

Life and Times

In a bicentennial profile of Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, the *Dublin Review of Books* wrote of the author, ‘His imagination was dark, almost to the point of disorder.’ It certainly seems only a singular imagination could have produced the body of work – comprising fourteen novels, several short stories, various poems and a play – that saw Le Fanu posthumously hailed as a master of Gothic horror. Although Le Fanu wrote across several formats and genres, notably sensation and mystery novels, non-fiction and historical fiction, today he is best known for his contribution to and expansion of the Victorian ghost story. Despite his success as a best-selling author during his lifetime, he largely fell out of public awareness after his death, until his work found a champion in M R James, in the early twentieth century. The scholar and author of supernatural tales praised Le Fanu in the highest terms as ‘absolutely in the first rank as a writer of ghost stories’, and as an author who ‘succeeds in inspiring a mysterious terror better than any other writer’. James edited and introduced two editions of Le Fanu’s works that revived interest in his fiction and established it as archetypal of the horror genre.

Early Life & Career

Born on 28 August 1814, Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu was the son of an Anglican minister. Originally descended from Huguenot refugees, the Le Fanus lived in Phoenix Park, Dublin, where

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Thomas Le Fanu was employed as chaplain at the Royal Hibernian Military School, and later Abington in County Limerick. Initially educated at home, Joseph Le Fanu went on to a successful university career at Trinity College Dublin, graduating in Classics in 1836.

Although called to the bar, Le Fanu eventually abandoned law for journalism, becoming the owner of a newspaper, the *Warder*, in 1839, and holding financial stakes in various papers throughout his life. Notable among these were the *Statesman*, the *Dublin Evening Mail* and the *Dublin University Magazine*, where his first ghost story, 'The Ghost and the Bonesetter', was published in 1838.

The Purcell Papers

Le Fanu continued to publish stories in the *Dublin University Magazine* under the assumed fictional identity of an eighteenth-century Catholic priest, Father Francis Purcell, purporting to comprise his literary estate. These early works – Le Fanu's first twelve published stories – reflected Romantic and Gothic influences of the time, their imagery of dark, foreboding castles suggesting a nostalgia for Ireland's dispossessed Catholic aristocracy, while themes such as supernatural visitations, madness, and suicide were classic ghost-story prototypes. The stories were later collected in an anthology entitled *The Purcell Papers*, published in 1880.

Personal Tragedy

In 1844, Le Fanu married the daughter of a leading barrister, Susanna Bennett, with whom he went on to have four children.

After an initial happy period, however, relations between the two became strained, as Susanna began to suffer from poor mental health, exacerbated by a crisis of faith following the death of several close family members. In April 1858, after what has been described as a ‘hysterical attack’, Susanna Bennett died in mysterious circumstances.

Le Fanu was overcome by grief and guilt, blaming himself for the tragedy, and from this time on he became a recluse, retreating from society and seldom venturing outside before nightfall. Perhaps as a reflection of his own interior turmoil, his work became darker and more introspective, with an increased focus on the Gothic, the supernatural and elements of psychological horror.

Sensationalism, Sex and the Supernatural

In 1864, Le Fanu published the novel *Uncle Silas* – one of his best known and most successful works, now regarded as a classic of Gothic horror and one of the first examples of the locked-room mystery. Veering towards sensationalism in the vein of Wilkie Collins’ *The Woman in White*, it expands on established Gothic Romantic tropes – a vast, crumbling mansion, a cast of characters by turns grotesque and shadowy, a guileless, innocent heroine forced into isolation – by combining them with themes of deception, inheritance, madness, criminality and sexuality. Suffused with ambiguity and mystery (it is suggested of the reclusive titular character that ‘Perhaps other souls than human are sometimes born into the world, and clothed in flesh’), the novel’s elements of psychological horror and the pervasive, unspoken threat of the supernatural have influenced countless

later works, including Daphne du Maurier's *Rebecca* and Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*.

The novella *Carmilla* was similarly ahead of its time. Published in 1872 as part of the important collection *In a Glass Darkly*, it precedes Bram Stoker's *Dracula* by over a quarter of a century, making it one of the earliest vampire stories. The vampire in question being female, *Carmilla* explores complex female relationships and plays with themes of repressed desire, death and the supernatural: 'You will think me cruel, very selfish, but love is always selfish; the more ardent, the more selfish. How jealous I am you cannot know. You must come with me, loving me, to death; or else hate me and still come with me, and hating me through death and after.' Le Fanu's writing of female sexuality would influence the eroticism portrayed in Stoker's *Dracula*, and his marrying of fear and sex would become a well-known trope of the horror genre overall.

Though he published steadily throughout his life, it was these later works that cemented Le Fanu's literary reputation, and, alongside the revival led by M R James fifty years later, inspired the novelist, biographer and historian E F Benson to write of Le Fanu in *The Spectator* in 1931 that 'no one else has so sure a touch in mixing the mysterious atmosphere in which horror darkly breeds'.

Glimpses of the Abyss: A Frightful End

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu died of a heart attack on 7 February 1873 at the age of fifty-eight. In a 1962 essay, 'A Cautionary Note on the Ghostly Tale', American literary critic Russell Kirk speculates that Le Fanu 'is believed to have literally died of fright'. Some-

what more astutely, Kirk continues: 'He knew that his creations were not his creations merely, but glimpses of the abyss.' Indeed, battling his own demons to the end, Le Fanu maintained a reclusive lifestyle until his death, earning him the moniker 'Dublin's invisible prince'. He is buried in that city's Mount Jerome Cemetery, where his grave is inscribed with the epithet gifted to him by its people.