautiful in their way even if they do not match the idea of proportion induced in the notion of fitness. Thus, according to Burke, perfection was not always synonymous with beauty.

Burke strenuously attempts to isolate the aesthetic form from the non-aesthetic. He insists that the satisfaction afforded by beauty is something totally different from the pleasure arising from proportion, fitness or custom which are fundamentally non-aesthetic qualities. They make their appeal to the understanding; they depend for their effect, to a certain extent, on experience and knowledge; and the impact they make is one which produces "approbation, the acquiescence of the understanding, but not love, nor any passion of that species." Beauty, Burke claims, makes an immediate impact on the emotions; the satisfaction it gives is vital and intense, and is not to be identified with mere "approbation"<sup>118</sup>.

Thus, Burke questions the criteria which had built the notion of beauty until then. He does not deny that utility and measure dear to Plato generate feelings for the spectator, yet he considers that the sensation experienced is more a rational one which "appeal to the understanding". On the contrary, the "satisfaction afforded by beauty" generate stronger feelings, coming from the bottom of the heart. According to him, what is experienced is more a reaction to the sight of the object and it has nothing to do with a logical reasoning. This reassessment of the traditional criteria is also found in Vernon Lee's works and it totally fits the ideas advocated by the Decadent Movement.

Nevertheless, Burke kept from the past the idea that sight is a very significant element to determine beauty: "This emphasis on sight puts him in the tradition of Aristotle (who claims sight as the most important organ of knowledge) [and] Locke (who considers it 'the most

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<sup>115</sup> Burke, E. *Philosophical Enquiry Into The Origin Of Our Ideas Of The Sublime And Beautiful*. London: A. Robertson & Co., 1824. p.171

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.* p.181

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.* p.181

<sup>118</sup> Note by James T. Boulton in Burke, E. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful*. (1824). Taylor & Francis, 2009. p.xxxix

comprehensive of all our senses')<sup>119</sup>." That is why he started to study the qualities of beautiful objects by the ones "taken in by the eye<sup>120</sup>." According to him, these qualities generate an almost somatic response in the spectator's body and mind: all the other senses answer to the sight when a beautiful object is seen. In fact, this "synaesthesia<sup>121</sup>" sums up the whole process of the encounter of Beauty. Thus, in Edmund Burke's idea, it is the visual aspect which has to be emphasized—and not the useful one—because the vision of something beautiful triggers a response from the other senses. These interactions between senses procure an effect of delight on the spectator. This conception of beauty breaks with the traditional one of Plato.

### **b) Major sources of inspiration: Walter Pater, the Pre-Raphaelites**

Lee and Pater (1839-1894) granted importance to emotions conveyed by arts and beauty: two aspects which are linked. Their common interest led them to become friends but Lee was also "the only one of his followers acknowledged by him as a disciple<sup>122</sup>". Pater believed in the importance granted to the feelings created by works of art. That is why he compared colors in paintings and sounds in music as words used by writers. Still according to him, each work of art can bring pleasure to the person whom experiment it; this connects with Burke's conception of beauty.

To define beauty, not in the most abstract but in the most concrete terms possible, to find, not its universal formula, but the formula which expresses most adequately this or that special manifestations of it, is the aim of the true student of aesthetics. [...]

The objects with which aesthetic criticism deals—music, poetry, artistic and accomplished forms of human life—are indeed receptacles of so many powers or forces: they possess, like the products of nature, so many virtues or qualities. What is this song or picture, this engaging personality presented in life or in a

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<sup>119</sup> Burke, E. "The beautiful". *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful*. (1824). Taylor & Francis, 2009.

<sup>120</sup> Burke, E. *A Philosophical Enquiry Into the Sublime and Beautiful*. (1824). Taylor & Francis, 2009. p.xxiv

<sup>121</sup> Burke, E. *Ibid*. This is the actual term employed to describe this process.

<sup>122</sup> Note by Catherine Maxwell, and Patricia Pulham. *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*. Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview Press, 2006. p.283

book, to me? What effect does it really produce on me? Does it give me pleasure?  
And if so, what sort or degree of pleasure?<sup>123</sup>

Here, Pater emphasizes the reception of the work of art: he takes into account the sensibility of the person who beholds—or listens to—the work of art and the notion of pleasure provided. Lee fully supports this questioning about the intensity of the pleasure experienced by the spectator. In other words, Lee and Pater share what Maxwell and Pulham qualified of "kind of intellectual osmose<sup>124</sup>." Similarly, the two artists share a great interest for the historical period of the Italian renaissance. Pater's *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) was a great source of inspiration for Lee. When they met at a diner in Oxford in 1881, she had already published her first essay, *Studies of the Eighteenth Century in Italy*<sup>125</sup>. In this essay, she shows her fascination for the Italy of the eighteenth century while privileging feelings over facts, just like Pater. Indeed, according to her: "the past can give us [...] emotions" which could not be caught by "the skepticism of the science<sup>126</sup>." This idea is reflected in Spiridion's evolution in "Amour Dure":

*Nov. 5th.*—I can't free myself from the thought of this Medea da Capri. In my walks, my mornings in the Archives, my solitary evenings, I catch myself thinking over the woman. Am I turning novelist instead of historian? And still it seems to me that I understand her so well<sup>127</sup>.

First, the narrator has shown a scientific interest for Medea, it was the historical aspect which attracted him. But then, he is no longer only interested in facts, he also values feelings: those that Medea may have felt, but also those that her story gives him. This point of view connected Lee to Pater's ideas for whom, in the words of Christa Zorn: "history is [...] not a matter of scientific truth but a piece of art made up of layered impressions<sup>128</sup>."

Nevertheless, although having highly influenced Lee, Walter Pater was not her only source of inspiration. Indeed, Decadents were not the first to be depressed by the society they

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<sup>123</sup> Pater, Walter. "The Renaissance: Studies in Art and Poetry". *The Project Gutenberg EBook of The Renaissance*. 27 Mar. 2009. Date accessed 29 Apr. 2020 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2398/2398-h/2398-h.htm>>.

<sup>124</sup> Maxwell, Catherine, and Patricia Pulham. *Vernon Lee Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. p.14

<sup>125</sup> It was published in 1880.

<sup>126</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Euphorion". *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Euphorion*. 17 Feb 2010. Date accessed 29 Apr. 2020 <<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/31303/31303-h/31303-h.htm>>.

<sup>127</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* pp.55-56

<sup>128</sup> Zorn, Christa. *Op. cit.* p.37

lived in. They were not the first to think that the established codes needed to be challenged and that the concept of beauty needed to be revised. Before them, some artists already had similar thoughts. During the autumn 1848, a group of "idealistic young men who were passionate about art, depressed by the current, very conventional state of the art world and idealistically desirous of bringing about dramatic changes<sup>129</sup>" created the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood<sup>130</sup>. This society was mainly formed of artists who studied at the Royal Academy where they were taught classicism and were encouraged to follow the example of Raphael (1483-1520) who was considered as the master of the Renaissance art. Yet, these artists wanted to capture the purity as it was before Raphael, hence their name. "They harked back to the paintings of Boticelli and other early Italian artists and they admired the style of medieval frescos, so rich in colour and depicting animated subject matter<sup>131</sup>". Among their founding principles were, for instance, the necessity to have genuine ideas to express and the will to produce thoroughly good works. On this aspect, Lee's point of view is the same: "[T]he teachable portion of the art of writing is totally useless without that which can neither be taught nor learned—the possession of something valuable, something vital, something essential to say<sup>132</sup>". The author, as well as the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, thought that a meaningful message had to be provided behind the beauty of their works. Another link between Vernon Lee and the Pre-Raphaelites was John Ruskin (1819-1900). He was not a member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood as a painter but he was the benefactor of the group. He had a Master of Arts from Oxford and, for a while, his artistic reflections were inseparable from the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelites. He was one of the first to claim that the industrial revolution and especially railway lines contributed to the ugliness of the British landscape. He was very concerned about art and delivered *Lectures on Art*, at the University of Oxford. These lectures were key texts in Vernon Lee's inspiration:

Everything is broken up, and mingled in confusion, both in our habits and thoughts; besides being in great part imitative: so that you not only cannot tell

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<sup>129</sup> Hawksley, Lucinda D. *Lizzie Siddal: The Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel*. London: Andre Deutsch, 2017. p.20

<sup>130</sup> The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood (PRB) was a society whose members were: J.E Millais (1829-96), W.H Hunt (1827-1910), D.G Rossetti (1828-82) and his brother W. Rossetti (1829-1919), T. Woolner (1825-92), F.G Stephens (1828-1907) and J. Collinson (1825-81)

<sup>131</sup> Hawkley, Lucinda. *Op. cit.* p.21

<sup>132</sup> Lee, Vernon. *The Handling of Words, and Other Studies in Literary Psychology*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1923. p.32

what a man is, but sometimes you cannot tell whether he is, at all!—whether you have indeed to do with a spirit, or only with an echo<sup>133</sup>.

In this quotation from the chapter "The relation of arts to moral" Ruskin not only refers to a blurred cultural and social context ("habits and thoughts") which impacts men at the core of their identity but he also emphasizes the lack of reasoning ability of people. Consequently, because Lee granted importance to "erudition and independent thoughts<sup>134</sup>", she could only agree with him. Moreover, the terms "spirit" and "echo" are obviously reflected in *Hauntings* through the different ghosts or doppelgängers evoked.

In addition, the Pre-Raphaelites and the author of *Hauntings* also had in common a strong interest in the past. One of the favorite theme of the Pre-Raphaelites was medievalism because medieval art was synonym of the art before Raphael: "[T]hey admired the style of medieval frescos, so rich in colour and depicting animated subject matter. Eventually, the group pinpointed the time at which they believed art had 'gone wrong': it had been with the advent of Raphael<sup>135</sup>." They did not disparage Raphael's works but saw in it (and generally in art after him) a lack of freedom and authenticity. A parallel can be made with Lee, to whom evoking the past was important because of the emotions it could provide. Thus, the will to revive the past as well as the Pre-Raphaelites' influence can be noticed in the short story *Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady* for instance.

Thus, we have seen that Vernon Lee was mainly influenced by Walter Pater and by the Pre-Raphaelites. Nevertheless, she was a very educated woman and *Hauntings* shows the multiplicity and the diversity of her sources of inspirations. Thus, in "Amour Dure" painting is emphasized throughout Medea's portrait and the different references used throughout the short story; such as the painters Francesco di Giorgio<sup>136</sup> and Federico Barocci<sup>137</sup>. In "Dionea", sculpture is highlighted through the plot of the story. The author also makes

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<sup>133</sup> Ruskin, John. "Lectures on Art". The Project Gutenberg EBook of Lectures on Art. 3 Sept. 2006. Date accessed 20 May 2020 <[https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19164/19164-h/19164-h.htm#LECTURE\\_III](https://www.gutenberg.org/files/19164/19164-h/19164-h.htm#LECTURE_III)>.

<sup>134</sup> Zorn, Christa. *Op. cit.* p.7

<sup>135</sup> Hawksley, Lucinda D. *Lizzie Siddal: The Tragedy of a Pre-Raphaelite Supermodel*. London: Andre Deutsch, 2017. p.21

<sup>136</sup> "Francesco di Giorgio Martini (1439-1501), Italian, architect, painter, and sculptor". Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.43

<sup>137</sup> "Federico Barocci (1530-1612), Italian painter". *Ibid.* p.51



references to various other sources: for instance, Edward Burns Jones is mentioned<sup>138</sup> as well as Balzac<sup>139</sup>. Similarly, in "A Wicked Voice", it is music which is emphasized and we find references to Wagner<sup>140</sup> from the beginning of the story.

This profusion of references to arts has a two-fold effect. On the one hand, making reference to real and famous artists helps to anchor the narrative in reality. On the other hand, these artistic references carry the reader into an imaginary world in which arts predominate. Actually, by diversifying the forms of art which inspired her, Vernon Lee's aim was to "make a space for the aesthetic, for the condition of music or beauty, which works, not exactly as a transcendence beyond meaning, but as a different, even indifferent, stress within it<sup>141</sup>."

### c) "[B]eauty exists in many forms<sup>142</sup>": Vernon Lee's appropriation

As we have seen, the Pre-Raphaelites wanted to break with the traditional codes of the Royal Academy and to establish new standards. Thus, the representation of Beauty evolved through the nineteenth-century models. This is what Catherine Rancy explains in her essay:

[L]e type féminin préraphaélite se retrouve dans la production littéraire fin-de-siècle, aussi bien dans la littérature sentimentale et populaire que dans le domaine du fantastique : on y reconnaît souvent les modèles de Rossetti, Elizabeth Siddal et Jane Morris, ces femmes aux yeux tristes, au cou et aux mains allongées, à l'abondante chevelure et aux lèvres charnues<sup>143</sup>.

This character is ambivalent. On the one hand it represents the embodiment of human beauty, the ideal nineteenth century woman through male gaze, while on the other hand, it symbolizes perversity, egotism and sin through a sexual behaviour. It is also synonymous of danger, and Gabriel Dante Rossetti linked these two notions, by painting Lady Lilith as a *femme fatale*. In her work *La Femme Fatale: Ses origines et sa parentèle dans la modernité*, Béatrice Grandordy asserts that the nineteenth century is the golden age of the *femme fatale* although there is no precise date or origin for the term. Yet, according to her: "[La femme fatale] prend

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<sup>138</sup> Sir Edward Coley Burne Jones (1833-98), English painter. Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.82

<sup>139</sup> Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), French novelist and author. Lee, Vernon. *Ibid.* p.91

<sup>140</sup> "[...]who has despised the new-fangled nonsense of Wagner". Lee, Vernon. "A Wicked Voice". *Op. cit.* p.154

<sup>141</sup> Leighton, Angela. 'Ghosts, Aestheticism, and "Vernon Lee"'. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.1 (2000): 1-14. p.11

<sup>142</sup> Pater, Walter. *The Works of Walter Pater*. London: Macmillan, 1910. p.x

<sup>143</sup> Rancy, Catherine. *Op. cit.* p.11

corps sur le terreau de la dangerosité féminine qui existait depuis Eve, et son apparition connut des prémisses qu'on peut dater de la Renaissance [...] De cette époque, date l'apparition de sorcières, premières Femmes Fatales<sup>144</sup>." Thus the character has been inspired by women who challenged men, who represent a danger towards their authority. According to Dominique Maingueneau, the development of this image of women could be explained by women's evolution at that time:

Dans les dernières décennies du XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle apparaît une population de femmes qui excède les catégories traditionnelles. Il ne s'agit plus d'êtres d'exception [...] mais du personnel d'une véritable industrie du spectacle : le café-concert, le cabaret [...] La femme dangereuse y prend l'inquiétant visage de la « *demi-mondaine* », de celle qui n'appartient ni au monde des prostituées, ni à celui des femmes honnêtes<sup>145</sup>.

Thus the character could have been inspired by mythical women who opposed the power of men, but it would be the evolution of women and the development of this new category of dangerous women that would have contributed to the development of the figure of the *femme fatale* at the end of the nineteenth century. In addition, Maingueneau also agrees with Béatrice Grandordy on the fact that the power of this character is explained by its seductive behaviour which leads to man's decay. The reader will find in Vernon Lee's heroines these "ornaments [which] seem to partake of [their] fatal nature, to bear upon them her brand of beauty fresh from hell<sup>146</sup>." For instance, the description of the Infanta in "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers" perfectly reflects the mix of sensuality and voluptuousness which emanates from the character : "[t]he breast of the princess heaved deeply; her lips opened with a little sigh, and she languidly raised her long-fringed lids [...] Her face was oval, with the silver pallor of the young moon; her mouth, mostly subtly carmined, looked like a pomegranate flower<sup>147</sup>." Emphasis is given to "the breast", "her lips", "her mouth" which are parts of the body which can easily be eroticized; especially when they are combined with the fact that she breathes "languidly". Undoubtedly, Vernon Lee uses here some of the Pre-Raphaelites codes. However, the Pre-Raphaelites promoted new standards of beauty in order to break with the traditional Victorian culture. On the contrary, Marie-Carmen Thue-Tun points out in her thesis, *Vernon*

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<sup>144</sup> Grandordy, B. *La femme fatale: ses origines et sa parentèle dans la modernité*. Paris: Editions L'Harmattan, 2013. p.15

<sup>145</sup> Maingueneau, Dominique. 'Esthétique de La Femme Fatale'. *Fatalités du féminin* (2002): 43–67.

<sup>146</sup> Swinburne, Algernon Charles in Lee, Vernon. *Op. cit.* p.280

<sup>147</sup> Lee, Vernon. "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers". *Op. cit.* p.268

*Lee : une odyssée scripturale entre romantisme et modernité*, that: "Vernon Lee est consciente que la mission de l'écrivain est de participer à l'évolution des mentalités<sup>148</sup>." Thus, she condemns the erotical sensualism of the Pre-Raphaelites because it harms the image of women. This is what she already described in *Miss Brown*, a novel published in 1884:

The descriptions of the kisses of cruel, blossom-mouthed women, who sucked out their lovers' hearts, bit their lips, and strewed their apartments with coral like drops of blood. Most of the poets, as Anne speedily discovered, were young men of harmless lives, and altogether unacquainted with the beautiful, baleful ladies they represented as sucking at their vitals<sup>149</sup>.

Actually, through her heroine, Vernon Lee denounces the fact that painters or poets use women's sensuality to represent them as dangerous creatures, when these artists know nothing of them except their great beauty. Indeed, she considers that women, especially the *fatale* ones, are a subject about which they have an imperfect knowledge and that consequently, they convey a wrong message through their representations. Therefore, why did she use their ideas?

In fact, it is a way to question the Decadent point of view about beauty and art. Indeed, Vernon Lee thought that they saw in art a source of excitement and that their love for art was actually the result of this vision. She believed that this was not *art for art's sake* anymore: "As to art, real art, they treat it much worse than the most determined utilitarian: the utilitarians turn art into a drudge; these aesthetic folk make her into a pander and a prostitute<sup>150</sup>." Thus, it is not from art in itself that comes the satisfaction of the Decadents but, on the contrary, they use art as a means to provide pleasure through their cult of beauty. The quest of the ideal beauty is actually a means to feel delight, this is why they did not grant much importance to the context of works of art: their main goal was to find satisfaction through aesthetics regardless of context. According to Vernon Lee, this worship actually isolated the artists: they were disconnected from the reality, from the real world. So in order to avoid this, Vernon Lee endeavoured to add a sense of reality to the aesthetic aspect in her writings. Consequently, her characters are a mix of ideal beauty and human flaws. Thus, in the case of Mrs Oke, the extreme beauty of the character challenges her oddity: "To make a long story short, Mrs. Oke

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<sup>148</sup> Thue-Tun, Marie-Carmen. *Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856-1935): une odyssée scripturale entre romantisme et modernité*. Université de la Réunion, 2010. p.481

<sup>149</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Miss Brown*. Edinburgh and London: Blackwood and Sons, 1884. p.24

<sup>150</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*. (1881). London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887. p.247

of Okehurst was, in my opinion, to the highest degree exquisite and strange<sup>151</sup>." It implies that she was at the peak of her beauty but also of her weirdness—not to say insanity—when the narrator met her; she was not perfect. Her extreme oddity was equal to her great beauty. This statement is based on visual clues: the narrator saw her beauty as well as her strangeness. Thus, he noted that "there was something far-fetched in her whole appearance, [...] she was dressed in a strange way<sup>152</sup>" and "[s]he always seemed to be thinking of something else<sup>153</sup>." These visual elements contribute to introduce the character as an eccentric one. Yet, a few lines further, the narrator goes beyond the mere description of Alice Oke. Indeed, as he narrates the story after the events happened he can add to the narrative some comments which are almost like prolepsis:

Now that I look back upon it, I am tempted to think that the psychological peculiarity of that woman might be summed up in an exorbitant and absorbing interest in herself [...] curiously complicated with a fantastic imagination, a sort of morbid day-dreaming, all turned inwards<sup>154</sup>.

By submitting the "psychological peculiarity" of the character just after having depicted her strange appearance, the narrator creates a feeling of potential danger. Indeed, he describes a much deeper oddity than the visual one and the character appears as volatile. As we have seen, mental health problems bring a feeling of strangeness and at the same time of dangerousness as no one can predict what happens in other people's minds. Thus, in the same way the Society for Psychical Research attempted to find scientific answers to deconstruct this feeling, Lee uses this unpredictability in order to build a gloomy atmosphere. That is why she emphasizes the fact that Alice Oke is very much "turned inwards" and that at the same time something morbid emanates from the character. At least it is what the narrator's recollection of the events indicates.

Nevertheless, Lee's male narrators create room for criticism because they are actually not reliable. Indeed, in "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers" for instance, the depiction of the Infanta is a way to subvert the Pre-Raphaelites' conception of beauty. Don Juan's gaze is not trustworthy because the author has been careful to create a despicable character—always

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<sup>151</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst". *Op. cit.* p.115

<sup>152</sup> *Ibid.* pp.115-116

<sup>153</sup> *Ibid.* p.116

<sup>154</sup> *Ibid.* p.116

under the cover of irony, a "magnanimous cavalier<sup>155</sup>"—who despises his former mistresses and calls them "sluts" or "abominable witch". Similarly, in "Dionea", the character of Waldemar is depicted as "[a] big lion [...] with his odd eyes, as some wild animal—odd, and, your Excellency remarks, not without a gleam of latent ferocity<sup>156</sup>." Thus, the author subverts the negative representation of women by giving a lecherous gaze to the man who beholds her. Once again, this lack of reliability can be seen in "Amour Dure" since Spiridion is seduced by a ghost. According to Marie-Carmen Thue-Tun, Medea—who is described as a *femme fatale*—is at first sight the incarnation of the devil. Yet, she could be on the contrary, the victim of Spiridion's obsessive mind. By questioning the narrators' credibility, Vernon Lee's aim is to deconstruct the myth of the *femme fatale* who would be the cause of sufferings and misfortunes.

As we have seen, Lee draws inspiration from her predecessors or from her contemporaries; yet she is confident enough to build her own style. She manages to distance herself from the ideas that inspired her. Thus, she agrees with Walter Pater who emphasizes that the feeling conveyed by Beauty is linked with the notion of pleasure. But she disagrees with the fact that this feeling is created by the spectator's conditions at the moment he meets the work of art.

For our intimate commerce with beautiful things and beautiful thoughts does not exist only, or even chiefly, at the moment of seeing, or hearing, or reading; nay, if the beautiful touched us only at such separate and special moments, the beautiful would play but an insignificant part in our existence<sup>157</sup>.

She even goes further by writing that these feelings are a means for people to improve themselves: not only will they heighten "[our] vitality as we experience from going into fresh air and sunshine or taking fortifying food<sup>158</sup>" but they will help to enhance the spiritual life because people will learn from these experiences. The feelings experienced and the remembrance of the work of art will remain in the spectator's mind and he will be able to revive it when he wants to—or needs to— comfort him for instance. By developing Pater's

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<sup>155</sup> Lee, Vernon. "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers". *Op.cit.* p.262

<sup>156</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.96

<sup>157</sup> Broomfield, A., and S. Mitchell. *Prose by Victorian Women: An Anthology*. Taylor & Francis, 2013. p.690

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid.* p.685

concept about beauty and feelings, Vernon Lee not only deviates from his mentor's ideas, but also creates her own way.

Furthermore, through her literary development, she disagrees with her mentor about the question of ethics and morality. Indeed, while Walter Pater advocates a model in which nothing is excluded—because beauty exists in everything—Lee disagrees and establishes a distinction between *healthy pleasure* and *pain* procured by beauty. Indeed, "[f]or Pater pain is an acceptable category or form of the pleasure that the aesthetic critic seeks in art and life, and its enjoyment takes place within the morally neutral field of the aesthetic<sup>159</sup>." This conception brings him closer to Burke who associated pain and sublime, and it totally fits the Decadent state of mind as well as their motto, *art for art's sake*. Although Vernon Lee first agreed with this research of beauty at all costs, it seems that, to a certain extent she started to reconsider her point of view and that she wanted to introduce a moral side to this idea. Thus, as Patricia Pulham and Catherine Maxwell have noted: "The link between art and pleasure is still upheld, but Lee's problematic distinction between healthy and unhealthy pleasures, as well as her recourse to ethics, seek to overthrow Pater's aesthetic model while still operating within it<sup>160</sup>." In contrast, Pater, the fervent Decadent, saw this attempt to introduce morality in a concept which precisely rejected it, as "something like Puritanism<sup>161</sup>."

### **3. Mythical characters who convey new messages**

#### **a) The myth: a universality Decadents have appropriated for themselves**

In his work, *Aspects du mythe*, the Romanian historian, mythologist and philosopher Mircea Eliade defines the myth as a story which narrates a process of a creation. It tells how something comes to life, how everything started: "Le mythe dit comment, grâce aux exploits des Etres Surnaturels, une réalité est venue à l'existence<sup>162</sup>." This process also involves some supernatural: the presence of Supernatural Beings acts as an explanation, they give meaning

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<sup>159</sup> Maxwell, Catherine, and Patricia Pulham. *Vernon Lee Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. p.97

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.* p.97

<sup>161</sup> Pater, Walter, in *Pall Mall Gazette*, 5 Aug. 1887. p.5

<sup>162</sup> Eliade, Mircea in Brunel, Pierre. *Dictionnaire des mythes littéraires*. France: Editions du Rocher, 1988. p.8

to a phenomenon that is difficult to understand. For human beings do not like uncertainty, they need to understand the world they live in and this clarification about the origin of a phenomenon helps them control their fears: "Du fait que le mythe relate les *gesta* des Etres Surnaturels et la manifestation de leurs puissances sacrées, il devient le modèle exemplaire de toutes les activités humaines significatives<sup>163</sup>." Therefore reality is actually a repetition of what gods did originally; actions of human beings are only the reflection of a model coming from gods.

Moreover, by spreading and by transcending the ages, these mythical stories become references.

Myth is identifiable not by the characters in the tale—gods rather than heroes or ordinary men—but by the extent to which it explicates and even founds the cultural understanding of a group. Every culture develops its myth in this sense, and it relies on them for an understanding of its own identity<sup>164</sup>.

The myth is known by all social classes and it is understood by everyone belonging to the same culture. It is not only the story of the myth which survives over time but it is also its capacity to gather a community. Thus, the beliefs associated to the myths are often strong and rooted in people's mind. In addition, the origin of the myth is often uncertain. As Claude Levi-Strauss has noted:

[L]es mythes n'ont pas d'auteur [...]. Quand un mythe est raconté, des auditeurs individuels reçoivent un message qui ne vient, à proprement parler, de nulle part ; c'est la raison pour laquelle on lui assigne une origine surnaturelle<sup>165</sup>.

Because of its imprecise origin, the myth is perceived as a message coming from the Hereafter, as a metaphysical information. And when a phenomenon cannot be explained by science, the myth acquires a sort of legitimacy. Thus, referring to some *Etres Surnaturels*, who live in the Hereafter, seems to be the only way left to justify some phenomenons. Besides, it is precisely the result of this impact on Earth which makes people think that either gods gave them an explanation or a warning. According to Mallarmé in *Les Dieux antiques I*, the inexplicable change of seasons gave an appropriate basis to the creation of mythological gods for instance. By creating these myths, human beings found a way to explain

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<sup>163</sup> Eliade, Mircea. *Aspects Du Mythe*. Paris: Gallimard, 1963. pp.15-16

<sup>164</sup> Townsend, Dabney W. 'Myth and Meaning'. *The Centennial Review* 16.2 (1972): 192–202. p.194

<sup>165</sup> Levi-Strauss, Claude. *Le cru et le cuit*. Paris: Plon, 1964. p.18

phenomenons that they did not control. To take up the idea of Nina S. Hellerstein in *Mythe et structure dans les Cinq grandes odes de Paul Claudel*: "Le mythe est lui-même comme un langage, un système qui confère une signification au cosmos en utilisant les catégories et les mécanismes du discours<sup>166</sup>." Therefore, the myth is a sort of scheme which gives a signification to the universe. This idea implies that human beings have to master its language and to decrypt its meanings in order to understand the universe. This is true with the seasons and the moon, but also with more abstract concepts such as birth and death, fertility and sexuality. Actually, nature often induces an idea of a cyclical movement to which gods are linked.

This regular movement of nature involves an idea of an eternal return which is a comforting one since people tend to fear what they do not know or understand. Thus, Catherine Rancy points out that the revival of myths in the *fin de siècle* literature is linked to a need for reassurance: "Ce besoin de retour aux origines correspond à l'atmosphère de désespoir, de scepticisme et d'effondrement des valeurs qui caractérise l'époque décadente<sup>167</sup>." Indeed, as we have seen, the unknown generates fear; this is why people find comfort when they turn to elements that are known and mastered.

Nevertheless, Decadents did not only tell old stories to reassure themselves and their readers. In fact, they saw in this idea of cyclical movement an opportunity to transform the notion of return and to apply it to the gods themselves. In this new Decadent version, the gods preserve their power to impact what happens on Earth but, as Lilith did, they are able to come on Earth, *disguised* as human beings so people cannot recognize them. Thus, their coming back on Earth is a kind of resurrection. Indeed, once living on Earth according to the myth, this time they come back before witnesses, which contributes to make them real. Consequently, this reality newly gained impacts their mythical aspect which is absorbed in real life: the myth becomes a reality. Moreover, this return has another specificity: formerly considered benevolent, gods come back this time with other purposes. On this topic, Catherine Rancy has noted that: "[A]u même titre que le double, jadis bienveillant et maintenant objet de terreur, les dieux se font images d'épouvante [...] [C]'est une mise en scène du mythe sous le signe de la terreur<sup>168</sup>." Consequently, at the end of the nineteenth century, gods and doppelgängers are

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<sup>166</sup> Hellerstein, N.S. *Mythe et structure dans les cinq grandes odes de Paul Claudel*. Paris: 1990. p.95

<sup>167</sup> Rancy, Catherine. *Op. cit.* p.185

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.* p.184



not benevolent anymore and they become characters who bring fear. Gods give a terrifying image of themselves by their malevolent behaviours. Thus, Dionea's blasphemous conduct illustrates this notion:

It appears that this mad creature very nearly committed a sacrilege: she was discovered handling in a suspicious manner the Madonna's gala frock [...] One of the orphans [...] even pretends to have surprised Dionea as she was about to adorn her wicked little person with these sacred garments; and, on another occasion [...] to have discovered her seated on the edge of the altar, in the very place of the Most Holy Sacrament<sup>169</sup>.

Her attitude suggests that she is a goddess, even in her human costume. She can hardly bear the fact that another divinity is venerated. This is why she does not respect the Madonna: Dionea is actually the one who must be adored.

Thus *fin de siècle* literature recycled mythology to create its own system focused on the notions of darkness and evil. The myth of Medusa underwent the same process. Moreover, as we have seen, the *femme fatale* fascinated nineteenth-century artists; and because the notion of feminine power they both convey, the *femme fatale* and Medusa were linked at that time. Besides, this evolution of the myth was in line with changes in the British society. Indeed, *fin de siècle* women were no longer only the "imperfect double<sup>170</sup>" of men, they started to gain power. This power included the capacity to do good or evil deeds, and it was this possibility which frightened men. The "myth crowning a disobedient woman in her guises as heir of the ages and demoniac savior of the race<sup>171</sup>" could become reality and this contributed to harm the image of women.

### **b) Lee's inspiration: Medusa and Pater's Gods in exile**

This fascination about women's powers was already at the heart of Romanticism. In 1819, John Keats wrote the poem *La Belle Dame sans Merci*<sup>172</sup> in which, the power of the woman comes from her ability to bewitch the knight with her seductive behaviour. Later, this

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<sup>169</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.84

<sup>170</sup> Zorn, Christa. *Op. cit.* p.22

<sup>171</sup> Auerbach, N. *Woman and the Demon: The Life of a Victorian Myth*. Harvard University Press, 1982. p.2

<sup>172</sup> *La Belle Dame sans Merci*: chivalric poem written by John Keats in 1819. It tells the story of a knight who meets a very beautiful lady and falls in love with her. Then she brought him to her "grot" when he died in her arms. Thus, this poem links the dangerous beauty of the lady to the knight's death.

poem and its characters inspired many works of art by the Pre-Raphaelites. Thus, at the end of the nineteenth century, the *femme fatale* can be considered as a modern *Belle Dame sans Merci*. As Maris-Carmen Thue-Tun points out: "Presque toutes les 'Belles Dames sans Merci' ont les formes de femmes-serpents portant l'empreinte ancestrale de la Méduse<sup>173</sup>." A monster from Greek mythology, Medusa can be described as a woman whose hair locks are snakes. She is able to change people into stone just by gazing at them. She is associated with serpents and death in the collective memory. As Jean-Louis Le Run has noted: "Méduse est une borne, un signal qui réapparaît chaque fois que la régression, la destruction, la désintrinsication pulsionnelle, la déliaison conduisent à un seuil, au bord de la mort<sup>174</sup>." Therefore one can see that there is a link between the interest of late nineteenth century artists for characters inspired from Medusa and the context of this *fin de siècle*. Indeed, because they were skeptical about progress and science and because they thought that everyday life was boring and reality was ugly, the Decadents felt a feeling of collapse. Thus, to take up Catherine Rancy's idea, they thought that the world was at its end, which may explain their interest in death and therefore the presence of Medusa in many of their works.

On the other hand, Thue-Tun affirms that the snake-woman is undoubtedly one of Lilith's metamorphoses after her fall from the Garden of Eden. According to the Bible, Lilith was the first wife of Adam but after rebelling against him she entered into a pact with the Devil. The latter provided her wings to flee from Adam and she came to live on Earth. In the same way the Irish poet John Todhunter had established a connection between Lilith and Medusa in his poem *Beatrice Song*<sup>175</sup>, Vernon Lee's characters are a mix of these mythological women. In *Hauntings*, the descriptions of Lee's heroines brings to mind these characters. For instance, Oriana is literally the Snake Lady and Dionea comes almost miraculously on Earth. Moreover, in the words of the Doctor Alessandro De Rosis (the narrator of the story) Dionea is "an amazing little beauty, dark, lithe, with an odd, ferocious gleam in her eyes, and a still odder smile, tortuous, serpentine, like that of Leonardo da Vinci's women<sup>176</sup>". In this description, there is an obvious reference to Medusa: the mention of the word "serpentine" is about Medusa's hair and the way the narrator depicts her gaze reflects the fear induced by

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<sup>173</sup> Thue-Tun, Marie-Carmen. *Op. cit.* p.267

<sup>174</sup> Le Run, Jean-Louis. 'D'un millénaire à l'autre, Méduse'. *Enfances & Psy* 26.1 (2005): 43. p.43

<sup>175</sup> "Beatrice Song From 'The Poison Flower'" published in Mathews, Elkin. *The Book of the Rhymers' Club*. London: The Bodley Head, 1892.

<sup>176</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.84

such eyes. In addition, this portrayal refers also to "da Vinci's women". One can assume that it is Mona Lisa who is involved. About this painting, Pater noted that she has "[an] unfathomable smile, always with a touch of sinister in it<sup>177</sup>". Thus, the two descriptions are linked and in both cases the beauty is overridden by the suggestion of a dangerous aspect, not precisely defined but which refers to the devil.

The story of Lilith is linked to the theme of *The Gods in Exile*<sup>178</sup> which inspired Pater and Lee. Thus, the idea that Gods must go into exile and have to disguise themselves is the theme of "Denys L'Auxerrois" for instance. According to critics, this text, taken from the *Imaginary Portraits*<sup>179</sup>, would have strongly influenced Lee, especially for the writing of "Dionea". Thus, these Gods coming back on Earth gather and bring to the present the main interests of the two authors: past, history and beauty. This sort of anachronism creates a difficulty to establish if the Gods are dead or alive, resurrected or biologically perpetrated. The difficulty to find out their real nature generates a feeling of uncertainty among those who are in contact with them.

Yet, regardless of their essence, their presence is still linked to the conveyance of a message. And because the long history of myths has attributed a meaning to each god, very often, people already know the content of message they have to deliver before it is expressed. For instance, in "Dionea" it is not the fear of what is unfamiliar which is highlighted but rather the fear of what is going to happen.

Dionea seemed to scandalise every one, perhaps because these good folk had a mysterious instinct that the name is derived from Dione, one of the loves of Father Zeus, and mother of no less a lady than the goddess Venus. The child was very near being called Maria, although there are already twenty-three other Marias, Mariettas, Mariuccias, and so forth at the convent<sup>180</sup>.

The behaviour of people towards Dionea illustrates perfectly what they already know about the Greek goddess Dione. It is the fact that Dionea could be linked to her that frightens them. Indeed, although not seen as a malevolent goddess, Dione was Venus' mother. The latter is

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<sup>177</sup> Pater, Walter. 'Lionardo Da Vinci'. Studies in the History of the Renaissance. London: MacMillan & Co, 1873. 90–122.

<sup>178</sup> Essay by Heinrich Heine (1797-1856). Translated by Pater in 1871 in his essay *Pico della Mirandula*.

<sup>179</sup> Walter Pater, *Imaginary Portraits*, published in 1887.

<sup>180</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.80

known for representing beauty, seduction and love—all traits that make her dangerous. That is why they try to take actions (the change of name for instance) in order to avert the possible danger. Thus, the specificity of these characters is that they are not only ghosts but they are related to another world. They have an historical, cultural and artistic specificity. Indeed, Lee's ghosts as well as Pater's "figure, not the terror of the unknown [...] They are located in history, not, extraterrestrially, out of it<sup>181</sup>". The fear is brought on by the mythical message implied by the presence of these characters but it is also brought by the fact that these *ghosts* are "reincarnation and not apparitions<sup>182</sup>". Indeed, as Catherine Rancy explains, they represent a repetition. It would be this repetition of a past event which would bring a feeling of malaise<sup>183</sup>.

Consequently, in "Amour Dure", the reader fears for Spiridion's future: on the one hand, the heroine is related to the goddess Medea by her name and, on the other hand, Lee's character has a similar background as the one of the goddess. Indeed, Euripide's Medea is famous for a series of murders which went hand in hand with her escape through Greece. In the same way, two of the husbands of Lee's Medea were found stabbed in the chest and another died mysteriously. As a result, at each time she had to flee. The narrator himself, realizes it: "[H]er magic faculty is to enslave all the men who come across her path; all those who see her, love her, become her slaves; and it is the destiny of all her slaves to perish. Her lovers, [...], all come to an untimely end." Thus, Spiridion grants Medea a certain magical power but here it is mostly the repetition of her past actions which is highlighted. However, even if he is conscious of the danger, this extract shows that the narrator is doomed to a sad fate because of his fascination for Medea.

### c) Lee's deconstruction of myths

Lee agreed on Oscar Wilde's idea that the most interesting ghosts are the ones hidden in our imagination, in our nightmares. "By ghost, we do not mean the vulgar apparition which is seen or heard in told tales; we mean the ghost which slowly rises up in our mind, the

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<sup>181</sup> Leighton, Angela. 'Ghosts, Aestheticism, and "Vernon Lee"'. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.1 (2000): 1–14. p.1

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.* p.2

<sup>183</sup> The freudian theory of *Unheimlich* is based on this idea. This theory will be developed later on this essay.

haunter not of corridors and staircases, but of our fancies<sup>184</sup>". Sticking to this idea, Vernon Lee's works distance this *boring* reality and provide an interesting background to her *ghosts*. Therefore, her ghosts have the features of mythical figures such as Aphrodite or Medusa, coupled to the features of the nineteenth century *femme fatale*. This mix makes these women terribly dangerous because they combine different sources of power: a divine one but also a sort of carnal one.

Yet, although Lee created such fearful characters, she also cast doubt on the threat they represented. Indeed, in "Amour Dure", Medea's gaze is considered dangerous by Duke Robert: "It is said that she haughtily requested to see the new Duke, but that he shook his head [...] and that it is remarkable that he persistently refused to see her<sup>185</sup>." This is an obvious reference to Medusa. Nevertheless, the knowledge of the dangerousness of Medea did not prevent him from being seduced by her. For this reason, is Spiridion the victim of the attractive power of Medea's reincarnation, or on the contrary is she the victim of Spiridion's obsessional delirium? In the second case, this would imply that there is no reason to fear Medea since she is not even a ghost but merely an object of desire trapped in Spiridion's mind. This notion echoes another form of trapping as Maxwell and Pulham have noted in her introduction of *Hauntings and Other Fantastic Tales*: "Lee's Medea da Capri [is] not merely [...] an enigmatic *femme fatale* but [...] a brilliant woman trapped in history<sup>186</sup>." Indeed, Vernon Lee does not hide her inspiration since through her narrator's voice she compares Medea to "Bianca Cappello, and at the same time [...] Lucrezia Borgia<sup>187</sup>." Like these two Italian aristocratic ladies, Medea is a great beauty and has a tragic end predicted—even if her fate mostly links her to Lucrezia Borgia. By making her character the right mix between myth and history, Vernon Lee's aim was to give a voice to Medea; and through Medea to Lucrezia Borgia.

As we have seen, the society of the nineteenth century was still a patriarchal one. This implies that the field of history was dominated by men; thus, to be trusted, Lee's historian had to be a man. This partly explains the character of Spiridion. Yet, contrary to *real* historians

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<sup>184</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions*. (1881). London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887. p.93

<sup>185</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.49

<sup>186</sup> Maxwell and Pulham in Lee, Vernon. *Op. cit.* pp.11-12

<sup>187</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op.cit.* p.46

who agreed on the fact that Lucrezia Borgia was a dangerous woman who poisoned her husbands, Spiridion has a different idea about Medea. Indeed, his feelings for her make him question the reasons of such a behaviour. Thus, Spiridion even goes as far as writing a plea in favor of Medea:

Yes; I can understand Medea. Fancy a woman of superlative beauty, of the highest courage and calmness, a woman of many resources, of genius, brought up by petty princelet of a father [...]—a woman whose one passion is conquest and empire—fancy her, on the eve of being wedded to a man of the power of the Duke of Stimigliano, claimed, carried off by a small fry of a Pico, locked up in his hereditary brigands castle, and having to receive the young fool's red-hot love as an honor and a necessity! The mere thought of any violence to such a nature is an abominable outrage [...]. Reflect what that means: it means that this imperious woman is soon treated like a chattel, made roughly to understand that her business is to give the Duke an heir, not advice; that she must never ask "wherefore this or that?" That she must courtesy before the Duke's counsellors, his captains, his mistresses [...]<sup>188</sup>.

Here, Spiridion's voice gives a different point of view; he reveals another truth than the historical one. Through Spiridion's perspective, Lee actually seeks to reveal the factors which led Medea to kill. Thus, without denying the reality of the facts, the narrator explains that it was the context which forced her to have such a behaviour. The acts were hers but they only were an answer to the way men acted towards her. In fact, Spiridion blames Medea's father and then her husbands for her conduct: they were not fitted for her. He even goes further claiming, "Is this Medea's fault? [...] Certainly not<sup>189</sup>." Through this plea, Lee actually deconstructs the myth of the *femme fatale* who would be the cause of sufferings and misfortunes. Indeed, she reverses the myth and suggests that it is *because* women suffer from men's behaviours that they have to act so cruelly towards them.

Similarly, the reader will find this subversion of the traditional myths in the short story "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady". As we have seen, in mythology, the gaze of Medusa is frightening because it is synonymous of death. Yet, Lee's Snake Lady deconstructs this idea. Actually it is rather Prince Alberic who contributed to challenge this point of view. Indeed, as a child he was in love with Lady Oriana, who was depicted on the tapestry of his bedroom. This lady was actually the representation of the Fairy Oriana who was imprisoned in a snake body. Yet, when he saw for the first time that she actually has a snake body, he was not scared

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<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.* p.56

<sup>189</sup> *Ibid.* p.57

at all: "Very strange it was, but he loved the beautiful lady with the thread of gold hair only the more because she ended off in the long twisting body of a snake. And that, no doubt, was why the knight was so very good to her<sup>190</sup>." In his childhood eyes, the lady's particularity made her even more beautiful than a real one and he thought candidly that the knight had the same thought. That is why, without bias, the young Alberic was able to become friend with this "large tame grass snake whose acquaintance he had made the day after his arrival at the castle<sup>191</sup>." He did not know that this snake was in fact Lady Oriana from the tapestry and his godmother. For, despite the curse, Lady Oriana, could change herself in human form for an hour a day, at sunset. Therefore she took advantage of this hour with her godson to fill her duties of godmother, following the tradition because "[t]he Snake Lady [is] of the nature of fairies<sup>192</sup>." Thus, in the same way as the traditional fairies from the tales did, she was able to comfort Prince Alberic from his loneliness, she taught him "to read, to manage a horse, and, above all, to love<sup>193</sup>." Later, when he became an adult and was told the legend of the Snake Lady, he does not hesitate to press "his lips on the little flat head of the serpent<sup>194</sup>" in order to break the spell. Consequently, through the whole short story, Alberic demonstrates that Oriana is not a threat despite her aspect. Whether she is a snake or a woman, whether she is linked to Medusa or Lilith, she is not a threat for men. Besides, she does not correspond either to the analysis Freud made of Medusa. Indeed, in 1922, Freud studied this mythological figure and according to him, Medusa's head and gaze would represent the complex of castration. As Jean Clair explains in his essay *Méduse*: "Freud [...] décrit la tête de Méduse pour ce qu'elle est : l'organe maternel adulte entouré d'une chevelure de poils dont la vision jette l'épouvante dans le jeune adolescent qui y jette un œil<sup>195</sup>." Thus, the child would be scared by Medusa's head because his unconscious would consider it as his mother's sex. Although "Alberic and the Snake Lady" was written before this theory, the contemporary readers have now another element to add in favor of Lee's subversion of the mythical image of Medusa.

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<sup>190</sup> *Ibid.* p.188

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.* p.203

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.* p.212

<sup>193</sup> *Ibid.* p.202

<sup>194</sup> *Ibid.* p.214

<sup>195</sup> Clair, Jean. *Méduse : contribution à une anthropologie des arts du visuel*. Paris: Gallimard, 1989. p.40

## 4. The theme of love in *Hauntings*

### a) Pessimism: Schopenhauer's breeding ground for impossible loves

The theme of love is present throughout *Hauntings*. Indeed, most of Vernon Lee's stories relate ambiguous relationships between the main characters which can be studied from different angles. Thus, these relationships can be seen as love stories which have unsuccessful endings as none of Lee's short stories have happy endings. This can be linked to the pessimistic vision of life adopted by the Decadents. This characteristic of this *fin de siècle* context finds its source in Schopenhauer's ideas. In his work, *The World as Will and Representation*<sup>196</sup>, the philosopher explains that the world is purposeless. Indeed, according to him, pain and boredom are the two concepts which characterize human existence. Frustration, suffering and grief are everywhere. In the words of Christopher Janaway, author of *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*, human existence "must contain suffering, and cannot be preferable to non-existence. It would even have been better for reality not to have existed<sup>197</sup>." This very pessimistic conception of life is based on the observation that human beings have to fight in order to meet their needs and to survive. He argues that the awareness of the fulfillment or not of these needs inevitably creates suffering. Indeed, one of his main argument is that "a being strives only if it experiences a lack or deficiency, and experiencing a lack is already a form of suffering<sup>198</sup>." In other words, either the human being is not able to answer his lack: in this case, the need is not filled and the person still suffers from the deficiency. Or, the need is fulfilled: in this case, the lack is filled and the person feels satisfaction. Be that as it may, this state of happiness is related to the absence on which the action was based. Thus, a human being can only be satisfied if he has suffered first. Moreover, the satisfaction felt is not a real state of happiness: "to be satisfied is simply to return to neutral by wiping out a felt deficiency<sup>199</sup>." Consequently, what human beings think to be satisfaction is actually just a return to a normal state, in which there is no lack, no need to fill.

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<sup>196</sup> The book was published in Germany in 1819 but it was published in France and in England only in the 1880s.

<sup>197</sup> Janaway, C. *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. p.104

<sup>198</sup> *Ibid.* p.104

<sup>199</sup> *Ibid.* p.105



According to Schopenhauer, this state has no advantages because of its neutrality and it will last only until the next need arises. For, life is a succession of requirements which need to be satisfied. Consequently, this state which men think to be happiness is not meant to last.

He even goes further by claiming that this state is synonymous of boredom. Thus, he sums up his concept as such: "This is the life of almost all men; they will, they know what they will, and they strive after this with enough success to protect them from despair, and enough failure to preserve them from boredom and its consequences<sup>200</sup>." Actually, he thinks that the life of human beings is always between pain and *ennui*: "In middle-class life it is represented by Sunday, just as want is represented by the other six days of the week<sup>201</sup>."

However, men possess enough will to fight for their lives and to fulfill their needs rather than give up. According to the philosopher, it is precisely this will which condemns them to be unhappy. A parallel can be drawn with the Decadents, who tried to make life more bearable by advocating art. They saw it as an answer to the ugliness of life and it is partly for this reason that Decadent literature is widely based on aesthetics. However, while art can indeed help to alleviate the disgust of reality, its effect is temporary and it does not act on the cause of the ugliness (consequently the need is not fully satisfied). Thus, according to Schopenhauer's philosophy, Decadents were condemned to oscillate between satisfaction and dissatisfaction and therefore to suffer. Vernon Lee's characters illustrate this theory. Indeed, in "Oke of Okehurst" for instance, Mrs Oke's behaviour has "the perverse desire [...] to surprise and shock more particularly her husband, and thus revenge for the intense boredom which his want of appreciation inflicted upon her<sup>202</sup>." Thus her actions are an answer to the boredom created by her marital life for which she holds her husband responsible. Yet, in parallel, Mr Oke suffers in return:

This woman had shocked and pained him more than was possible to say, and yet it was evident that he could neither cease loving her nor commence comprehending her real nature. [...] So Oke of Okehurst was condemned never to understand; but he was condemned also to suffer from his inability to do so<sup>203</sup>.

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<sup>200</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur in Janaway C. *Op. cit.* p.105

<sup>201</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation, Vol I.* (1819). Cambridge University Press, 2010. p.340

<sup>202</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst". *Op. cit.* p.116

<sup>203</sup> *Ibid.* pp.139-140

In this extract, the reader understands that Mr Oke is subject to a double suffering: the one coming from his wife's behaviour but also the one coming from his attempts to understand her. This coincides with Schopenhauer's idea that: "one's life as a human individual among others will be very likely to contain episodes in which one suffers, and episodes in which one brings about suffering<sup>204</sup>." Consequently, either human beings are responsible for the suffering of other people or they inevitably are the victim of other people's actions which make them suffer. This is precisely what happened in "Oke of Okehurst": husband and wife are partly guilty of the misery of each other. Thus, Schopenhauer thinks that our will is to blame for our sufferings but that human beings are also responsible for the pain inflicted to other people. Nevertheless, according to him women are more accountable for the suffering inflicted, because:

[T]hey have no "*sense of justice*." This arises from their deficiency in the power of reasoning [...] and reflection, but is also partly due to the fact that Nature has not destined them, as the weaker sex, to be dependent on strength but on cunning; this is why they are instinctively crafty, and have an ineradicable tendency to lie. For as lions are furnished with claws and teeth, elephants with tusks, boars with fangs, bulls with horns, and the cuttlefish with its dark, inky fluid, so Nature has provided woman for her protection and defence with the faculty of dissimulation, and all the power which Nature has given to man in the form of bodily strength and reason has been conferred on woman in this form. [...] Accordingly, it is as natural for women to dissemble at every opportunity as it is for those animals to turn to their weapons when they are attacked; and they feel in doing so that in a certain measure they are only making use of their rights. Therefore a woman who is perfectly truthful and does not dissemble is perhaps an impossibility<sup>205</sup>.

In other words, women are liars by nature: they are endowed with this capacity from a very early age. It is because this faculty is a part of them that it directs the course of their actions in everyday life. Moreover, they do not hesitate to use lies as means of defence if they feel threatened. And, because of their lack of judgement, they think that it is the right thing to do. Consequently, according to Schopenhauer, their untruthful behaviour can only lead to men's suffering. For instance, such an attitude contributes to develop "that discord in married life which is so prevalent and almost the normal state<sup>206</sup>." As a result, although man's will is

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<sup>204</sup> Janaway, C. *Op. cit.* p.104

<sup>205</sup> Schopenhauer, Arthur. "On Women". *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Essays of Schopenhauer*. 7 Apr. 2004. Date accessed 9 May 2020 <[http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11945/11945-h/11945-h.htm#link2H\\_4\\_0009](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/11945/11945-h/11945-h.htm#link2H_4_0009)>.

<sup>206</sup> *Ibid.*

responsible for his suffering, woman is an additional factor that helps to feed this feeling. This is why, Schopenhauer advocates not only the denial of the will but also a renunciation of women. Instead, he thinks that aesthetics can bring a temporary consolation to these misfortunes. By the beauty it conveys, art can provide a provisional relief from the sufferings of our nightmarish human existence. The Decadent Movement followed this pessimistic conception of life. Decadents also approved Schopenhauer's thoughts on aesthetics, in which women could be included as mere objects of contemplation.

**b) "'Decadence' was also a *fin de siècle* euphemism for homosexuality<sup>207</sup>"**

In a context in which pessimism prevailed, it is not surprising to notice that this heavy atmosphere considerably impacted Vernon Lee's short stories. Indeed, in *Hauntings*, this pessimism affects the idea of love. The characters experiment pain and misery because of the impossibility to live their love. From this point of view, there are similarities with the personal life of Vernon Lee—which may explain the importance and the recurrence of the theme in her work. According to Sondeep Kandola, "the complexity of Lee's sexual identity (a repressed lesbian who claimed that she pursued women solely for the purposes of intellectual sustenance)<sup>208</sup>" was what makes her unique. Nevertheless, if she was at ease with her sexual identity, it seems that the context of the nineteenth century made her repress this identity: indeed, as we have seen in the first part of the essay, at that time homosexuality was associated with degeneration and decay. It was seen as something unnatural and perverse and it was strongly punished. Moreover, Decadents and New Women were seen as the waste of the Victorian society and they were blamed for the sexual anarchy because "[b]oth were [...] blurring the borders between sexes<sup>209</sup>." Thus, being considered half-Decadent, half-New Woman, Vernon Lee had to conceal her homosexuality if she wanted to be published. Consequently, this background prevented her to get love and to live a happy love life.

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<sup>207</sup> Showalter, E. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. London: Virago Press, 1990. p.171

<sup>208</sup> Kandola, Sondeep. 'Vernon Lee: New Woman?' *Women's Writing* 12.3 (2005): 471–484. p.1

<sup>209</sup> Showalter, E. *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*. London: Virago Press, 1990. p.169

In 1881, she met Mary Robinson. The two women shared a great sensibility and a difficulty to cope with solitude: their relationship can be depicted as a platonic love. Yet, in 1887, Mary married James Darmester:

Last week, I received half a sheet of notepaper from Mary telling me she has engaged herself to marry James Darmsteter, a Jewish Prof. at the Collège de France, whom I have seen once. [...] she asked him (for she says she asked him rather than he her) to marry. Mary is anxious to come to Italy with me all the same. Of course this will be the last time. She wishes our relations to continue as before, & I, God knows, will stick to her always. But of course everything will be quite different. You can understand how I felt<sup>210</sup>.

This extract from a letter she had sent to her mother, shows how the relationship between the two women was more than mere friendship. Thus, following this wedding Vernon Lee endured a mental breakdown which lasted two years. Then, she met Clementina Anstruther Thomson (Kit). She admired her tenderness as well as her artistic soul and the two women lived a long relationship. They were love partners but also literary associates as they wrote together two essays: *Beauty and Ugliness* (1912) and *Music and its Lovers* (1932). However, in 1899, Kit neglected her friend in favor of another friend who was ill. According to Marie-Carmen Thue-Tun, following this break-up she experienced a serious psychological crisis and she sought refuge in work. Writing became a means of expression which allowed her to find comfort from her feeling of malaise and solitude.

Throughout her whole life she sought to fill the emotional emptiness that her childhood brought her. Her mother was quite distant, her father was absent because of his work, and later, she had to care for her brother who got paralyzed. Consequently, she was the one who took care of the others, but she was not taken care of very much.

I now see that one should try to get to know oneself, (since others don't take the trouble) and particularly to know one's own history and evolution that is, one's parents and one's childhood. [...] How immense a part of education it will become to teach the individual to know his own private aptitudes and dangers, instead of learning only about general virtues and vices!<sup>211</sup>

Thus, her words suggest that she was well aware of who she was. She also highlights the importance of being conscious of one's own background and history. Yet, despite this self-

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<sup>210</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Vernon Lee's Letters*. London: Privately printed, 1937. p.272

<sup>211</sup> Lee, Vernon, in Pantazzi, Sybille. 'Carlo Placci and Vernon Lee'. *English Miscellany* 12 (1961): 97–122. p.117

knowledge, her education, her encounters and nineteenth century society did not allow Lee to live and to express fully her sexuality. This incapacity to fulfill her need of affection is reflected in her work and her torment and frustration are mirrored through her characters.

For instance, in "Oke of Okehurst", Mrs Oke is plagued by her ancestress's history: "[T]he resemblance was heightened by the fact that, as I soon saw, the present Mrs. Oke distinctly made herself up to look like her ancestress, dressing in garments that had a seventeenth-century look; nay, that were sometimes absolutely copied from this portrait<sup>212</sup>." In fact the way the present Mrs Oke chooses to dress herself reflects her suffering; it is like she dresses up in the former Alice Oke everyday. Thus, in the same way Vernon Lee had to cope with nineteenth century society, Mrs. Oke has to deal with a personality which does not fit the times she lives in.

Similarly, there is another example of this inadequacy between the character and its context in "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers". Indeed, Don Juan who always had "masterful manners<sup>213</sup>" finds himself powerless in the middle of a crowd which acts as if he was not there. First he does not understand their behaviour toward him, before realizing that the crowd is actually gathering in order to attend funerals, his own funerals: "Don Juan Guzman del Pulgar stared fixedly. It was himself<sup>214</sup>." This scene represents the split between his mind and his body: it is only his soul which is among the crowd and not his body, which is in the coffin. In these two examples, the reader witnesses the frustration and the torment of the two characters. Indeed, what is reflected in other people's eyes is not what they truly are: this expresses the feeling experienced by Vernon Lee.

Furthermore, the ambiguity conveyed by characters directly inspired from gods and mythology contributes to demonstrate her feeling about the place she occupies in society. Indeed, as we have seen, some of the characters from *Hauntings* are inspired by the *Imaginary Portraits* of Walter Pater. These characters are ambiguous ones, being capable of the best and the worst. Thus, in "Denys L'Auxerrois", this is "the two natures of Dionysus that Pater describes: one, joyous and pleasure-seeking, the god of the vine—the other, demoniacal, horrible, the spirit of werewolves and other blood drinking creatures<sup>215</sup>." In the same way, Lee

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<sup>212</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst". *Op. cit.* p.119

<sup>213</sup> Lee, Vernon. "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers". *Op. cit.* p.275

<sup>214</sup> *Ibid.* p.276

<sup>215</sup> Court, Franklin E. 'Change and Suffering in Pater's Fictional Heroes'. *Modern Fiction Studies* (1967): 443–453. p.447

used this duality to shape the character of Dionea. Thus, the narrator of the short story depicts her as "a lovely sight, a thing fit for one of your painters, Burne-Jones or Tadema<sup>216</sup>". This first depiction implies that she is a great beauty who inspires only delight. Yet, a few pages further: "None of our boys, peasants or fishermen, seem to hang on her steps; and if they turn round to stare and whisper as she goes by straight and dainty in her wooden clogs [...], it is, I remark, with an expression rather of fear than love<sup>217</sup>." Dionea's behaviour and the rumor associated exceed her beauty and actually, this beauty became a cursed one. This contributes to establish an "abstractness, a misty haze of obscurity that hides [the characters] meaning.<sup>218</sup>" As a result, it is difficult for the reader to constitute a clear judgment about the protagonist. This ambiguity about the characters leads to an evolution of their status. In "Denys L'Auxerrois", "the hero [is] involved at first in bringing a condition of change into his society [...] and later as the suffering victim of this society<sup>219</sup>." This notion of becoming a victim of the society is what the author expresses in "Dionea". As an illustration, when the narrator depicts Waldemar's gaze, "with his odd eyes, not without a gleam of latent ferocity<sup>220</sup>", or when he reports that "[t]he way he speaks of Dionea [...] is almost brutal and coldness<sup>221</sup>", these are indications that Dionea is actually Waldemar's victim. Therefore a parallel can be made between Dionea and Vernon Lee as well as between Waldemar's eyes and the gaze of society. Thus, *Hauntings'* characters can be seen as the embodiment of society: if their destructive behaviours prevent them from reaching love, they also represent the destructive power of Victorian society.

### **c) Hysteria and violence cannot lead to love**

In his work on Schopenhauer, Christopher Janaway writes that: "Independence of spirit is the trait most characteristic of Schopenhauer. He writes fearlessly with little respect for authority, and detests the hollow conformism which he finds in the German academic

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<sup>216</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.82

<sup>217</sup> *Ibid.* p.85

<sup>218</sup> Court, Franklin E. 'Change and Suffering in Pater's Fictional Heroes'. *Modern Fiction Studies* (1967): 443–453. p.445

<sup>219</sup> *Ibid.* pp.447-448

<sup>220</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.96

<sup>221</sup> *Ibid.* p.98

establishment<sup>222</sup>." Thus, if there are similarities in the way Schopenhauer and Lee conceive the world and society there are also resemblances in their natures. Indeed, Vernon Lee was a very independent woman who had "erudition and independent thoughts<sup>223</sup>." Moreover, although Schopenhauer was one generation ahead, they both had in common the willingness not to stick to the rules and ideas which dominated their times. Consequently, this will and this freedom of thoughts allowed them to write without restrictions.

Thus, *Hauntings* reflects some aspects of Schopenhauer's ideas and suffering is present under many forms, including love. As the *femme fatale* appears in almost all the stories, one can be tempted to believe that she is the vehicle of pain and that she is the reason why love stories end badly. Yet, once more, Lee subverts this theory by assigning her male characters a hysterical behaviour. Indeed, at that times, hysteria was considered as a disease concerning exclusively women<sup>224</sup>. To sum up, it was thought that women were defined by their organs and not by their mind. Therefore, in the case of hysteria, the illness was the expression of their womb, which was considered as a monstrous beast whose aim was to create disorder. In contrast to this theory, in Lee's short stories, the disaster is created by men's behaviour. Thus, in "A Wicked Voice", the narrator (Magnus) is not thinking rationally when he starts a frantic chase in order *to catch the feminine voice* he heard.

Suddenly there came across the lagoon [...] a ripple of music, a voice breaking itself in a shower of little scales and cadences and trills. [...] "To shore! Quick!" I cried to the gondolier. [...]

For all of a sudden a second ripple of voice swept over the lagoon, a shower of little notes, which seemed to form a little mocking laugh. Then again all was still [...]

"Row to St. Mark's!" I exclaimed. "Quick!" [...] I felt the need of noise, of yells and false notes, of something vulgar and hideous to drive away that ghost-voice which was haunting me<sup>225</sup>.

The narrator is caught up in a process of action and reaction: when he hears the music, he can do nothing else than try to catch it. He is not able to analyze the situation; on the contrary, it is more like a knee-jerk reaction, he is not in control of the situation anymore. That is why he

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<sup>222</sup> Janaway, C. *Op. cit.* p.1

<sup>223</sup> Zorn, Christa. *Op. cit.* p.7

<sup>224</sup> See *Studies on Hysteria (Studien über Hysterie)* published in 1895, by Sigmund Freud and Josef Breuer.

<sup>225</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wicked Voice". *Op. cit.* pp.166-168

acts hastily although he is aware that he is not going to find the source of the music because the sound appears suddenly and does not last. Moreover, because he is no longer in control of his mind, he cannot analyze the situation. Thus, he does not know from which direction the sound which just "swept over the lagoon" comes. In the same way, he is tricked by his mind that convinces him that the voice is mocking him. Besides, he finally concedes that his mind is haunted by this *ghost-voice*. Thus, it is Magnus's behaviour which leads him to his ruin and not the voice. Similarly, in "Dionea", it is Waldemar who kills Dionea and then kills himself. He is the only one who chooses their fate, and the bad end of the story is the result of his action. Yet, once more, it seems that he was not in full possession of his mind:

Then he rose, and walking nervously round my study, talking disconnectedly about his work, his eye suddenly fell upon a little altar [...] dedicating to Venus, the mother of Love. [...] "So," he said, "this little cavity was to burn the incense in; or rather, I suppose, since it has two little gutters running into it, for collecting the blood of the victim? [...]" and he laughed, and left me with that odd ferocious lighting-up of his face<sup>226</sup>.

The use of adverbs such as "nervously" and "disconnectedly" indicate that Waldemar does not control himself anymore. Moreover, he sees this altar as an object linked to sacrifice: this thought makes him laugh and even lights-up his face. This scene mixes all his ferocity and the madness his work with Dionea created. As a result, in these stories, men's behaviours are not rational and the object of their fascination is not something they cherish but rather something that enhance their hysterical conduct.

Furthermore, the theme of impossible love is mirrored in Lee's stories by the inclusion of cruelty and brutality in stories which can be seen as fairy tales. Indeed, her writings sometimes depict scenes of an extreme violence. Because of the image she conveys, the *femme fatale* can be considered responsible for this cruelty. Indeed, according to Catherine Rancy, the *femme fatale* is actually the mortal form of *La Belle Dame sans Merci*. The expression *sans merci* implies that this character has no pity for the men she seduces. This is this abrupt aspect that the reader experiences in Vernon Lee's works. Yet, contrary to what one might think, the violence does not emanate from women but it is rather directed against them. To express this brutality, Vernon Lee uses several literary devices among which oppositions.

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<sup>226</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.101



For instance, in "A Wedding Chest", the description of the mutilated body is followed by the description of the beautiful garden in which the body is supposed to be buried.

[T]heir eyes were met [...] by the body of Monna Maddalena, naked as God had made it, dead with two stabs in the neck, the long golden hair tied with pearls but dabbed in blood; the which Maddalena was cruelly squeezed into that coffer, having on her breast the body of an infant recently born, dead like herself. [...]

Desiderio [...] carried the coffer into the garden. This garden, [...] was pleasantly situated, and abounding in flowers and trees, useful both for their fruit and their shade, and rich likewise in all herbs<sup>227</sup>.

Moreover, in the description of the body itself, there are oppositions. As an illustration, the mention of God as creator of this body implies a religious aspect, some sort of purity, almost holiness. Yet, this purity is instantly challenged by the fact that the woman was stabbed. Someone destroyed God's work. Similarly, the mention of Monna Maddalena's pearls in her "golden hair" indicates delicacy and refinement. Unfortunately these pearls are covered with her blood. At last, the position in which the body has been placed in the chest ("cruelly") contrasts with the tenderness suggested by the fact the child has been laid on Monna Maddalena's breast.

This violence expressed through oppositions is also reflected in the description of Oriana's death in "Prince Alberic":

For there, in a corner, the tame grass snake was placidly coiled up, sleeping. [...] Alberic threw himself forward. But it was too late. The Jester, with a blow of his harlequin's lath, had crushed the head of the startled creature; and even while he was struggling with him and the Jesuit, the Dwarf had given it two cuts with his Turkish scimitar. [...] Alberic had thrown himself on the dead snake, which lay crushed and bleeding on the floor; and he moaned piteously<sup>228</sup>.

The serpent does not represent any threat: it is tamed and placidly sleeping. Yet, it is going to endure an accumulation of mortal blows, an obstinacy from the Duke's favorites. The narrator emphasizes the fact that the serpent was not a danger, qualifying it of "startled creature" when it was crushed. Yet, despite its harmless aspect, it does not prevent it to be literally destroyed; this is the dangerousness implied by its form and its connotation to the devil that the favorites wanted to eradicate. They did not know that the serpent was in reality Lady Oriana, Alberic's lover. Yet, this idea went through the Duke's mind: "As he prepared to leave, he approached

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<sup>227</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wedding Chest". *Op. cit.* p.237

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.* p.226

the dead snake, and looked at it for some time. He kicked its mangled head with his ribboned shoe, and turned away laughing. 'Who knows,' he said, 'whether you were not the Snake Lady?'<sup>229</sup>" The extreme cruelty of the scene is highlighted by this end and by the irony conveyed by the words of the Duke. He is conscious of the possible identity of the snake yet he is satisfied by the death of the animal<sup>230</sup>. Moreover, the fact that he laughed raised the question of who the real devil in this scene is.

The same cruel irony can be found in "A Wedding Chest". The note which went with the chest said: "To Master Desiderio; a wedding gift from Troilo Baglioni of Fratta<sup>231</sup>." Thus Troilo, who had kidnapped Desiderio's future wife, sends her back to him, dead, in the chest they had made for their wedding. The external narrator himself concedes that it is a harsh and cruel joke and explains to the reader that the note was doubtlessly written in reference "to the Triumph of Love [...] painted upon the front of the coffer<sup>232</sup>." This ironical allusion actually sums up the idea of impossible love in Lee's stories: how can one experience love when the object of this love is dead? Thus, as Catherine fancy has noted:

Comme dans presque toutes les histoires de "Vernon Lee", le thème central est celui de l'échec de l'amour idéal [...] L'insistance très décadente sur le serpent, déjà relevée à plusieurs reprises, sur l'horreur et sur la nudité féminine, suggère d'autre part une certaine culpabilité homosexuelle, ou du moins le tourment d'un amour jamais atteint, idéal mais impossible à satisfaire au sein de la société<sup>233</sup>.

Yet, in *Hauntings*, it is not merely the failure of love which is expressed: it is the failure of love because of madness, because of death. Consequently, the characters are not only unhappy but are forever separated in two very distinct worlds that cannot communicate with each other, which can be seen as a metaphor of the dual aspect of the Victorian society. The result is that it deprives them of any possibility of living happily and only the feeling of irrevocable loss and the vision of impossible happiness remain. Therefore, by discussing the theme of impossible love, Lee links her vision of society with her personal experience that she shares in an implied way.

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<sup>229</sup> *Ibid.* p.227

<sup>230</sup> This cruel attitude can be compared to Herodias' behaviour at the end of Oscar Wilde play, *Salomé*. Indeed, he unscrupulously orders to his soldiers to kill his daughter-in-law.

<sup>231</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wedding Chest". *Op. cit.* p.237

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.* p.237

<sup>233</sup> Rancy, Catherine. *Op. cit.* p.162

### **III. *Hauntings'* ambivalence: a criticism and a product of the society**

The combination of many elements is what makes the specificity of the Gothic genre but also its richness. In his work, "The Genesis of 'Gothic' Fiction", E. J. Clery explains that: "The credible emotions of the characters connect us to incredible phenomena and events and allow terror to circulate via processes of identification and projection<sup>234</sup>." In other words, Gothic stories are driven by emotional characters. First, their emotions contribute to anchor them in reality by giving them authenticity: thus, the creation of emotional characters allows the reader to easily identify with them. Then, the process of identification leads the reader to share the feelings of the characters: this provides him the *frisson* he waits for. In a world which did not always meet people's expectations, Gothic literature was a way to add excitement to a life lacking thrills. Nevertheless, while supernatural events experienced by credible characters provide a background for Gothic authors to discuss deeper themes such as death and anxiety, these incredible events are also often a metaphor for real events. Hence, the Gothic story becomes an ideal framework to criticize the society. *Hauntings* is no exception to the rule and ghosts from the past come back to haunt the present with a message to deliver. Yet, they never assert anything and the whole content of their message is always delivered in a subtle way. In the same way, their presence, although being always suggested, feels very real. The reality given to these unreal characters create an uncanny atmosphere as Freud will name it, while Lee's "preference for the undefined, the suggested<sup>235</sup>" forces her readership to be active in their readings and to wonder about, the hidden meaning of her words.

#### **1. *Hauntings* and its relation to the Gothic genre**

##### **a) A "combination of 'high culture' and 'low culture'<sup>236</sup>"**

The term Gothic "was first used by early Renaissance art historians in Italy to describe pointed-arch and castellated styles of medieval architecture, as well as medieval ways of life

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<sup>234</sup> Clery, E. J. 'The Genesis of "Gothic" Fiction'. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 21–40. p.25

<sup>235</sup> Catherine Maxwell, and Patricia Pulham in Lee, Vernon. *Op. cit.* p.19

<sup>236</sup> Hogle, Jerrold E. 'Introduction: The Gothic in Western Culture'. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 1–20. p.8

in general<sup>237</sup>." They used this term in reference to brutal Goths, known for their archaic way of life and their carelessness about architecture. With this definition as a basis, the term evolved towards two different meanings as Clara F. McIntyre notes in her essay *Were the "Gothic Novels" Gothic?* On the one hand, Gothicism can be considered "as a genuine expression of the life of the Middle Ages<sup>238</sup>" and therefore it can be synonymous of something archaic. On the other hand, she describes the Gothic "as implying excess of ornament, divergence from a prevailing style, the inclusion of certain abnormal and even grotesque aspects of life<sup>239</sup>." Because Gothic literature diverges from the styles which dominated until then and because it involves "abnormal" aspects of life, it is this second meaning which applies the best to the genre. The first literary work called Gothic was *The Castle of Otranto*, a novel written in 1764 by Horace Walpole. Yet, not until the 1780s will the golden age of the Gothic literature be reached. In "The Genesis of 'Gothic' Fiction", E. J. Clery claims that the development of the Gothic genre at the end of the eighteenth century was linked with:

[...] boredom and satiety. They are both products of a commercial society in which stability, leisure, and plenty lead to a demand for artificial excitements, and most appositely, in which the rapid growth of the reading habit in the middle class breeds obscure longings for novelty<sup>240</sup>.

Hence, the genre highlights the need for middle-class people to be entertained from their monotonous daily life and their search for plots which would provoke excitement and fright. Thus, the Gothic was perceived as a new literary genre because these new readers' expectations implied the use of new features such as "castles in an eternal state of delapidation, complete with winding passages, secret haunted chambers, and creaking hinges, and narratives revolving around tyranny, rapine, and the ravishing of maidens<sup>241</sup>." Now considered as standards of the Gothic, these new characteristics distinguished at that time the genre from the romance which was the most popular fictional work until then.

Moreover, as we have seen, the growth of newspapers and the increasing interest of the British middle-class population in reading during the nineteenth century encouraged the publication of short stories in magazines, the latter proposing a wider variety of genres. Thus,

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<sup>237</sup> *Ibid.* p.16

<sup>238</sup> McIntyre, Clara F. 'Were the "Gothic Novels" Gothic?' *PMLA* 36.4 (1921): 644–667. p645

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.* p.645

<sup>240</sup> Clery, E. J. *Op. cit.* p.29

<sup>241</sup> *Ibid.* p.35

*The Cassell's Magazine*<sup>242</sup> published for instance "The Ides of March"<sup>243</sup>, which narrates the adventures of the gentleman thief, A.J. Raffles, while *The Strand Magazine* published "The Thames Valley Catastrophe"<sup>244</sup>, a science-fiction work about the destruction of London. In some ways, it is this search for diversification from readers which allowed Gothic literature to flourish. In 1884, the *Pall Mall Christmas Extra* published "The Body Snatcher": the story was written by Stevenson and relates the theft of buried corpses for medical courses on anatomy. A few years later, in 1890, it was *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which was printed in the *Lippincott's Monthly Magazine*. As these authors, Vernon Lee took advantage of this blossoming and had several short stories printed in magazines among which "Amour Dure" published in *Murray's Magazine* in 1887 or "The Virgin of the Seven Daggers" printed in 1896 in *Feuilleton du journal des débuts du Samedi*<sup>245</sup>.

These nineteenth-century Gothic short stories kept the same literary codes as the eighteenth-century stories and the reader could recognize the characteristics of Elizabethan drama. Indeed, Horace Walpole himself had made no secret of his inspiration "in his preface to the second edition of *The Castle of Otranto*, [...] [he] claims Shakespeare as his model"<sup>246</sup>. Thus, Gothic plots, like Elizabethan plays, often revolved around a crime and "[i]n most of them, [...] the hero and heroine are carried through many alarming disasters and trials"<sup>247</sup>. These twists throughout the plot hold the reader's attention. Moreover, the notion of revenge and the presence of supernatural events in the background were already present in Elizabethan plays and more specifically in Jacobean revenge tragedies. Indeed, very popular during the reign of James I, these tragedies also often addressed the question of patriarchal violence through murders and manipulation for instance; a violence that the reader can find in *Hauntings* through the characters of Waldemar in "Dionea" or of Duke Balthasar in "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady"<sup>248</sup>. Thus, some critics consider Jacobean playwrights such as John Webster or John Ford as precursors of the Gothic genre because of the themes discussed but also because "these revenge tragedies challenge the dogmas of patriarchalism and absolutism on

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<sup>242</sup> *The Cassell's Magazine*: monthly British magazine published from 1897 to 1912.

<sup>243</sup> "The Ides of March" was written by Ernest William Hornung and published in the *Cassell's Magazine* in June 1898.

<sup>244</sup> "The Thames Valley Catastrophe" by Grant Allen was published in *The Strand Magazine* in December 1897.

<sup>245</sup> Short story originally published as "La Madone aux sept glaives"

<sup>246</sup> McIntyre, Clara F. *Op. cit.* p.652

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.* p.648

<sup>248</sup> The theme of violence will be discussed later on this essay.

which James based his rule<sup>249</sup>." As a matter of fact, the genre adapted itself to its social, political and cultural context: "Gothic fiction has always possessed the ability to adapt to its environment. It mutates to reflect the times in which it lives<sup>250</sup>." If the aims of the genre were still the same, that is to say to entertain but also criticize, the themes evolved with time. Consequently, the nineteenth-century Gothic genre describes the evolutions the society had to face: for instance, *Frankenstein; or, The Modern Prometheus* was written in 1818 by Mary Shelley and mirrored the fears induced by the evolution of science and R. L. Stevenson depicted the Victorian duality in his novel, *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* in 1886. In the same way, *Hauntings* still denounced this duality but also the hypocrisy and the repression created by this twofold society. However, if the nineteenth-century Gothic revival is mainly linked to Britain and the Victorian era, it also concerned the rest of the world. Thus, the German writer Theodor Storm published in 1888 the Gothic novella called *The Rider on the White Horse (Der Schimmelreiter)* while a few years before, in 1884, the Russian writer Anton Chekhov had written "The Black Monk": a short story about the last years of a scholar, which suggests people's distancing from religion. In the United States, Edgar Allan Poe published many famous short stories falling under the Gothic genre by their themes, features and a writing style that suggests rather than asserts and can thus be compared to Lee's.

Thinking about the Gothic abroad leads us to speak about the importance of locations. The British Gothic stories were often located in exotic places and distant time until the nineteenth century; the lack of knowledge about the country and the fact that the stories took place a long time ago added mystery to the plot. In the nineteenth-century Gothic revival, some of the stories still took place in foreign places (as *Hauntings'* short stories which are set in Italy excepted "Oke of Okehurst"), but another part was set in England. "[W]e can see in this period [...] the rise of a new imperialism fuelled by capitalism and racial ideologies<sup>251</sup>." One can say that the nationalism the authors of *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change* refer to, was mirrored in literature and that there was a sort of

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<sup>249</sup> Allman, E.J. *Jacobean Revenge Tragedy and the Politics of Virtue*. University of Delaware Press, 1999. Book jacket.

<sup>250</sup> Buzwell, Greg. 'Gothic Fiction in the Victorian Fin de Siècle: Mutating Bodies and Disturbed Minds'. *The British Library*. 15 May 2014. Date accessed 14 June 2020 <<https://www.bl.uk/romantics-and-victorians/articles/gothic-fiction-in-the-victorian-fin-de-siecle>>.

<sup>251</sup> Carnevali, Francesca, Julie-Marie Strange, and Paul Johnson. *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change*. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009. p.30

national Gothic branch which developed. Already at the beginning of the nineteenth century the conservative *Blackwood Magazine*<sup>252</sup> published some of these stories such as "The Buried Alive" or "The Man in the Bell"<sup>253</sup>. Although the authors of these fiction works were known, "Blackwood's employed a dense and fluid network of pseudonym and anonymity, which [...] lends a strangeness to the atmosphere which allows such curious stories to flourish<sup>254</sup>." Thus, while the plots may have lost a part of mystery because of their well-known setting, they gained in secrecy by not revealing the names of their authors.

Actually, the fact that some of the stories took place in Britain was a means to denounce the British system while "[t]he supernatural itself does not constitute the Gothic, but rather an awareness of the social order as coercive, spectral, and deathly<sup>255</sup>." Consequently, under the cover of a popular literary genre, the Gothic was also a means to criticize the system. It can therefore be summed up as being a genre which has always oscillated between opposites: combining real and unreal elements to discuss profound themes, it is consequently considered as a "serious<sup>256</sup>" genre but also "popular<sup>257</sup>" because it remains entertaining and accessible to all.

## **b) The Gothic genre reflecting our cultural selves**

According to Walpole, people enjoyed the Gothic genre because it produced something different from the traditional novels which showed a too "strict adherence to common life<sup>258</sup>." Contrarily to these novels which most often ended up with a moral lesson, Walpole preferred to emphasize the pleasure of reading through the use of one's imagination. He would later be joined by the Decadents who advocated pleasure over moral and ethical values. Indeed, as we have seen, one of the characteristics of the Decadent Movement was its contempt for morality as Catherine Rancy asserts in her essay. Thus, the Gothic short stories

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<sup>252</sup> The *Blackwood Magazine* was a British periodical which was published each month between 1817 and 1880. As a conservative magazine, it was the rival of the *Edinburg review*.

<sup>253</sup> "The Buried Alive" by John Galt was published in October 1821 and "The Man in the Bell" was written by Thomas Mann (a.k.a. William Maginn) in November 1821.

<sup>254</sup> Killick, T. *British Short Fiction in the Early Nineteenth Century: The Rise of the Tale*. New York: Routledge, 2016. p.25

<sup>255</sup> *Ibid.* p.154

<sup>256</sup> Hogle, Jerrold E. *Op. cit.* p.9

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.* p.9

<sup>258</sup> Walpole in Clery, E. J. *Op. cit.* p.23

were intended to entertain a readership who was weary of long Victorian novels. Nevertheless, they were also a way to point out the failures of society.

As we have seen, some of the characteristics of the Gothic evolved over time. It moved from stories which took place in the past in foreign countries to stories which took place in England during the nineteenth century. Yet, the features of the place where the story is set are still the same; it is an enclosed one:

[...] be it a castle, a foreign palace, an abbey, a vast prison, a subterranean crypt, a graveyard, a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, an aging city or urban underworld, a decaying storehouse, factory, laboratory, public building, or some new recreation of an older venue, such as an office with old filing cabinets<sup>259</sup>.

These places intentionally provide boundaries and they represent the limits that the character cannot exceed. During the eighteenth century, these cloistered places were already a metaphor for the boredom felt by British people. By making time and place evolve, *fin de siècle* Gothic authors barely disguised their criticism of the society: the fact that they placed these enclosed places on British soil reinforced their criticism about the British society and its leaders. Consequently, the location of the story has a metaphorical significance. In Vernon Lee's short stories, even if the heroes are not trapped in some secluded mansion, other devices are used to create this feeling of imprisonment. Thus, even the sky seems to be an element of the pitfall in which the protagonist is trapped, like a part of the "Gothic structure of imprisonment<sup>260</sup>." "Oke of Okehurst" provides a good example of this idea: when the narrator arrives at his hosts' house, "[i]t was pouring floods<sup>261</sup>." Hence, "the steady downpour<sup>262</sup>" described is not only a reference to the narrator's mood but it is also part of the enclosed world he was about to enter into. This reflected the fact that there was a part of nineteenth-century middle-class who did not just feel trapped by their living conditions but also by the society's narrow view of the world.

According to Jerrold E. Hogle: [L]ongings for gender-crossing, homosexuality or bisexuality, racial mixture, class fluidity [...]: all these motifs, as possibly evil *and* desirable, circulate

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<sup>259</sup> Hogle, Jerrold E. *Op. cit.* p.2

<sup>260</sup> Milbank, Alison. 'The Victorian Gothic in English Novels and Stories, 1830–1880'. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 145–166. p.149

<sup>261</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst". *Op. cit.* p.109

<sup>262</sup> *Ibid.* p.109



through Gothic works<sup>263</sup>. Indeed, including such elements in Gothic works was a way to make a part of the population think about these themes while confronting society with its contradictions. Thus, Charlotte Brontë advocated the idea that the aim of "Gothic metaphors<sup>264</sup>" was "to expose social hypocrisy, even to provoke society into declaring its true nature<sup>265</sup>." *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, written in 1886 by R. L. Stevenson is the perfect example of this twofold society. Science is embodied by Dr Jekyll: he is the respectable side of the character, the façade, while Mr Hyde represents the embodiment of what Jekyll denies and cautiously hides. The same notion of concealment is found in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* when Dorian decides to hide away in his attic the portrait reflecting his sins. Alice Oke in "Oke of Okehurst" also hides an insanity just as great as her beauty. Thus, there is a parallel between the Victorian society trying to conceal its unwanted abnormal side and the way Mrs Oke's mental condition forces her to live in her secluded mansion: "The Okes lived a remarkably solitary life<sup>266</sup>" and "[Mrs Oke]'s health had accustomed [Mr Oke] to solitude<sup>267</sup>". Because Alice Oke is not able to behave properly according to the Victorian standards, she and her husband have to live apart. It is this discrimination that Gothic stories want to expose and condemn: in the words of Alison Milbank, one of the aim of the Gothic is "to reveal the fictive nature of the real itself<sup>268</sup>." Thus, writing fictional stories using devices such as the supernatural was an efficient means to denounce the insincerity of the society and its lack of reality. Consequently, the Gothic symbolizes people's ambiguousness as well as the ambivalence of societal norms, especially for the late Victorian society which refused to assume its *darker* side. It claimed to be respectable but actually cautiously hid people who did not correspond to its standards. To quote once again Jerrold E. Hogle: "Social and ideological tensions about all these 'deviations' at different times thus find expression in the Gothic mode, which offers hyperbolic temptations toward these possibilities disguised in aberrant and regressive forms<sup>269</sup>." Thus, with the recurrent use of motives of concealment, the late nineteenth-century Gothic literature revealed these deviant behaviours as part of the society although they were still hidden. In order to highlight this duality, the genre insists on the

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<sup>263</sup> Hogle, Jerrold E. *Op. cit.* p.12

<sup>264</sup> Milbank, Alison. *Op. cit.* p.153

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid.* p.153

<sup>266</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst". *Op. cit.* p.117

<sup>267</sup> *Ibid.* p.117

<sup>268</sup> Milbank, Alison. *Op. cit.* p.154

<sup>269</sup> Hogle, Jerrold E. *Op. cit.* p.12

juxtaposition of opposites such as physical and non-physical or madness and sanity. Besides, the open endings of the stories suggest that neither of these extremes outweighs the other: as we have seen there is no moral aspect in these narratives.

### **The evolution of Gothic heroines: from emancipated ones...**

Women issue is another theme discussed in Gothic novels or short stories. Since the 1780s, many women saw in the development of the Gothic genre the opening of a new path: thus "novice fiction writers [such as] Sophia Lee (*The Recess*, 1783–85), Charlotte Smith (*Emmeline, the Orphan of the Castle*, 1788), and Ann Radcliffe (*The Castles of Athlyn and Dunbayne*, 1789)<sup>270</sup>" followed Walpole's path. But it was Ann Radcliff who was seen as "the dominant novelist of the decade, certainly as far as commercial success was concerned<sup>271</sup>." A key element of her success was the fact that she extended the theme of the heroine in distress used by Walpole, in order to provide for her heroines a genuine journey at the end of which they stand out more powerful. As Nelson C. Smith has noted, Ann Radcliffe took "the heroines of the sentimental novels [and] exposed them to the conventions of the Gothic novels<sup>272</sup>." Thus, the female readership of the mid-eighteenth century middle-class could find common points with these "young, beautiful and persecuted sometimes-poetesses<sup>273</sup>" characters who "share with their fictional antecedents propensities for fainting<sup>274</sup>." Thus, these heroines embodied a certain part of the readership while they allowed women to travel in a fictional way through their stories. Moreover, Ann Radcliff's liberated heroines stood for the symbol of women oppression on the one hand, while they were a way for the author to express her ideas and to take side for women on the other hand. Nevertheless, she was careful not to go too far: the actions of her heroines were not political or rebellious for instance; although being liberated by some aspects, they had to keep their place within the patriarchal society.

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<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.* p.34

<sup>271</sup> Miles, Robert. 'The 1790s: The Effulgence of Gothic'. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 41–62. p.45

<sup>272</sup> Smith, Nelson C. 'Sense, Sensibility and Ann Radcliffe'. *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* (1973): 577–590. p.577

<sup>273</sup> *Ibid.* p.581

<sup>274</sup> *Ibid.* p.581

### **...To submissive creatures**

The Gothic evolved through time and by the nineteenth century, although the Radcliffian heroines were still part of Gothic literature (as in Charlotte Brontë's works for instance) they were not emancipated as they were in the past. As Alison Milbank notes, plots revolved around "the terrorizing system and the woman threatened by this system<sup>275</sup>." Thus the heroine was depicted as the victim of a whole system. Once again, this vision of woman as a weak character who suffers other people's behaviours corresponds to the Victorian ideology. Indeed, Victorian women must be submissive and domestic; they were perceived as "guardian of the 'sacred place', home<sup>276</sup>." Yet, still according to Alison Milbank, "the provocation of victimage is deliberate, and by no means unconscious<sup>277</sup>." Thus, while the woman portrayed corresponds to the expectations of the nineteenth century society, she actually paves the way for a criticism of society. Indeed, the innocence of the depicted victim allows her to stand "as a contrast and a judge of the people and institutions that attempt to corrupt or enclose [her]<sup>278</sup>." From that point of view, the nineteenth-century Gothic heroine was an additional tool to denounce the dysfunctional society.

### **Lee's combination for making women's voices heard**

Vernon Lee's gaze was always critical towards the society she lived in but her work did not stop there. Actually, she chose to subvert the code of the "distressed heroine<sup>279</sup>" and to grant women the place they deserved, that is to say not merely as a device for criticism. For this reason, her work steps away from "the virtuous, imperiled young heroine<sup>280</sup>" to give voice to deeper and more somber characters. Thus, on one side, her heroines meet the Victorian standards: they looked like Pre-Raphaelite models with their great beauty and they were victims of the patriarchal society they inhabited, their deaths being the result of the oppression they have to endure, as the example of Medea da Capri shows. As a matter of fact, this

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<sup>275</sup> Milbank, Alison. *Op. cit.* p.152

<sup>276</sup> King, J. *The Victorian Woman Question in Contemporary Feminist Fiction*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005. p.9

<sup>277</sup> Milbank, Alison. *Op. cit.* p.153

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid.* p.155

<sup>279</sup> Hale, Terry. 'French and German Gothic: The Beginnings'. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 63–84. p.68

<sup>280</sup> Hurley, Kelly. 'British Gothic Fiction, 1885–1930'. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 189–208. p.191

woman of an "exquisite<sup>281</sup>" beauty not only died because of Duke Robert's will ("he had Medea strangled<sup>282</sup>") but he did not even give her a proper death: "[He] refused to permit her a priest or monk, thus forcing her to die unshriven, and refusing her the benefit of any penitence<sup>283</sup>." Thus the circumstances of her death show a patriarchal domination but it is mainly the words used by the narrator to depict this event that reflect Medea's helplessness. On the other side, bringing her heroines back into the present gives them a second opportunity to express themselves: Lee allows them to turn the tide and to become masters of their own revenge. Thus, in "Amour Dure", in a letter, Medea asks Spiridion to hack "a silver statuette<sup>284</sup>" which is supposed to allow the soul of the Duke Robert (her late husband) to rest. To this end, he has to destroy a statue of Duke Robert which is a crime. Yet, despite the risks, Spiridion is ready to act: "What I am going to do is, I suppose, an act of vandalism; and certainly I have no right to spoil the property of this city of Urbana. But I wish no harm either to the statue or the city [...] But I must obey Her; I must avenge Her<sup>285</sup>." This is an evidence of his submission to Medea: not only is he going to behave against his principles but it is as if he is not the master of his fate anymore. He *must* do what Medea has decided, he becomes her means to retaliate against the society which has destroyed her before. As a result Vernon Lee criticizes the society which harmed her heroines but at the same time she gives them a real voice and means to express themselves.

## **2. Death: the appropriation of an elusive event**

### **a) Between certainty and uncertainty**

As we have seen, Gothic literature was an answer to the dullness felt by mid-eighteenth century people. Thus, the readership welcomed this new genre because it met its expectations for excitement and entertainment. Actually, this quest of thrill has similitudes with the sublime developed by Burke. In *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, Edmund Burke claims that "man possesses a sort of

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<sup>281</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.51

<sup>282</sup> *Ibid.* p.50

<sup>283</sup> *Ibid.* p.50

<sup>284</sup> *Ibid.* p.53

<sup>285</sup> *Ibid.* p.72

creative power of its own [...] called Imagination<sup>286</sup>." It is in our imagination that our fears and hopes live: by using them, notions such as pleasure and pain can develop. When pleasure extends it leads to what Burke calls "delight<sup>287</sup>". Still, according to him, it is what brings delight which is called sublime. Here is how he defines it:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the SUBLIME; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling<sup>288</sup>.

Thus, through the sublime the reader experiences the notion of fear, of danger, and even of terror while not being directly threatened. "When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, [...] they may be, and they are delightful<sup>289</sup>." It is this in-between situation which allows the reader to fully *enjoy* the feeling generated. Indeed, his mind focuses entirely on the situation and on the feeling itself without being disturbed by a sense of danger that could lead him to his own death.

Besides, this delight felt through the sublime can lead to another sort of delight: the one created by fascination. Indeed, as Luce Des Aulniers has noted: "[L]a fascination [est][...] associée au prodigieux sentiment de plénitude [...], aux émois du sublime, au vertige de l'illimité... *No limits, no death. No death, no limits*<sup>290</sup>."

Thus, sublime and fascination have an intricate relationship: the delight experienced when under the spell of fascination would be similar to the one experienced with the sublime. These two concepts are also connected because what is fascinating by its mystery is feared, still according to Luce Des Aulniers<sup>291</sup>.

As a consequence, death and fascination have a complex relationship. On the one hand, death fascinates people because of the fear it creates and, on the other hand, fascination leads to the denial of this fear because it overwhelms the individual and thus overshadows the feeling of fear. *Hauntings* perfectly illustrates this intricacy and how fascination overwhelms the

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<sup>286</sup> Burke, E. *Philosophical Enquiry Into The Origin Of Our Ideas Of The Sublime And Beautiful*. London: A. Robertson & Co., 1824. p.13

<sup>287</sup> *Ibid.* p.89

<sup>288</sup> *Ibid.* p.50

<sup>289</sup> *Ibid.* pp.51-52

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid.* p.15

<sup>291</sup> Des Aulniers, Luce. *La fascination: nouveau désir d'éternité*. Québec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2009.

characters. Indeed, all the narratives involve the topic of fascination linked to death, be it through characters such as Dionea whose beauty was mesmerizing or through ghosts such as Medea whose past was captivating. About fascination, the French literary critic and philosopher, Maurice Blanchot thinks that this process is also linked to the gaze:

[Q]uand la manière de voir est une sorte de touche, quand voir est un contact à distance [...] quand ce qui est vu s'impose au regard, comme si le regard était saisi, touché, mis en contact avec l'apparence [...] le regard est entraîné, absorbé [...] ce qui nous est donné par un contact à distance est l'image, et la fascination est la passion de l'image<sup>292</sup>.

Fascination comes through the gaze because a contact is created between the eye and the image beheld. Thus, this contact is able to overwhelm the viewer until absorbing him in another world: this is fascination. This definition of fascination implies that fascinated people experience a loss of control: this would explain why villagers in "Dionea" look at the heroine "with an expression rather of fear than of love<sup>293</sup>" as well as why the Duke Robert "persistently refused to see<sup>294</sup>" Medea, the latter inspiring fear because of her power over the male gender.

Similarly, in "Amour Dure", when Spiridion meets death, the reader can feel the fascination of the narrator towards the characters embodying it and who are described as *undead*:

It struck me suddenly that all this crowd of men and women standing all round, these priests chanting and moving about the altar, were dead [...] I touched, as if by accident, the hand of my neighbour; it was cold, like wet clay. He turned round, but did not seem to see me: his face was ashy, and his eyes staring, fixed, like those of a blind man or a corpse<sup>295</sup>.

In this extract, Lee describes death through its physical features. Death is not only suggested because the narrator knows people around him are dead (he uses the word). Here she renders the depiction of death very vivid by not only involving sight. Indeed touch introduces the characters: they are not only cold but they are "like wet clay". This comparison with "wet clay" implies a degree of decay of their corpses and helps the reader to figure out what they look like. Then, the depiction goes on with their physical appearance among which the lack of color entailed by the adjective "ashy". But it is on the eyes of the *undead* that Lee chooses to

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<sup>292</sup> Blanchot, Maurice. *L'espace littéraire*. (1955). Paris: Gallimard, 2009. pp.28-29

<sup>293</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.85

<sup>294</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.49

<sup>295</sup> *Ibid.* p.70

dwell on. Indeed, these eyes are not moving, they are "staring, fixed": actually they have lost their ability to see. Besides, the narrator compares them to "a blind man or a corpse" to highlight the permanent state of this incapacity. These eyes are dead like the characters they belong to. Thus, giving such concrete comparison, the narrator intends to make his depiction the most accurate and impartial possible. However, the reader can note that the trigger event by which the description starts is the fact that Spiridion touches his neighbour "as if by accident". This detail can be perceived in two different ways. Either, he touched the *undead* really by accident and in this case, this can be read as an ominous prediction of his future. Or, this meeting with death actually increased the narrator's interest towards the characters' state of decay and he wanted to really *feel* it and not just witness it.

Another interesting aspect to stress is the position of the narrator among the crowd. As a matter of fact, he depicts the other characters as "standing all around". This involves that Spiridion is in the middle of the crowd. There are two meanings. On the one hand, it can represent Spiridion's position in the narrative: he is the central element of the story. But it can also imply that he is at the core of a process that transcends him. Indeed, the idea of a circle around him suggests that there is no way to escape, he is trapped in this crowd which is like a "Gothic circle between an imaginary realm full of specters and an equally spectral reality<sup>296</sup>." Thus, after this meeting between Spiridion and death, the boundaries between reality and fiction are blurred because specters have invaded reality as shown by the apparition of Medea in the midst of the crowd: "Once or twice she lingered, and I thought I should overtake her; but again, when, not a second after the door had closed upon her, I stepped out into the street, she had vanished<sup>297</sup>." In this sentence, Medea is depicted having all the characteristics whereby Blanchot qualifies death: indeed, according to him death is something unavoidable but unattainable; something certain yet elusive. From this perspective, we can say that she becomes the embodiment of the elusiveness of death. Nevertheless, the narrator no longer questions the reality of Medea after this incident because all his senses have witnessed her presence.

In addition to this, each time Spiridion spots Medea, she flees and he cannot meet her. Yet, she leaves elements to Spiridion: the first time she leaves "the rose which [Spiridion] had seen in

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<sup>296</sup> Milbank, Alison. *Op. cit.* p.164

<sup>297</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.71

her hand the moment before<sup>298</sup>" and the second time she leaves a letter, giving him instructions to earn her love. Marie Carmen Thue-Tun calls these elements real referents: "la rose [comme la lettre] est l'indice d'un référent réel, posée sur la marche de l'église par un référent imaginaire, le fantôme de Medea<sup>299</sup>." These referents reinforce the feeling of reality of these meetings. Indeed, once again, Lee involves the narrator's senses and Spiridion "felt [the rose], smelt it<sup>300</sup>". Similarly, by taking the letter home, he brings it into his world which is supposed to be the real world. Thus, Medea leaves a trace of her coming each time they met: consequently, Spiridion has no doubt about her existence and if Spiridion's reason keeps telling him that these encounters cannot be real ("Is it a delusion<sup>301</sup>?"), all his senses demonstrate the contrary.

However, as the narrator's certainty increases, so does the reader's uncertainty. Indeed, the character's psychic world can be questioned: are the events experienced a threat to his mental health or is it his fragile mental health that makes him believe he is experiencing these events? In fact, if the Gothic of the late nineteenth century left room to the reader's imagination by emphasizing psychology, it is the result of the *fin de siècle* interest in human psyche and depths of the mind. By entering in the characters' minds, the reader discovers that death is not only a physical threat and the process raises once again the question of the uncertainty of the narrative, of the reliability of the character. Thus, Lee discusses the theme of death directly: she does not hesitate to depict embodiments of death, through comparisons and images which render the phenomenon very realistic. Yet, despite these sharp descriptions, she keeps the elusiveness of death by questioning the mental clarity and thus the reliability of the narrator.

## **b) The ills of the society highlighted through the theme of death**

Driven by Schopenhauer's pessimism, the Decadents saw the world as an old man. In the words of Catherine Rancy: "[L]'espèce humaine a atteint l'âge de décrépitude, le monde est trop vieux [...] [L]'humanité est assimilée à un organisme individuel, au même titre que la société<sup>302</sup>." They thought that the world (including the British society) as it was came to an

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<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.* p.70

<sup>299</sup> Thue-Tun, Marie-Carmen. *Op. cit.* p.184

<sup>300</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.70

<sup>301</sup> *Ibid.* p.68

<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.* p.5



end and consequently the next logical step would be its death. The fear of having to face the death of the world as well as their own death impacted their behaviours. As Catherine Rancy has noted:

[D]e nombreux poètes et artistes décadents meurent jeunes, se suicident, comme Davidson, deviennent fous, comme Symmons, sombrent dans l'alcoolisme, ou simplement s'éclipsent de la scène littéraire, d'où l'expression de "génération tragique" qui désigne ceux qui sont arrivés à maturité dans les années 1890, mais n'ont pas pu tenir leur promesses<sup>303</sup>.

Thus, they adopted strategies allowing them to avoid the reality of a collapsing society. Even if these behaviours eased their fear or the sufferings linked to the *malaise* of this end of century, they were nonetheless violent behaviours: all destructive and which will lead sooner or later to death. Therefore there is an ambivalence: on the one hand, these behaviours were a means to counter the violence of this *fin de siècle* while on the other hand, they precisely embodied this violence. As Luce Des Aulniers explains, violence can lead to death, it can be a step towards death: "[L]a violence [...] peut corrompre et abîmer, voire anéantir, concrètement ou symboliquement. Toute violence fait planer la possibilité d'atteinte mortelle<sup>304</sup>." In other words, the risk of death is proportional to the degree of violence; it has a potential for destruction which can reach death as a climax. As an illustration, in "Dionea", Waldemar's death can be considered as the perfect example showing the escalating violence of his feelings towards his model and his art: "No love of mere woman was ever so violent as this love of woman's mere shape<sup>305</sup>." This sentence comes just after the fact that he was depicted speaking to Dionea in a brutal and cold way. Thus, his feelings were so violent that they impact his behaviour. Because he cannot manage his love towards the body of his model he loses control and is overwhelmed by his feelings. Unfortunately, it is the innocent Gertrude who is the victim of his murderous madness. Thus, if Waldemar's violence illustrates Luce Des Aulniers's words, on the other hand his suicide also reflects the behaviour of the above-mentioned artists.

Similarly, in "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady", the reader witnesses the violence of Duke Balthazar towards Prince Alberic. Yet, it is another form of violence: less brutal and

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<sup>303</sup> Rancy, Catherine. *Op. cit.* p.14

<sup>304</sup> Des Aulniers, Luce. *La fascination: nouveau désir d'éternité*. Quebec: Presses de l'Université du Québec, 2009. p.77

<sup>305</sup> *Ibid.* p.98

impressive than Waldemar's but more pernicious and latent. As a matter of fact, Prince Alberic has to suffer Duke Balthazar's violence when he refuses to marry the princess the Duke has chosen for him: "[H]e was locked and bolted into the State prison, alongside of the unfinished sepulchral chapel, whence a lugubrious hammering came as the only sound of life<sup>306</sup>." Thus, he is treated like a criminal and locked in a cell which faces the "sepulchral chapel". The fact that the cell faces a religious structure could already suggest death to the reader. However, Lee chooses the adjective "sepulchral" to qualify the chapel: she wants to highlight that Prince Alberic beholds death each day while waiting for his. Moreover, "the only sound of life" being "a lugubrious hammering" is a contradiction: the hammering referring to the sound of hell<sup>307</sup> and therefore to death. Consequently, by inviting signs of death in life, Vernon Lee casts the shadow of death on Prince Alberic's cell and life. These two examples emphasize how violence and death are linked but mainly that they can emerge from two different sources: on the one hand, the characters can suffer from someone else's violence, or on the other hand, they can be the victims of their own violence and in this case they are threatened by themselves.

Because "Britain's empire began to be threatened by the spread of French, American and German political and economic power<sup>308</sup>" at the end of the nineteenth century, foreignness was no longer associated to exoticism but became a subject of fear. In literature, the threat of other countries, was embodied by the foreigner. Indeed, since the mid-nineteenth century, the theme of the villain embodied by a foreigner was already used by Poe in his short stories. Thus, in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*<sup>309</sup>, the sailor is the first to be suspected of the murders. First, he embodies foreignness because of his occupation: by traveling overseas, he belongs nowhere, has no home. Then, his physical appearance represents a threat too: he is depicted as having a "dare-devil expression of countenance<sup>310</sup>" and wearing a "*mustachio*<sup>311</sup>." Consequently, because he does not belong to the Parisian community, he is more inclined to

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<sup>306</sup> *Ibid.* p.224

<sup>307</sup> See Minois, Georges. 'L'élaboration de l'enfer chrétien'. *Histoire de l'enfer*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2019. 43–50.

<sup>308</sup> *Ibid.* p.30

<sup>309</sup> Published in 1841 in *Graham's Magazine*.

<sup>310</sup> Poe, Edgar Allan. 'The Murders in the Rue Morgue'. (1841) *Selected Tales*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1998. p.118

<sup>311</sup> *Ibid.* p.118

be a murderer in people's eyes. Here a parallel can be established with the story of Dionea, a character who seems coming from nowhere: "[N]o one at Spezia or in any of our ports knows anything about [the ship]<sup>312</sup>". Thus, the sea is her only known origin. She also has in common with Poe's sailor the fact that she does not share the physical appearance of the group she is welcomed by: she is described as "swaddled up close in outlandish garments [...] and as brown as a berry<sup>313</sup>." These elements clearly symbolize that Dionea is a foreigner, will contribute to creating a climate of suspicion towards her. Indeed, according to Julia Kristeva, the group or community we belong to, constitutes our identity: it is the group which shapes our language, values and historical cultural. Belonging to a community with which we share these cultural aspects is reassuring for human beings. Thus, having to face someone who does not belong to the group means facing the fact that all these notions are as relative and precarious as our identity<sup>314</sup>.

Consequently, because he is different, the foreigner is the figure on whom people can project their fears, including the fear of death. Thus, in *fin de siècle* novels, the theme of death was mixed with the one of the foreigner as in *Dracula*<sup>315</sup> for instance. In *Hauntings*, the theme of foreignness is discussed throughout the collection of short stories, but it is in "A Wedding Chest" that the violence perpetrated by a foreigner is at its climax. Indeed, Messer Troilo is a foreigner: "Messer Troilo [...], riding over from his castle of Fratta<sup>316</sup>." Not belonging to Perugia (the location of the plot), it is him who takes away Monna Maddalena and cruelly murders her. Moreover, the narrator of the story uses Latin words and expressions only when he refers to the actions accomplished by Messer Troilo. Thus, he killed a bull "singulari vi ac virtute<sup>317</sup>" and he is considered as someone "honestis valde modibus<sup>318</sup>." Similarly, when Master Desiderio and Ser Piero receive the wedding chest with Monna Maddalena's corpse sent by Messer Troilo, the narrator uses once again Latin expressions. The use of another language (a foreign one) emphasizes the notion of foreignness linked to him. Indeed, if at first sight it suggests his superiority over Master Desiderio and Ser Piero (and, by extension to the

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<sup>312</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.78

<sup>313</sup> *Ibid.* p.78

<sup>314</sup> Kristeva, Julia. "Vivre l'étrangeté Aujourd'hui". *17ème édition du cycle de conférences "Droit, Liberté et Foi" : "L'ÉTRANGER"*. 1 Oct. 2014. Date accessed 3 Aug. 2020 <<http://www.kristeva.fr/reflexions-sur-l-etranger.html>>.

<sup>315</sup> By Bram Stoker, published in 1897.

<sup>316</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wedding Chest". *Op. cit.* pp.233-234

<sup>317</sup> *Ibid.* p.235: "with singular strength and virtue"

<sup>318</sup> *Ibid.* p.235: "completely honourable in his behaviour"

people of the region), it mainly shows his non-belonging to the community. Thus, pain, suffering and eventually death are brought by an out-of-town person. Hence, if we refer to Julia Kristeva's ideas, the murder of Monna Maddalena by Messer Troilo would be a metaphor for the risk of destruction of identity brought by foreigners.

Yet, still according to Kristeva who sums up Freud's ideas, the foreigner does not really exist. He merely awakes fears and injuries that we already carry in ourselves and that are forgotten or denied. Thus, in her words: "l'étranger nous habite, il est la face cachée de notre identité, l'espace qui ruine notre demeure<sup>319</sup>." From this point of view the threat is not coming from outside but from inside us. This statement implies taking the individual's psychology into account: an idea which developed at the end of the nineteenth century, as we have seen. Indeed, the exploration of the quirks of the mind became a real subject of studies and the development of science made psychology a true scientific discipline. Thus, the work of the Society for Psychical Research focused on providing scientific evidence on phenomena considered until then as supernatural while "psychology and psychoanalysis offered to explain the human mind in completely new ways<sup>320</sup>." This evolution was a basis for a new sort of literature because it provided many themes and examples that could be addressed by end-of-the-century writers among whom Vernon Lee.

It is the case in "Oke of Okehurst" in which the danger does not come from an external agent but comes from the characters themselves. Indeed, in this short story, the two characters are attacked from inside: they are trapped by their own minds as Marie-Carmen Thue-Tun sums up:

Alice Oke est atteinte de schizophrénie, parce qu'elle perd contact avec la réalité, au point de passer simplement sous silence l'existence de son mari, selon le peintre. [...] Quant à William Oke, Vernon Lee illustre un cas pathologique sous une forme psychotique de la jalousie. Il est convaincu que sa femme éprouve de l'amour pour son « amant fantôme », et il en souffre. Ses hallucinations accompagnées de ses fantaisies morbides sont les caractéristiques de sa folie, ce qui l'amène à assassiner sa femme, dans un moment de démence (« Mr. Oke had

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<sup>319</sup> Kristeva, Julia. "Vivre l'étrangeté Aujourd'hui". *17ème édition du cycle de conférences "Droit, Liberté et Foi" : "L'ÉTRANGER"*. 1 Oct. 2014. Date accessed 3 Aug. 2020 <<http://www.kristeva.fr/reflexions-sur-l-etranger.html>>.

<sup>320</sup> Carnevali, Francesca, Julie-Marie Strange, and Paul Johnson. *Twentieth-Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change*. Harlow, England: Pearson Longman, 2009. pp.30-31

killed his wife in a fit of madness. » [V. Lee, « Okehurst » : 191]). Folie et destruction sont liées : il se suicide en se tirant une balle dans la tête<sup>321</sup>.

The author of *Vernon Lee (Violet Paget, 1856-1935): une odyssée scripturale entre romantisme et modernité*, underlines the scientific aspects of the couple's mental illnesses. Relying on today's knowledge, she asserts that Alice Oke is living with schizophrenia. As a matter of fact, scientists can now assert that the diagnostic of schizophrenia is the result of several elements such as: a modification of what is experienced, that is to say a disturbance of the relationship to the environment and to one's own body, an inability to manifest emotions, an inability to construct an appropriate behaviour and discourse<sup>322</sup>. Summing up these notions, the narrator notes that Mrs Oke is "all turned inwards<sup>323</sup>" and that her behaviour has consequences on her relationships with the other inhabitants of the house. As an illustration, she "simply passed over [her husband's] existence<sup>324</sup>" but also the one of the narrator ("I cannot say she paid much attention to any one's, even to mine<sup>325</sup>"). She does not need other people's presence that is why she does not notice them. She does not do it on purpose, it is her natural way of acting and she treats everyone the same. She seems to be alive only when she speaks of what she is interested in, that is to say the story of her ancestress and the poet Christopher Lovelock: "Very soon she got into the way of never talking to me at all, save about Alice and Nicholas Oke and Christopher Lovelock<sup>326</sup>." It is actually with these characters she lives.

Besides, at one point, this interest in these characters turns into an obsession: she identifies herself completely with her ancestress, dressing and acting like her. Actually, Lee takes advantage of the beginnings of psychiatry to pass off her illness as a case of possession. Thus, the narrator of the story who is quite rational throughout the narrative has doubt for a while: "For Mrs Oke, who seemed [...] incapable of understanding or sympathizing with the feelings of other persons, entered completely and passionately into the feelings of this woman, this Alice, who, at some moments, seemed to be not another woman, but herself<sup>327</sup>." Lee's originality resides in the fact that she mixes the clinical signs of a mental disease with "the

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<sup>321</sup> Thue-Tun, Marie-Carmen. *Op. cit.* pp.185-186

<sup>322</sup> Franck, N. 'Clinique de la schizophrénie'. *EMC - Psychiatrie* 10.1 (2013): 1-16. p.3

<sup>323</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst". *Op. cit.* p.116

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.* p.115

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.* p.115

<sup>326</sup> *Ibid.* p.130

<sup>327</sup> *Ibid.* p.131

extraordinary phenomenon of a creature being apparently invaded from within by the personality of another creature<sup>328</sup>" which was not explained yet. Indeed, the word schizophrenia was only used for the first time in 1911 by Eugen Bleuler.

In any case, whether their disorders can be explained by science or not, the result is that Lee's characters have difficulties to cope with reality. Indeed, Mr Oke, for his part, suffers from her wife's behaviour one the hand, but on the other hand, this suffering is accentuated by his mental illness, causing him hallucinations and leading him to murder his wife and eventually to kill himself. Thus, none of the two protagonists of the story are connected to reality and their behaviours are driven by their fanciful minds. The narrator is their last connection with the real world and besides, the latter tried to reason Mr Oke on this matter: "I tried to explain to him [...] that he was ill, and ought to see a good doctor. I even offered to take him to own with me. I poured out volumes of psychological explanations<sup>329</sup>." However, if these rational explanations were not enough compared to the force of the characters' illnesses, they contribute to make of the narrator a reliable character, anchored in reality. The same reality the Okes could not face: "Madness were easy to bear compared with truth like this<sup>330</sup>." Moreover, the narrator's rational behaviour helps the reader to realize that mental troubles can impact life at a high degree (whose climax is death). Thus, behind the theme of death, Vernon Lee actually raises the question of alienation: indeed, if it is one of the major themes of the Gothic, Vernon Lee uses it in *Hauntings* in order to highlight the problems of the Victorian society. She especially emphasizes the rejection of other people because of their physical, cultural or mental differences and who consequently have to suffer the violence the society inflicts to them.

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<sup>328</sup> Lee, Vernon. *The Handling of Words, and Other Studies in Literary Psychology*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1923. p.22

<sup>329</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Oke of Okehurst". *Op.cit.* p.149

<sup>330</sup> Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. (1897). New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. p.181

### 3. "Imaginative suggestiveness<sup>331</sup>": a strategy to manipulate the reader's mind

#### a) "[T]his vague we know not what<sup>332</sup>"

By attempting to mask its disreputable side, the Victorian society actually tried to pretend that this side never existed. It made it almost unreal, like a ghost which tried to haunt the respectable society. Indeed, the ghost (as well as the danger linked to it) can be depicted as "the invisible force in the mist [...]. He is always there for the reader but not visible for the characters<sup>333</sup>." This description of the ghostly as something prowling around the character corresponds to the idea developed by Angela Leighton in "Ghosts, Aestheticism, and 'Vernon Lee'". According to her: "It [the ghostly presence] outlines emptiness but also fills it up, embodying and disembodying its own reality at the same time<sup>334</sup>." Thus, the ghost fills up a space by its presence although it does not have any visual appearance: it is all about feelings. As a matter of fact, this lack of visual support to refer to creates a range of feelings for the character: it can range from confusion to dread. Moreover, in ghost stories (the Gothic ones) the character's disarray is highlighted by a silent and gloomy environment, in which he is alone. Thus, the environment in which the ghost manifests himself also creates a feeling of angst. Indeed, these are "elements in the production of that infantile morbid anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free<sup>335</sup>". If the phantom generates a type of fright because of its supernatural aspect, it also awakens a deeper fear, linked to our inner fears, anchored in us. This is what Vernon Lee emphasizes in the introduction of *Hauntings*:

[M]y four little tales are of no genuine ghosts in the scientific sense; they tell of no hauntings such as could be contributed by the Society for Psychical Research, of no spectres that can be caught in definite places and made to dictate judicial evidence. My ghosts are what you call spurious ghosts (according to me the only

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<sup>331</sup> Catherine Maxwell, and Patricia Pulham in Lee, Vernon. "Introduction". *Op.cit.* p.13

<sup>332</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Hauntings, Fantastic Stories*. London: John Lane, 1906. p.vii

<sup>333</sup> Staunton, Mathew. 'Telling Stories to Kill Monsters: Researchers as Heroes in *Dracula* and *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*'. University of Western Brittany. 29 Nov. 2019.

<sup>334</sup> Leighton, Angela. 'Ghosts, Aestheticism, and "Vernon Lee"'. *Victorian Literature and Culture* 28.1 (2000): 1–14. p.1

<sup>335</sup> Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny". *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*. 1919. Date accessed 10 Mar. 2020 <<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>>. (first publication in *Imago* in 1919)

genuine ones) of whom I can affirm only one thing, that they haunted certain brains<sup>336</sup>.

The ghosts she depicts are not ghosts in a traditional way: they do not haunt a place but our minds. Consequently they can take different forms depending on our fears. Thus, if people are afraid of the unknown, it seems that what arouses the greatest fear and is the most likely able to haunt us is the reappearance of that which is "deeply and internally familiar."<sup>337</sup> The separation anxiety or the anguish of death are among these primeval anxieties for instance. Therefore the awakening of ghosts like Lee's "threaten[s] to reengulf us and promise[s] to return us to our primal origins"<sup>338</sup>. People have to make efforts in order to live with their fears, they must tame them; it is these efforts these ghosts attempt to destroy.

In this task they are helped by our own mind: indeed, Lee's ghosts "are things of imagination, born there, bred there."<sup>339</sup> And since they are created by our imagination and fed by our fears, they take a different form for each of us and therefore it is difficult to picture them.

Yet, Lee represents them physically: they have human appearance, they are ghosts but they are also revenants. They are coming back from the past where they were humans. However, she manages to keep this vagueness which is essential to maintain the spectral aspect alive: "paint us that vagueness, mould into shape that darkness, modulate into chords that silence—tell us the character and history of those vague beings... What do we obtain? A picture, a piece of music, a story but the ghost is gone"<sup>340</sup>. A parallel can be made between this inability to grasp the ghostly and Waldemar failing to capture the beauty of Dionea: "[S]he is far, far more beautiful than Waldemar's statue of her"<sup>341</sup>. Her beauty cannot be reproduced, it is elusive, like a ghost. Thus, the elusive features of a *real* character blur the boundaries between the reality and unreality. Another example of this fuzziness is the one of Medea da Capri in "Amour Dure". On the one hand she belongs to reality because she is a historical character while on the other hand, she has a mythical side which confers her almost magical powers. Indeed, the Duke Robert "fears her as something almost supernatural"<sup>342</sup>. Thus, although she

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<sup>336</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Hauntings, Fantastic Stories*. London: John Lane, 1906. p.xi

<sup>337</sup> Hogle, Jerrold E. *Op. cit.* p.6

<sup>338</sup> *Ibid.* p.7

<sup>339</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Hauntings, Fantastic Stories*. London: John Lane, 1906. p.viii

<sup>340</sup> Lee, Vernon. *Belcaro: Being Essays on Sundry Aesthetical Questions (1881)*. London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1887. p.94

<sup>341</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.100

<sup>342</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op.cit.* p.58



is a human being, she is feared because of her alleged powers. Actually the strength of the emotions she creates in the people she meets, added to the lack of any other explanation except the supernatural one may explain this blurring between real and unreal. And, as Freud theorized in 1919, it is precisely when this distinction between reality and imagination fades away that "an uncanny effect<sup>343</sup>" is created.

In his essay based on a German article<sup>344</sup>, Freud asserts that if the word uncanny<sup>345</sup> can be used to define a range of "sensations, experiences and situations<sup>346</sup>" very diverse, the core of the feeling is always the same: "the 'uncanny' is that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar<sup>347</sup>." Thus, as we have seen, the uncanny theorized by Freud joined Lee's idea that the most frightening ghost is already in our mind and not outside.

Moreover, Freud studies the meaning of the word *heimlich* in order to try to define as precisely as possible what is *unheimlich*, its antonym. On the one side, he notes that the word *heimlich* is linked to what belongs "to the house, not strange, intimate<sup>348</sup>" and on the other side, it refers also to something "[c]oncealed, kept from sight<sup>349</sup>." Thus, our intimate fears would belong to the *heimlich* and it would be the fact that they are rekindled which would make them *unheimlich*. As Catherine Nancy sums: "[L]a notion d'«Unheimlich», c'est-à-dire le sentiment d'Inquiétante Etrangeté [...] naît lorsqu'un élément ancien et refoulé d'une psyché réapparaît dans le présent, fait irruption alors qu'il aurait dû rester caché<sup>350</sup>." Actually, Vernon Lee's ghosts are the embodiment of this process. In a first time forgotten, hidden in the past, they resurface in the present and frighten the character as well as the reader precisely because we know them (indeed, some of them are famous like Lucrezia Borgia or Don Juan for instance) but we have almost forgotten their existence. Thus, Vernon Lee's ghosts are not traditional ghosts but they are the representatives of forgotten events from the past. As a

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<sup>343</sup> Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny". *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*. Date accessed 10 March 2020 <<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>>

<sup>344</sup> "Zur Psychologie des Unheimlichen" was published in the *Psychiatrisch-Neurologische Wochenschrift* in 1906

<sup>345</sup> English translation for *unheimlich*.

<sup>346</sup> Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny". *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*. Date accessed 10 March 2020 <<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>>

<sup>347</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>349</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>350</sup> Nancy, Catherine. *Op. cit.* p.184

matter of fact, these ghosts are not only a means to revive our fears but they are also a tool for Lee to express her fascination about the past. As we have seen she thought that the past brings emotions and her aim is to create deep emotions for the reader. In addition, "the return of the repressed<sup>351</sup>" from the past in the present also allows a reconsideration of the past.

Consequently, once again Lee's point of view is joined by Freud, who thinks that our fears' revival through ghosts is not the only element which contributes to create an uncanny feeling or situation: the creation of an uncanny experience has to deal with the context too. Indeed, in literature, the feeling of uncanniness is highlighted if the story makes the protagonist live in an environment unknown from himself but also from the reader. That is why the author should not be too precise about the nature of the world in which his characters are.

[I]n the realm of fiction many things are not uncanny which would be so if they happened in real life. [...] The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality. In this case he accepts all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life. [...] But in this case, too, he can increase his effect and multiply it far beyond what could happen in reality, by bringing about events which never or very rarely happen in fact. [...] We react to his inventions as we should have reacted to real experiences; by the time we have seen through his trick it is already too late and the author has achieved his object<sup>352</sup>.

Thus, the less orientated the reader is, the most uncanny the situation is. Nevertheless, in order to duplicate the feeling of uncanny, the author must emphasize the gap between reality and supernatural that is why he has better make his story the more realistic possible.

## **b) A sense of reality which challenges the content of the stories**

Vernon Lee was well aware that the combination of reality and incredible events creates a feeling of uncanniness: that is why she endeavoured to make her stories as authentic as possible. Thus, in *Hauntings*, it is sometimes the format of the story that makes it real as opposed to the events recounted. For instance, "Dionea" is a collection of letters: they are written from Doctor Alessandro De Rossi to Lady Evelyn Savelli. As we have seen, there is no letter from Lady Savelli, they are all written by the doctor. Therefore, the pronoun I stands

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<sup>351</sup> Savoy, Eric. 'The Rise of American Gothic'. *The Cambridge Companion to Gothic Fiction*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002. 167–188. p.171

<sup>352</sup> Freud, Sigmund. "The Uncanny". *Massachusetts Institute of Technology*. Date accessed 10 March 2020 <<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>>

for the doctor throughout the short story. As Gérard Ferreyrolles points out in his essay *L'épistolaire, à la lettre*, in fictional letters the pronoun *I* does not refer to a person but it stands for a character that is to say a function. From this point of view, his status gives him credibility. Indeed, the doctor describes himself as "an old man<sup>353</sup>" as well as a "physician<sup>354</sup>": these words mirror his experience and his knowledge and consequently guarantee the veracity of his words.

Besides, still according to Ferreyrolles, in the case of published letters (fictional or not), the addressee is a pretext which allows the author of the letter to express himself. In the fictional letters from "Dionea", the addressee is twofold: the doctor addresses Lady Savelli while Vernon Lee addresses her readers. Therefore, although the letters were written in a way suggesting spontaneity, the fact that they were intended to be published inevitably made Lee pay attention to the rhetoric. Thus, behind the factual report intended for Lady Savelli, the choice of words can be seen as Lee's:

I think that hereby hangs the explanation of his [Waldemar] never doing any but male figures: the female figure, he says (and your Excellency must hold him responsible, not me, for such profanity), is almost inevitably inferior in strength and beauty<sup>355</sup>.

The doctor feels compelled to highlight the fact that what he writes is Waldemar's statement ("he says") and not his. He even goes further and stresses his disagreement by qualifying Waldemar of "responsible" for "profanity". Of course, since he writes to a princess who also happens to be the woman who provides for his *protégée*, he cannot afford to agree with these thoughts which echo Schopenhauer's ideas about women. Yet, it does not prevent him from using adjectives such as "little<sup>356</sup>" or "poor<sup>357</sup>" to qualify women. Thus, although being always respectful towards women these terms actually express his feeling of superiority on women. On the one hand, the evocation of Schopenhauer's ideas by Lee gives her narrative a real dimension because it makes a parallel with the *fin de siècle* ideas. On the other hand, through Waldemar's statement as well as through the doctor's behaviour, it is the impact of these ideas on the society that she denounces.

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<sup>353</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.82

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.* p.86

<sup>355</sup> *Ibid.* p.96

<sup>356</sup> *Ibid.* p.86-p.88

<sup>357</sup> *Ibid.* p.83-p.104

Nevertheless, despite this particular attention paid to the words because the text is aimed to be shared, the formats of the letter or the diary in "Amour Dure", enable the creation of a confidential atmosphere. Indeed, an environment where secrets can be shared also creates a feeling of reality: the reader finds himself either in-between two people corresponding or between the author and his own writings in the case of the diary. Thereupon, Gérard Ferreyrolles notes:

La conséquence en est une très forte illusion référentielle [...] le lecteur [...] est mis directement en présence du ou des personnages [...] qu'il est d'autant plus facile de prendre pour des êtres réels [...] qu'ils dévoilent leurs sentiments intimes et qu'ils le font au présent en ignorant de quoi demain sera fait<sup>358</sup>.

Hence, even if the facts reported have already happened, the use of the present tense makes the reader feel alongside the character when he writes his text. It creates a sort of complicity between the reader and the narrator. Furthermore, the fact that the character does not know what is going to happen at the time of writing strengthens this connivance. The reader can feel this collusion in "Amour Dure", when the questions he asks himself appear on paper in Spiridion's pen: "And, for what am I waiting? I don't know; all seems a dream; everything vague and insubstantial about me. [...] Do I long for to-night? Do I dread it? Will to-night ever come? Do I feel anything, does anything exist all round me?"<sup>359</sup> Actually, the narrator and the reader share doubts about the reality of the world the narrator is into. And because their concerns are the same, the feeling of identification created by the use of the pronoun *I* is reinforced:

Le lecteur s'identifie à un *je percevant* (c'est-à-dire ayant une perception interne de son corps [...]) presque immédiatement, car, étant lui-même en situation de perception de signes écrits, il s'assimile aisément à un *je* du narrateur/personnage présenté en situation de perception<sup>360</sup>.

From this perspective, because, the character *thinks* the same thing as the reader, the identification of the latter to the narrator of the story is made easier. In the case of letters this identification to the text is even stronger because not only the reader shares the concerns of the *I* but he can also identify himself to the *you* which designates the addressee. Indeed,

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<sup>358</sup> Ferreyrolles, Gérard. 'L'épistolaire, à La Lettre'. *Littératures classiques* 71.1 (2010): 5–27. p.26

<sup>359</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.74

<sup>360</sup> Bloch, Béatrice. 'Voix du narrateur et identification du lecteur'. *Cahiers de narratologie* (2001): 221–229. p.224

because the letter is a text addressed to someone (as well as the diary addressed to oneself), it belongs to the speech category. Consequently, these texts follow the same rules as the ones of the speech except that instead of being pronounced, they are written. That is why, the reader can find in these texts a lot of questions<sup>361</sup>, interjections or exclamations as in an oral conversation as this extract from "Dionea" shows:

A terrible, terrible thing has happened! I write to your Excellency with hands all a-tremble; and yet I must write, I *must* speak, or else I shall cry out. Did I ever mention you Father Domenico of Casoria, the confessor of our Convent of the Stigmata? [...] Well, well, Father Domenico had struggled as hard as any of the Anchorites recorded by St. Jerome, and he had conquered<sup>362</sup>.

This example is characterized by the eagerness of the doctor to relate the event as if his interlocutor was in front of him as evidenced by the repetitions of words "terrible" and "well" or the question which is in fact a rhetoric one. Besides, he feels compelled to describe his state of agitation to legitimate his readiness. Moreover, the doctor himself makes a comparison between his letter and a speech: "I must write, I *must* speak". This gives the feeling that writing or speaking is the same for him: the emergency is to tell someone what happened (I *must*) by any means. Thus, even if the reader knows that the letter is a fictive one, the feelings described by the doctor is a common one. Therefore it is easy for the reader to identify with the narrator feelings. Thus, it makes the latter even more real in the reader's eyes and consequently it blurs once again the boundaries between real and unreal.

In the same way, Lee granted importance to the context of her short stories: thus they are a clever combination of supernatural events and historical references. This is the case of the last paragraph of "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" for instance. Indeed, after having narrated a fictional story which is almost a fairy tale, the narrator switches registers and describes historical facts: "Be as it may, history records as certain the house of Luna became extinct in 1701<sup>363</sup>." This reference casts doubt in the reader's mind and this is why some historians disagreed with this process. Indeed, already at the time she wrote "Amour Dure", this blurring of the boundaries between reality and fiction was already considered too confusing: "Lee's story 'Amour Dure' [...] was first rejected by *Blackwood* because she 'put

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<sup>361</sup> As in the example taken from "Dionea" and mentioned above.

<sup>362</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.87

<sup>363</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady". *Op. cit.* p.227

the historical facts into a fictitious frame<sup>364</sup>." As a matter of fact, a distinction should be made between facts and fiction: from an historical perspective, rewriting history through fictional characters was not allowed. Yet, Lee intended to ignore these critics and went on using historical references in abundance.

There is of course the case of Medea da Capri, who was widely inspired from Lucrezia Borgia as we have seen, but Zaffirino, the singer of "A Wicked Voice" seems to be based on an Italian singer: Farinelli. As a matter of fact, it appears that Zaffirino's life has common points with the one of Carlo Broschi (the real name of Farinelli) as it is related by Magnus, the narrator of the short story: "I tell them [...] how much more wonderful had been this Zaffirino's vocal gifts than those of any singer of ancient or modern times; how his brief life had been but a series of triumphs, petted by the greatest kings, sung by the most famous poets<sup>365</sup>." In the same way, Farinelli was admired by Frederick Louis, the Prince of Wales and son of King George II when he lived in London during the 1730's and later he spent more than twenty years at the Court of Spain, singing for kings including Philip V and Ferdinand VI of Spain<sup>366</sup>. Nevertheless, if all Lee's characters are not inspired from historical figures, they always refer to a myriad of real artists. Thus, Prince Alberic plays with "a gala coral with bells by Benvenuto Cellini<sup>367</sup>" who was a famous Italian sculptor and Doctor De Rosis in "Dionea" mentions Edward Burne-Jones and Tadema, both of them famous painters. In the same way, the narrator of "A Wicked Voice" started his story to mention famous composers such as "Wagner, [...] Handel and Gluck and the divine Mozart<sup>368</sup>." This multitude of references to real artists adds reality to the stories: they are a reference point. Indeed, the educated readership to which Lee addresses know these artists and therefore they can easily make a link between their works (the reality) and what is pictured by the author (the fiction).

Another feature of Lee's characters is that they are not flawless, as we have seen previously with the case of Mrs Oke. They do not have super powers, they are not fantastic characters although they experience incredible events. The reader can find this opposition emphasized in "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady": although Prince Alberic is in love with a supernatural character, he is not able to prevent the death of Lady Oriana or to resurrect her. Thus, being

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<sup>364</sup> Zorn, Christa. *Op. cit.* p.14

<sup>365</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wicked Voice". *Op. cit.* p.175

<sup>366</sup> Mamy, S. *Les Grands Castrats Napolitains à Venise Au XVIIIe Siècle*. Liège: Mardaga, 1994.

<sup>367</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady". *Op. cit.* p.188

<sup>368</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wicked Voice". *Op. cit.* p.154

imprisoned he had no choice than to use human means to end his life: "[H]e refused all nourishment during his second imprisonment, it was set on purpose<sup>369</sup>." Thus, killing himself by starvation was the only way to get back to his beloved. This end may seem a little boring for the reader because it sends him back to his own world, the real world. As Matthew Staunton declared, this return to normality at the end of the narrative is a feature of the Gothic. Nevertheless, as we have already seen, the end of this short story casts doubt on the reader's mind: thus the mystery goes on through the reader's imagination.

### c) "[C]'est le lecteur qui fait le texte<sup>370</sup>"

As discussed above, it is precisely our imagination which helps our most frightening fears to grow and develop. Nevertheless, people learnt to live with these primeval fears and the work of the Gothic writer is to awaken them in order to create the thrill awaited by the reader. Once again, to achieve his goal he needs the participation of the reader's imagination. Indeed, while the Gothic creates a space for our fears, it does not tell us what we must be afraid of. Thus, in *Hauntings*, Lee emphasizes suggestiveness and thus creates a space where the reader's fears can grow. For instance, in "Amour Dure", Medea da Capri is depicted having "an air of mystery, a somewhat sinister seductiveness<sup>371</sup>." In the whole description of Medea, Lee never mentions that she inspires fear, but rather underlines the "mystery" coming from the character, "somewhat sinister" which could imply fright: here the author makes Spiridion unable to depict it, deliberately leaving the reader in the dark. Yet, by stressing her "red-haired beauty<sup>372</sup>" and her mouth "brilliantly red and most delicately designed<sup>373</sup>" Lee gives clues to the reader: she physically links her character with the *femme fatale* which implicitly makes her dangerous. Besides, this dangerousness is also suggested by the terms "sinister" and "seductiveness": their juxtaposition implying that the seductive aspect of the character also includes a dark and gloomy part. Moreover, the alliteration in "somewhat sinister seductiveness" recalls the hiss of the snake, another allusion to Lilith, the snake lady linked with the Devil. In addition, she goes on writing that Medea has a mouth which "looks

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<sup>369</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady". *Op. cit.* p.227

<sup>370</sup> Louvel, Liliane, and Claudine Verley. *Op. cit.* p.30

<sup>371</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.52

<sup>372</sup> *Ibid.* p.52

<sup>373</sup> *Ibid.* p.52

as if could bite or suck like a leech<sup>374</sup>", thus invoking the myth of the vampire. Indeed, from ancient times to the eighteenth century (and the beginning of the development of science) the vampire was considered as an explanation of death<sup>375</sup>. Even if at the end of the nineteenth century, death can be explained from a scientific point of view, the figure of the vampire still symbolizes death<sup>376</sup>. Thus, Vernon Lee does not tell the reader what he must be afraid of: instead she gives her characters features from frightening mythical figures in order to stimulate the reader's imagination.

Similarly, the gaps in the narrative are another device which contributed to spur the imagination of the readers. As we have seen previously, the format of the letter or of the diary allows gaps in the plot without disturbing the narrative while compelling the reader to call his imagination: indeed, the writer cannot reveal the totality of the facts that happened. Therefore, the reader has to reconstruct the story and to decide what is important for its progression and what is not among what is reported by the narrator. As Gérard Ferreyrolles claims: "[L]'instance narrative est déléguée à chaque personnage épistolier, qui par définition ne peut pas dire plus que ce qu'il sait et qui ne sait pas tout ; le lecteur à son tour ne sait que ce que le personnage sait et doit construire un sens global à partir de l'entrelacs des lettres<sup>377</sup>." Indeed, the narrator is a character of the story, therefore he is an homodiegetic narrator who relates the story from an internal point of view, he is not omniscient. Thus, although he witnessed some events he does not know everything about them. Consequently, this internal point of view involves the reader in the reconstruction of the narrative while it allows him to identify himself to the narrator. Indeed, as we have seen, in the case of a letter, the reader can assimilate himself to the author as well as the addressee. "What is normally meant by "identification" is the establishment of affinities between oneself and someone outside oneself. [...] "[I]dentification" is not an end in itself, but a stratagem by which the author stimulates attitudes in the reader<sup>378</sup>." Therefore, a feeling of identification is created because the narrator and the reader share the same amount of information about the story. For

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<sup>374</sup> *Ibid.* p.52

<sup>375</sup> Montague, C. *Vampires: From Dracula to Twilight : The Complete Guide to Vampire Mythology*. London: Sphere, 2010.

<sup>376</sup> The success of Bram Stoker's *Dracula*, published in 1897, is an evidence of the interest of the late nineteenth century readers in this theme.

<sup>377</sup> Ferreyrolles, Gérard. 'L'épistolaire, à la lettre'. *Littératures classiques* 71.1 (2010): 5–27. p.26

<sup>378</sup> Iser, Wolfgang in Thue-Tun, Marie-Carmen. *Op. cit.* p.243



instance, in "Dionea", the doctor confesses that he does not know precisely what happened before the fire: "[Waldemar] must have collected all the roses about it, and thrown the incense upon the embers when Gertrude suddenly entered. And then, and then... We found her lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes of the incense<sup>379</sup>." The fact that the narrator uses the modal "must" reflects a sort of logical necessity, the narrator is almost certain that things happened this way. Yet, he cannot assert it because he did not witness the scene. He can only depict the scene at the time of his arrival. As a result, although the reader can embrace the narrator's theory, he is also free to develop his own. Thus, by highlighting the importance of the reader's imagination and by stimulating his identification to the character, Lee actually encourages the reader to be constantly in search for the meaning of the text. Actually, she makes an early use of what is called now the reader response theory. In this approach developed during the 1960s and 70s, it is the reader's feelings which give meaning to the text. As the French theorist Roland Barthes asserts: "L'enjeu du travail littéraire, c'est de faire du lecteur, non plus un consommateur, mais un producteur du texte<sup>380</sup>." This means that the reader must pay attention to the signs at his disposal in order to bring the text to life and make it evolve.

Besides, the task of the reader is not always easy because writers use schemes to try to delude him. It is the case of Lee, who asserts in *The Handling of Words, and Other Studies in Literary Psychology*: "The craft of the Writer consists, I am convinced, in manipulating the contents of his Reader's mind<sup>381</sup>." To this end, once again the choice of the words is very significant and, in *Hauntings*, Lee's manipulation resides in "[t]he narrative tension [which] is engendered by the uncertainty<sup>382</sup>." Thus, some of the words and expressions used highlight the *effet de réel*<sup>383</sup>. For instance, in "Amour Dure", Lee manipulates the reader's mind by involving sensations when Spiridion meets Medea: "I have seen Her! I can no longer doubt my senses. [...] I saw her, as I see this paper I write upon. [...] I heard the rustle of her skirts,

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<sup>379</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Dionea". *Op. cit.* p.104

<sup>380</sup> Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*. Paris: Seuil, 1970. p.10

<sup>381</sup> Lee, Vernon. *The Handling of Words, and Other Studies in Literary Psychology*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1923. p.15

<sup>382</sup> Milbank, Alison. *Op. cit.* p.150

<sup>383</sup> Concept theorized by Roland Barthes in 1968. This effect is created by details that are unnecessary to the story but which give the reader the feeling that the text describes the real world.

I smelt the scent of her hair. [...] Our eyes met<sup>384</sup>." If the reader was skeptical about Spiridion really seeing Medea, the fact that the narrator hears and smells her adds truthfulness to his narrative. As a matter of fact, the comparison made by Spiridion between Medea and the paper before him as well as the evocation of his other senses (hearing and smell) are not essential to the plot. They are what Roland Barthes qualifies of *details inutiles*<sup>385</sup>: they have no purpose except the one to create an *effet de réel*.

By contrast, this *effet de réel* is offset a few lines later: "I bought the saw of a poor joiner [...] I think he thought me mad; perhaps I am<sup>386</sup>." Thus, even if Spiridion's possible madness does not seem to bother him, this sentence reminds the reader that despite the assertions of the narrator, he has to remain vigilant about the events reported. Indeed, Spiridion seems confident in himself throughout the short story but the uncertainty of this sentence sows the seeds of doubt in the reader's mind. The verb to think (when used about Spiridion) means to assume, to suspect: Spiridion is not sure about the joiner's thoughts, he doubts. Moreover, when he writes that "perhaps" he is mad, this implies that he has thought about his own mental health and has come to the conclusion that it is possible that his sanity may be impaired. Using such oppositions, Lee shows her willingness to keep a part of undefined, of suggested: this should encourage the reader to remain cautious about what the character experiences. Similarly, the same scheme is exploited in "A Wicked Voice", where the words employed do not allow the reader to have a precise idea if the music heard by Magnus is real or if it is an auditory hallucination: "I seemed to hear the rattle of all that armour. [...] I seemed to feel the presence of that theme<sup>387</sup>." Then he *hears* it: "[A] thread of sound slender as a moonbeam, scarce audible<sup>388</sup>." First, the narrator *seems* to hear and to feel something: the words used imply that he is not sure. And then he is certain to hear the music, yet the narrator feels compelled to mention that the sound is scarcely hearable. The fact that the sound is low calls into question the truthfulness of the narrator's assertions.

By inserting in the middle of his characters' assertions remarks intended to make the reader doubt, the aim of Lee is to make her readership develop its critical thinking: "[T]he *active*

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<sup>384</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* pp.69-70

<sup>385</sup> Barthes, Roland. 'L'effet de Réel'. *Communications* 11 (1968): 84–89. p.85

<sup>386</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Amour Dure". *Op. cit.* p.72

<sup>387</sup> Lee, Vernon. "A Wicked Voice". *Op. cit.* p.166

<sup>388</sup> *Ibid.* p.167

*quality* in literature is [...] due [...] to the presence of words, and arrangements of sentences, *forcing the Reader to think*<sup>389</sup>."

Thus, if on the one side, the reader has a part to play in the interpretation of the text, on the other side, it requires a significant job from the author in terms of structure and writing to encourage the reader to be active while he is reading. This reflection about the work of the writer and the way it is received by the reader mirrors Lee's modernity. Hence, she did not consider her works of fiction as fixed in time but rather as texts that would evolve over time with the help of readers.

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<sup>389</sup> Lee, Vernon. *The Handling of Words, and Other Studies in Literary Psychology*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1923. p.245

## Conclusion

This dissertation has shown how Vernon Lee borrowed ideas and inspired herself from other writers and artists while making these ideas hers. She was convinced that "art is the expression, the typical image of a given condition of civilization, —that is to say, of a mode of living, feeling, and thinking<sup>390</sup>." Thus, literature as a form of art reflected the preoccupation of an era. The end of the nineteenth century was an era of uncertainties and moral transition, affected by the aftermaths of the Industrial Revolution. The improved economic situation of the country blurred the borders between the social classes, especially between aristocracy and upper middle class. But the working class was also impacted by this revolution and its new way of working. Consequently, the government had to adjust its laws in order to provide a better framework for the workers. As a result, the living conditions of a part of the working class also improved. For instance, the development of spare time gave people more time to read, and the reduction of child labour allowed the rise of education. At the same time, science developed and people began to question the existence of a world where God would be the only ruler. Thus, these transformations contributed to the emergence of a new world that brought anxiety and fear to the British population.

Hence, among the themes evoked by the *fin de siècle* authors, fear occupied a prominent place as it reflected the state of mind of the population: it was this mood of fear which gave Lee a basis for the writing of *Hauntings*. Furthermore, this fear led to the evolution of the states of minds and to the creation of several movements among which the Decadent Movement. Its members advocated a new way of thinking which also inspired Lee. Decadents were driven by a latent pessimism which is found in every themes they discussed. Thus, when they dealt with gods and mythical figures, they were always malevolent. In the same way, under their pens, beauty was constantly synonymous of danger and love became something essentially painful. Moreover, this pessimism led them to be concerned by their ultimate fate and they developed a fascination towards morbidity and death. Lee used these elements in *Hauntings* and the reader finds them at the core of the collection of short stories.

Besides, fear is also addressed from another perspective: the Gothic one. Indeed, fright is one of the element which composes the Gothic. The genre was used to entertain the readers, but

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<sup>390</sup> Lee, Vernon. 'Comparative Aesthetics'. *The Contemporary Review* XXXVIII (1880): 300–326. p.305

was also fed by the reader's deepest fears, allowing the latter to identify himself to the hero because "the written characters, have no power unless translated into images and feelings which are already within us<sup>391</sup>." Thus, the theme of fear was Lee's centerpiece; it allowed her to *write* the British fears of the *fin de siècle* with the codes of the Decadents and the Gothic revival of the nineteenth century.

Another element of connection which has to be mentioned is Lee's narrators. Indeed, not only do they have the task of narrating the story but they are another kind of link: the one between fiction and reality. As Marie-Carmen Thue-Tun points out, they are the fictional link between the author and the reader. Indeed, the reader can only refer to the narrator about the plot and the events of the story. Yet, Lee chose unreliable narrators: most of them such as Dr De Rosis in "Dionea" or Spiridion in "Amour Dure" have a biased gaze which results in a deeper involvement from the reader. Indeed, not only does the latter wonder about the sanity of the narrator but he also questions the truthfulness of the events reported. It is this lack of confidence towards the narrator which allows Lee to rewrite history with a critical eye and to give a credible voice to forgotten characters. These characters coming from the past appear in the present under a ghostly form which puts into question the sanity of her narrators. This is an unusual gateway for Gothic ghosts which are more used to come haunting the present by the means of dreams or nightmares. This makes her ghosts real characters, coming back in the present to convey a message. Thus, not only history is seen from another point of view (as shown with Medea's example) but the readers' involvement is also required to bring the texts to life.

Actually, Vernon Lee was convinced that only intelligence and logic were able to save society, this is why she wanted her readership to be involved in the narratives she wrote: she wanted her readers to think critically. Furthermore, writing for critical readers allowed Lee to adopt an indirect style in order to denounce the shortcomings of the society as patriarchalism for instance. On the one hand, she assumed her readership clever enough to read between the lines and to fully understand her ideas while on the other hand, it allowed her to remain published.

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<sup>391</sup> Lee, Vernon. *The Handling of Words, and Other Studies in Literary Psychology*. London: John Lane The Bodley Head, 1923. p.74

Nevertheless, if the reader has a part to play in the life of the narrative, the more difficult task belongs to the author who must do his utmost to make sure that the reader is interested and not indifferent: "Read; here is all that is most interesting and delightful and vital in the moods and thoughts [...] I have extracted it from the world and can transfer it to your mind<sup>392</sup>." Vernon Lee was well aware of the writer's purpose and she thought that changing mentalities was one of his tasks. Yet, despite the complexity of her work and the newness of her thoughts on several subjects (among which the relationship between author and reader) she was never considered as a creative spirit but she was rather considered as a great disciple (of Pater especially). This lack of gratitude towards her appropriation of the themes of the late nineteenth century in order to make the mentalities evolve contributed to her oblivion.

In addition, at the beginning of the twentieth century, World War I gave a blow to the literature of consumption and the magazines in which her short stories were published saw their sales decline. At the same time, she adopted a pacifist attitude towards the war, a behaviour neither understood nor approved of by her readership.

Moreover, as she did not publish "collected works or autobiographies<sup>393</sup>", after her death "only a few of her books were republished, mainly her ghost stories<sup>394</sup>". However, these stories represent only a small part of her work because it was "philosophical and historical essays [...] which constitute the bulk of her oeuvre<sup>395</sup>." Thus, with most of her work set aside, Vernon Lee's name and originality gradually faded away. It was only in late twentieth century, that some studies at last acknowledged the "exceptional fusion of symbolic, mythic and psychological elements<sup>396</sup>" in her works. This renewed interest towards her works actually supports the statement of this Victorian author who wrote in 1932: "Je suis venue trop tôt dans un monde trop jeune<sup>397</sup>."

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<sup>392</sup> *Ibid.* pp.31-32

<sup>393</sup> Zorn, Christa. *Op. cit.* p.20

<sup>394</sup> *Ibid.* p.16

<sup>395</sup> *Ibid.* p.16

<sup>396</sup> Maxwell, Catherine, and Patricia Pulham. *Vernon Lee Decadence, Ethics, Aesthetics*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006. p.105

<sup>397</sup> Lee, Vernon. "Introduction". *Op. cit.* p.26

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