

UNCLE SILAS — A LINK BETWEEN THE GOTHIC ROMANCE AND THE DETECTIVE NOVEL IN ENGLAND

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Uncle Silas by J. Sheridan Le Fanu appeared in 1864 — exactly 100 years after the publication of the first English Gothic novel — *The castle of Otranto*.¹ One hundred years being a long period from the point of view of the development of literary genres, even the most superficial comparison of novels representative of the second half of the 18th century with those of the Victorian period shows how tremendous were the changes and transformations that took place within this genre.

However, in spite of all the differences, the Victorian novel does not cease to belong to the whole heritage of the English novel and to constitute only one stage of its development by continuing the achievements of the earliest links of the chain and foreshadowing the later ones. One of the aspects that form a common denominator for the 18th century Gothic romance and some genres of the 19th century is mystery as a central compositional element of the novel.

From the point of view of this very aspect *Uncle Silas*, irrespective of its artistic value, is a particularly interesting case. Imitating traditional patterns rather than looking for new ones, this unambitious novel contains a wide range of elements which, first brought to English fiction by the Gothic romance, remained in it till Le Fanu's times only to be modified and continued as late as in the 20th century.

The main character of the novel — Silas Ruthyn — is a man of very conspicuous character — strange and eccentric in his ways, difficult to live with, he is even suspected of having committed a crime. However, according to his brother Austin Ruthyn's will, Silas is to be the warden of Austin's daughter —

¹ *The castle of Otranto* by Horace Walpole appeared in 1764.

Maud; moreover, in case of Maud's death before coming of age, Silas would be her only successor. Leaving such a will Maud's father wanted to give Silas a means of rehabilitating himself in the eyes of the community and of regaining his long lost self-dignity. Resolved to fulfil her dying father's will, Maud goes to Bartram Haugh — her uncle's abode.

Her stay there is disturbed by many unpleasant and apparently dangerous annoyances in spite of which Maud cannot yet suspect her uncle of being guilty of any malignant design against her. Silas' personality, which both repels and fascinates her, makes him an impenetrable mystery suggesting all shades of potential explanations — is Silas a supernatural being, an occult magician, a mystic, an opium addict, or a vulgar criminal?

The end of the novel smoothly solves this question. By mere accident does Maud avoid death — her governess is murdered instead. Hidden behind a curtain, Maud is a witness of a most deliberate murder — a scene which not only fully reveals Silas' personality but also provides the circumstantial detail missing to prove him guilty of another murder committed many years ago.

The element of mystery in this novel is not only the principle organizing its plot but it also decisively dominates over its imagery² on the level of which its general character is strictly analogous to that of the early Gothic novel.³ Thus, the very center of the images is constituted by a building — Bartram Haugh — all the elements of which find correspondences in the presentation of the early Gothic novel castle — moss and ivy covered ancient walls, long labyrinths of corridors, gloomy galleries, uninhabited wings, dark chambers providing most impressive interplay of light and shade, and, finally, a locked room shrouded by a thrilling mystery of a long forgotten crime.

Most strikingly Radcliffian is the image introducing Maud's governess — Madame de La Rougierre. First, musing over a nocturnal landscape, Maud is gradually led into a mood of half-conscious readiness to accept the potential supernatural — moonlit trees round a sepulchre make her think of her deceased mother, of her father's last journey mysteriously hinted upon and always associated in her mind with his strange religion (Swedenborgian theories) which, in turn, confront her with a dreaded presence of "something of the unearthly and spectral". This intense emotional background is suddenly

² The feeling that the element of mystery dominates in the composition of *Uncle Silas* is reflected in the term "novel of mystery" most frequently applied to it. "In many ways *Uncle Silas* is the Victorian mystery story par excellence" (E. P. Bleiler, Introduction to *Best ghost stories of J. S. Le Fanu*. New York: Dover Publications, 1964: VI). A. E. Murch (1968: 12) also classifies it as a "mystery story". Similarly, in the popular Penguin Books edition *Uncle Silas* appeared in the "Mystery and Crime" series.

³ A detailed analysis of the mystery in the early Gothic novel is presented in J. Nałęcz-Wojtczak (1972).

broken by the image of a white female form emerging from within the darkness and disturbing the stillness of the landscape by a strange grotesque bow (pp. 19—20).⁴

The Radcliffian technique can be seen not only in the components and atmosphere evoked by the above image but also in the abrupt dispelling of this intense suggestion of the supernatural. A laconic observation that it was only a governess classifies the scene into the so-called "supernatural explained" — a device most inseparably associated in literary criticism with the art of Mrs. Radcliffe.

Although the atmosphere of something unknown is evoked mainly by images presenting various fragments of Bartram Haugh and the outward appearance of Madame de La Rougierre and Silas, the motif of mystery suggested by means of poetic images can be also found in the presentation of other places and characters, e.g., the drawing room at Knowl (Ch. 7), the figure of Austin during his talk with Dr. Bryerly (Ch. 1), etc.

The parallels between the poetic imagery of *Uncle Silas* and the novels by Mrs. Radcliffe are sometimes so strong that they consist not only in evoking the same mood by means of the same components but in almost copying whole descriptive fragments. Such striking similarity can be seen, for instance, between the image of Emily approaching the monastery in *The Italian* and that of Maud arriving at Bartram Haugh. In both these cases: 1. the panorama of the mountains and the picture of the building are presented gradually as seen by a person travelling in a coach; 2. a strong contrast between the harmony of nature and the emotional tumult within the heroine is stressed; 3. some fragments of the road have to be covered on foot; 4. the heroine admires the landscape spreading in front of her as well as the valleys left behind; 5. the climax of the travel takes place at sunset; 6. in the very first image of the building its spiry and soaring character is stressed; 7. the next items mentioned are the walls, a gate, the trees.

The following confrontation of fragments from *The Italian* and *Uncle Silas*, respectively, illustrates this striking correspondence between the technique of introducing particular elements and sometimes even between the vocabulary:

a) *The Italian*

she perceived herself in a carriage
objects which would have afforded pleasure to a tranquil mind
(they) alighted for the ascent was too steep and irregular to admit of a carriage
glimpses of the glowing country below

b) *Uncle Silas*

the carriage and post horses were at the door
the pleasantest travelling if the mind were free
At some particularly steep points we had to get out and go on foot,
the magnificent view of the rich country we were leaving behind

⁴ J. S. Le Fanu, *Uncle Silas*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1947.

plains and mountains... lighted up with all
 the purple splendour of the setting sun
 spires that overtopped it
 the tall west window
 insurmountable walls which fenced the
 garden
 a dark portal leading into the chief court
 fantastic summits

we just reached the summit when the
 sun set down
 overtopped with mighty trees
 a pair of tall fluted piers
 a great grass-grown park wall
 great fantastic iron gate
 magnificent forest trees

Thus, as far as its composition is concerned, the poetic imagery of *Uncle Silas* shows most vital links between this novel and the Gothic romance; from the point of view of its function in the whole novel, however, it represents a clear breaking off from the Gothic tradition and a gradual but consistent development towards a new genre — the detective novel.

First of all, poetic imagery in *Uncle Silas* is introduced by much shorter fragments than in the Gothic novels. Thus, even from the point of view of their very "volume" measured in terms of the ideal perception time (cf. Skwarczyńska 1954 : 128), the descriptive items do not overshadow neighbouring fragments and thus do not draw the reader's attention away from the development of the action. An analogous observation can be made while comparing their poetic plurisignation and impact. The images of Gothic architecture in Mrs. Radcliffe's novels have several levels of meaning, some of which represent deep metaphorical allusions to the impenetrable mystery of human lot thus giving the novels their perspective depth (cf. Nałęcz-Wojtczak 1972 : 52—4). In *Uncle Silas*, on the other hand, the images of Bart-ram Haugh do not exceed the limits of a cheap sensational mystery of a long forgotten crime. Thus, producing unquestionable suspense, the imagery in *Uncle Silas* does not become, as in the case of Mrs. Radcliffe's novels, the main factor organizing the composition of the novel.

This more balanced function of the poetic imagery in Le Fanu's novel is achieved not only by artistic impoverishment of particular fragments but also by subordinating them to the action of the novel and harmonizing with the structure of the plot.

The above statement can be best illustrated by a set of images introducing the outward appearance of Silas. The compositional center of the novel is constituted by the mystery of Silas' personality, the unveiling of which takes place at the end of the novel (the murder scene, Ch. 28). Hence, the author's intention, realized most consistently throughout the development of the plot, is to keep the reader in constant suspense and hinder him from guessing the proper solution before its final formulation in the last chapter.⁵ In order to

⁵ This feature of the composition of *Uncle Silas* is stressed by S. M. Ellis (1951 : 163): "In the book it is again the sense of impending tragedy and horror long drawn out which is almost overwhelming in its culminative effect. The imagination is excited and dilated to such a pitch that when the actual scene of murder is reached it is nearly an anticlimax".

achieve this effect Le Fanu constantly suggests possibilities of various, often contradictory solutions — from a supernatural being, through a mystic, a drug addict, to a criminal. One of the vehicles of this kind of suggestion is imagery.

The almost Dutch masters' painting in which the light of a candle reveals from within the darkness a white marble face embraced by silver locks falling down the shoulders and brightened by "a fearful, monumental look" of its "singularly vivid, strange eyes" is followed by the image of a figure — tall, thin, wrapped in a black, loose garment "then quite out of fashion". Dominated by a strange expression of the eyes (stressed several times), the above image suggests the figure of a magician, a mighty sage initiated into the dark secrets of the occult — an impression strengthened by the image of Silas standing with his hand upon the Bible in which "lives his only hope" (pp. 99—101).

Quite different connotations are brought in by the scene in which Silas awakes at night after a long lethargic torpor caused by opium. "The figure of Uncle Silas rose up, and dressed in his long white morning gown, slid over the end of the bed, and with two or three swift noiseless steps, stood behind me, with a death-like scowl and simper. Preternaturally tall and thin, he stood for a moment almost touching me,... And after a momentary pause, he glided to the farthest window, and appeared to look out upon the midnight prospect. It was cold, but he did not seem to feel it. With the same inflexible scowl and smile, he continued to look out for several minutes; and then with a great sigh, he sat down on the side of his bed, his face immovably turned towards me, with the same painful look" (p. 150).

All the details of the above description (the underlined ones in particular) create the atmosphere which goes back to the tradition of the early Gothic supernatural — an apparition clad in white, a ghost sliding noiselessly with a death-like inflexible scowl. On the other hand, the features of Silas' face prominent during his talk with Dudley display his seldom revealed beastly cruelty: "I never saw such a countenance — like one of those demon-grotesques we see in the Gothic side-aisles and groining — a dreadful grimace, monkey-like and insane..." (p. 181).

The above fragments provide images which: 1. represent a strongly Gothic type of mystery; 2. by hindering Maud from reaching a univocal interpretation of Silas' personality they influence her behaviour and decisions thus determining the development of the action; 3. by suggesting various potential interpretations of Silas' personality they provide the reader with false clues which make finding the solution more difficult and thus strengthen his emotional and intellectual involvement in the puzzle-structured plot; 4. by intensifying the mystery of Silas' personality — the organizing principle of the

plot — they make its structure more prominent; 5. the same effect, i.e., making the structure of the plot more prominent, is often achieved by coordinating an image of strong dramatic tension with an equally dramatic moment of the plot (in Mrs. Radcliffe's novels images of strong tension were often introduced irrespective of the dramatic pulsation of the plot). For instance, the first of the above-quoted images is introduced at the moment when, after a long period of time (a period covering 11 chapters, that is, almost half way down the plot) the reader for the first time encounters Silas as a physical being, that is, at the moment which constitutes the first climax of the novel — one level of the mystery of Silas' personality (is he a supernatural being?) is definitely solved here: "Uncle Silas was no longer a shadow; I had now seen him in the flesh" (p. 101).

While the stereotype means of achieving the atmosphere of mystery on the level of poetic imagery points to the affinities with the Gothic genre of the second half of the 18th century, the strong connection, coordination, even subordination of imagery to the plot clearly foreshadow the detective novel — a new genre which was just being born in the second half of the 19th century.

One of the characteristic features of the composition of a classical detective novel is the subsidiary role of imagery in relation to the plot. And while the motifs of images are various and most often have nothing in common with the conventional Gothic patterns, we can, in the history of this genre, find images which, retaining the characteristic subordination to the plot, flavour (and sometimes very strongly) of the petrified Gothic devices of evoking the atmosphere of mystery and terror. Being at the very summit of his career as a detective story writer, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in *The hound of the Baskervilles* as late as in 1902 uses a typically Gothic motif of a supernatural curse. One of the means of conveying it is the image of vast marshes accompanied by such accessories as: night, mist, moonlight, wailing wind, and an uncanny, nightmarish howling of a hound. A detailed analysis of this novel would show that from the point of view of the main motifs and function of the poetic imagery no significant differences can be found between *Uncle Silas* — a novel evading generic classification,⁶ and *The hound of the Baskervilles* — a classical example of the detective novel.

The analysis of the plot of *Uncle Silas* provides even more correspondences between this novel and the other two genres. As far as its main motifs are concerned, *Uncle Silas* again goes back directly to the early Gothic novel.

⁶ Most often *Uncle Silas* is classified as a "mystery novel" (cf. footnote 2 above) or "sensation novel". Against the latter Le Fanu violently protested considering himself a follower of Sir Walter Scott's tragic romance (cf. Ellis 1951: 9).

After her father's death a young, innocent, sensitive girl finds herself suddenly among hostile people, imprisoned within an old building whose walls menace her with an imaginary mystery as well as with a real danger. The above sentence refers to both the novels — *The mysteries of Udolpho* and *Uncle Silas*.⁷ Many even more particular analogies could be found, for instance the motif of exploring secret, derelict chambers; imposing mysterious and uncanny qualities onto phenomena unfamiliar to the imaginative heroine; helplessness of the heroine, who is completely cut off from her friends and imprisoned in a house (castle) allowing for no possibility of escape; a scene in which the heroine watches a grave being dug for her; the discovery of a real crime committed within the walls of the house (castle) by its present owner; the role of coincidence in discovering the crime and lack of active logical detection; and, finally, the central mysterious personality of the main male character. The personality of Silas will be discussed later, it is worth-while, however, to notice here that some of its aspects are a direct continuation of the "Gothic villain".⁸

Thus, while from the point of view of the theme *Uncle Silas*, with only slight modifications, continues the tradition of a genre originated 100 years ago, from the point of view of its form it introduces several significant alternations which make the book representative of new tendencies within the novel — tendencies which were to find their zenith in the detective novel.

The main compositional outline of the plot of *Uncle Silas* is the same as in the early Gothic novel, that is, based upon the principle of mystery. The beginning of the novel confronts the reader with something unknown to be explained — the end of the novel provides the answer which at the same time constitutes the climax of the novel. The main innovation brought by Le Fanu is the tendency to introduce the question (beginning of the mystery) close to the very beginning of the novel and the answer (end of the mystery) close to the very end of the novel. Thus, already in the first chapter, we read: "There was also some disgrace about his younger brother, my Uncle Silas, which he felt bitterly" (p. 12). Similarly, the final solution, which consisted in disclosing the particulars of the murder of the past as well as Silas' plans concerning Maud, is given in the last chapter and it precedes only a short narrative fragment presenting Maud's escape and a concise *Nachgeschichte*

⁷ Christine Longford (Introduction to *Uncle Silas*, pp. 9-10) stresses that the motif of a "studious widower with a young innocent daughter" presented in *Uncle Silas* as well as in another story by Le Fanu — *Carmilla* — goes back to the tradition of *The mysteries of Udolpho*. W. Allen (1960 : 212) also notices some correspondences between *Uncle Silas* and novels by Mrs. Radcliffe: "... a young girl ... caught in a Mrs. Radcliffe-like situation of imprisonment in an old derelict house in the wilds of Derbyshire".

⁸ Cf. the discussion of Mrs. Radcliffe's black characters in P. L. Thorslev (1965), ch. IV: "The Gothic villain".

entitled "Conclusion". Thus, the climax is very close — almost converges with the end of the novel reducing very strongly the segment between the climax and the end of the novel which, in the case of the Gothic novel, was long and of very low dramatic tension (cf. Nałęcz-Wojtczak 1972 : 48). Even a superficial analysis of a classical detective novel would show that one of the characteristics of its composition is a maximum shortening of the segment between the solution of the puzzle and the end of the novel.

Another feature characteristic of *Uncle Silas* is a tendency to make this mystery-organized plot the most prominent compositional element of the novel. Referring our considerations again to the detective novels of Conan Doyle, we can clearly see that the mystery-organized plot attains such significance there that, in fact, it can be treated as the *raison d'être* of the detective novel.⁹ Many devices are employed to achieve this effect. First of all, the imagery is closely subordinated to the plot (which, as shown above, takes place also in *Uncle Silas*); all the motifs other than the mystery are reduced to rudimentary forms (for instance, the love story in *The hound of the Baskervilles*); the greatest stress is put upon the process of deducing the cause and result relationship between particular facts; and, finally, the detective's personality and activities are made so prominent that they decisively overshadow that of the criminal.¹⁰

Uncle Silas does not comply to all these requirements. First of all, there is no detective as a central character (although some elements of this character could be traced in dr. Bryerly) and hence we cannot yet find the process of logical deduction (although some antecedents of it can be detected in the careful circumstantial accounting for certain details). The most important difference, however, between *Uncle Silas* and the detective novel is the fact that in the very center of its composition is the personality of Silas, i.e., of a criminal.¹¹ Nevertheless, the tendency to give the mystery plot the most prominent position is clearly seen. First of all, the love-motif is sketched very superficially, without any attempt at individualizing the simplest stereotypes — hence its development cannot attract the reader's attention to such an extent as to overshadow the mystery-motif. A very important role is played by the introduction of false clues — a device most closely associated with the detective genres. Since particular fragments of the novel constantly suggest various potential interpretations of Silas' personality, he remains a mystery till the very climax.

⁹ Cf. Roger Caillois, "Powieść kryminalna ..." in Caillois (1967), S. Barańczak (1973), Helmut Heissenbüttel (1973).

¹⁰ Cf. Murch (1968 : 165): "The detective himself became the real centre of interest".

¹¹ Cf. Murch (1968 : 133): "... but there is no central character acting as a detective and no special emphasis is placed on deductive reasoning".

To strengthen the same effect, Le Fanu makes use of the so-called "episodic mystery" — that is, a mystery motif embracing only a relatively short fragment of the plot.¹² *Uncle Silas* contains several "episodic mysteries". On page 17 the mystery of the journey of Maud's father is introduced — Austin Ruthyn expects a visit which must inevitably be followed by his immediate departure. On page 63 this highly intriguing secret is revealed — the story of the inevitable journey is only an allegorical way of warning Maud of her father's approaching death. On page 174 Maud is terrified by a sudden shadowy image of Madame de La Rougierre's face — page 188 clears this uncanny mystery by ascertaining that the dreaded governess was really present at Bartram Haugh.

Referring again to the detective novel, we notice that "episodic mysteries" can be found very often, their compositional function being particularly significant. The beginning of such episodes is constituted by the introduction of an unknown fact (for instance, the figure of a man lurking on the marshes (*The hound of the Baskervilles*) — its end provides the explanation which, what is most important, proves to be less sensational than that expected by the reader — the conspicuous man is only an escaped convict whose presence has nothing to do with the investigated crime.

The same divergence between the dramatic impact of the potential and the actual solution is seen in the above discussed episodes from *Uncle Silas*. In the context of the fragment, Austin's journey has the flavour of something weird, eerie, at least occult while, in fact, it is simply a reference to ordinary death; similarly, the image of the governess's face seems to suggest something much more sensational than her real presence in the house.

Thus, the ending of each "episodic mystery" results in two kinds of the reader's response. On the one hand, it relieves the tension created at the beginning of the episode and "disappoints" the reader, whose imagination has prepared him for a stronger thrill; on the other hand, it increases his interest in the main mystery plot — if a given element belongs only to an "episodic mystery" the reader's attention is immediately stimulated to seek for other potential clues leading to the main solution; if his present deductions were false, the final solution promises to be even more unexpected, baffling and thrilling — if the lurking shadow of a man is not the murderer he must be looked for among the respectable citizens, which is a much more difficult and intellectually satisfying task. Thus, the solution of the "episodic mystery" is a moment in which the tension decreases in relation to a given episode and increases in relation to the whole plot. A comparatively great number

¹² A discussion of "episodic mystery" as a compositional device is given in J. Nałęcz-Wojtczak (1970), ch. III: "Tajemnica jako epizod u M. G. Lewisa".

of such moments is another characteristic of the composition of the detective novel.

It would be difficult to ascertain to what an extent the use of this technique in *Uncle Silas* resulted from its serial publication (in *Dublin University Magazine*) and to what extent from Le Fanu's conviction that it was most suitable for that very type of the novel (classified by the publishers as "mystery and crime novel"). Whatever the reasons, the important fact is that by an extensive use of this technique Le Fanu foreshadows the detective novel as well as goes back to the Gothic novel tradition of the "supernatural explained". Mrs. Radcliffe's famous scenes in which she very convincingly suggests the presence of a ghost to dispel it a bit later by a trivial explanation represent, in fact, the same technique. Yet, while in the Gothic novel its main impact was felt on the level of imagery which had its own dramatic pulsation irrespective of the plot — the detective novel, by transferring it onto fragments of the plot and coordinating with its most important moments, used it, together with other devices, to accentuate the fundamental outline of the mystery-organized plot.

Uncle Silas is representative of a great number of second-rate thrillers written in the sixties and seventies of the 19th century. The most typical examples are: novels by Mrs. Henry Wood (1814—1887) — the author of about forty novels, the most interesting of which — *East Lynne* was published in instalments in *Colburn's New Monthly Magazine* in the years 1860—1861; Mary Elizabeth Braddon's (1837—1915) eighty novels including such famous thrillers as *Lady Audley's secret* (1861), *A strange world* (1875), *An open verdict* (1878), *Just as I am* (1880), and, finally, Le Fanu's *Checkmate* (1871), a novel in which the compositional achievements of *Uncle Silas* are continued in an even bolder form.

In all these novels the composition tends evidently towards that of the classical detective novel. In some cases this tendency is so strong that we might already classify a given work as a detective novel as, for instance, in the case of *Checkmate*, which, according to A. E. Murch (1969:134), is "constructed purely as a detective novel". Nevertheless, the sixties and seventies is mainly a "pre-detective" period — a period during which an amorphous mass of literature mostly referred to as sensation novels constituted a final step towards the emergence of a genre of a most definite, precise and easy to classify form.

The next thirty years bring works in which the balance between elements characteristic of broadly understood sensation novels and narrowly understood detective genres is shaken. Such works as *Fast and loose* (1855) by M. A. Griffiths, *The dark house* (1855) by G. Manville, *A hard knot* (1855) by Ch. Gibbon, *Great Porter Square* (1884), *The mystery of Mr. Felix* (1890),

Samuel Boyd of Catchpole Square (1899) by B. L. Farjeon or *Prince Zaleski* (1895) by Matthew Phipps Schiel, though criticized for many compositional flaws, can yet be treated as full-form detective novels. During this very period the two detective novels by Conan Doyle appear — *A study in scarlet* (1888) and *The sign of four* (1889) — novels which, together with those by Wilkie Collins,¹³ provided a model for a further development of this genre, which took place already in the 20th century.

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¹³ *Uncle Silas* being representative of second-rate sensation novels, those by Wilkie Collins have not been included into the present discussion.

