Agency and the Supernatural in the Late Victorian Gothic Tales

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AGENCY AND THE SUPERNATURAL IN LATE VICTORIAN GOTHIC TALES

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will analyse the notion of agency and its relation to the supernatural elements in Gothic short stories “Dionea” (1890) by Vernon Lee and “Lot No. 249” (1892) by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The aim of the thesis is to examine the agency of the characters and the way that the supernatural is used to portray it in these late Victorian gothic tales. The analysis shall be carried out through a close reading of the short stories, followed by their comparative analysis.

KEY WORDS: agency, supernatural, *Dionea*, *Lot No. 249*, late Victorian gothic tales

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1. Introduction

"Dionea" by Vernon Lee and "Lot No. 249" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle are late Victorian Gothic tales. The term *Gothic* was firstly used in the eighteenth century to stand for all that was contrary to Western Europe's civilization, reason, and order: "The proportionate taste of the beautiful was wrenched out of shape by the excesses of the sublime" (Luckhurst, 2005:X).

In the 1880s, new print technologies, increasing number of readers and the emergence of new daily, weekly, and monthly magazines paved the way for the renewal of interest in the Gothic short story: "Anxious late-Victorian literary commentators felt that this mass market encouraged only the lurid, the sensational, and the horrifying: the Gothic was a kind of monstrous embodiment of new popular culture." (Lockhurst, 2005:xvi-xvii). Another important factor of the renewal of Gothic short story was the fact that the Gothic themes fitted perfectly into the current cultural movement – Decadence. According to Goldfarb (1962:373), there are a few literary descriptions of the Decadence movement, and they all agree that:

> Decadent literature is characterized by artistic concern for the morbid, the perverse, the sordid, the artificial, the beauty to be found in the unnatural, and the representation of the cleanliness in unclean things; it is characterized by a self-conscious and weary contempt for social conventions such as truth and marriage, by an acceptance of Beauty as a basis for life. (Goldfarb, 1962:373)

The Decadent Movement in Britain is characterized by vast popularity of ghost stories. According to Smajic (2003:1110), the popularity of the ghost story arose from the diminished impact of theology and metaphysical philosophy on creating popular opinion about visual perception and from the widespread theories proposed by physiological scientists that human vision is particularly subjective:

> While nineteenth-century physiological science could effectively rationalize the appearance of a

> specter as nothing more than a subjective optical effect-an ephemeral image that exists nowhere except in the deceived eye of the beholder, an illusion of evidence of the existence of an afterlife-the unsettling question that inevitably arose from such arguments, and which Victorian ghost-story writers often posed quite explicitly, was where precisely (if anywhere at all) to draw the line between objective and subjective perception in general, between optical fact and optical illusion. (Smajic, 2003:1110)

Smajic then (2003:1110) argues that the Victorian Ghost story "covertly invokes a form of spectatorship that meets the ghost on its own spectral terms" which, in reality, depicts the "desire for a metaphysical, theological model of vision that no longer seems plausible and believable".

Therefore, the presence of the supernatural in Gothic short stories is one of the key notions of the nineteenth century Gothic literature. In Vernon Lee's "Dionea" and Arthur Conan Doyle's "Lot No. 249", both the everyday life of Italian villagers of Montemirto in "Dionea" and ordinary student life at Oxford university in "Lot. No 249" are interrupted by the presence of the supernatural. In this essay's analysis of the supernatural in Gothic tales, the focus will be on establishing its relationship to the notion of agency. According to Schlosser (2019): "an agent is being with capacity to act, and 'agency' denotes the exercise or manifestation of this capacity". Also, the term agency represents, in narrower sense, "the performance of intentional actions" (Schlosser, 2019). Thus, the aim of this thesis is to examine who has agency over the supernatural events in the stories, i.e., who is using the supernatural to achieve their goal, and who is the passive recipient. Other important aims will be to establish the narrator's relation to the story, as well as the presence of symbols that contribute to the meaning of the overall story.

2. Dionea

"Dionea" is a short story written by Vernon Lee in 1890. Vernon Lee is known to be a major figure in the Aesthetic Movement and "Dionea" represents Lee's Aestheticist appropriation of Gothic fiction by making the main character the most beautiful, but at the same time the most terrifying girl in the village (Luckhurst, 2005: xxii).

The story is set in the little Italian village Montemirto Ligure between 1873 and 1887. The narrator is Doctor Alessandro De Rosis and the story takes the epistolary form, i.e., it consists of a series of letters from Doctor Alessandro De Rosis to Lady Evelyn Savelli, Princess of Sabina, in which he recounts the events in their little village. Doctor Alessandro De Rosis was particularly interested in the fall of the Pagan Gods, which is an important factor in understanding the narrator's point of view. He mentions the birth of the Roman Goddess Venus in his first letter to Lady Evelyn while describing the view from his 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, like one of your Ravenna mosaics spread out as pavement for the world a wicked sea, wicked in its loveliness, wickeder than your grey northern ones, and from which must have arisen in times gone by (when Phœnicians or Greeks built the temples at Lerici and Porto Venere) a baleful goddess of beauty, a Venus Verticordia, but in the bad sense of the word, overwhelming men's lives in sudden darkness like that squall of last week (Lee, 2005:3).

He then continues by asking financial support for her new protégé Dionea whose survival was miraculous: "for this coast is like a shark's jaw, and the bits of sand are tiny and far between" (Lee, 2005:4). Dionea is thought to be the only survivor of a Greek ship, "a big, lumbering craft,

with eyes painted on each side of the prow" (Lee, 2005:4) that was sunken in the great storm. She was taken in by nuns and they named her Dionea because that was the only word pinned to her clothes and because it was acceptable since there was a Saint Dionea, Virgin and Martyr. As described in the story, carrying a saint's name was obligatory, especially in the nunnery. The girl was thought to be unskilled, given that she was not interested in any of the disciplines that a young girl was expected to learn: "she hates learning, sewing, washing up the dishes, all equally" (Lee, 2005:6). On the other hand, she loved "lying in the garden, under the big myrtle-bushes, and, in spring and summer, under the rose-hedge." (Lee, 2005:7). The narrator introduces the idea that Dionea is in control of supernatural forces with subtle comments such as: "The nuns say that rose-hedge and that myrtle-bush are growing a great deal too big, one would think from Dionea's lying under them" (Lee, 2005:7).

When Dionea grew up, she was described as the most beautiful girl in the village, but everyone was afraid of her because "wherever she goes the young people must needs fall in love with each other, and usually where it is far from desirable" (Lee, 2005:10). Thus, it is suggested that Dionea has agency over the supernatural events that occur in the story. After spending some time with her, the villagers would suddenly fall completely under control of their feelings and instincts.

Dionea did several jobs to make a living when she left the convent. One of these jobs was helping a girl from the village to prepare for her wedding. However, after spending some time with Dionea, the girl had a change of heart and wanted to either marry another man who she declared to be her true love, or to go to a convent.

Another similar situation occurred when Dionea helped the villager's wife with washing, and the woman ran away with a coastguard. She also made sister Giuliana from the convent fall in

love with a sailor-boy from the port and they disappeared together. It was only the beginning of a strange love pandemic at the Convent of the Stigmata:

> The elder schoolgirls have to be kept under lock and key lest they should talk over the wall in the moonlight, or steal out to the little hunchback who writes love-letters at a penny a-piece, beautiful flourishes and all, under the portico by the Fish-market… the poor little nuns taking fresh penances on the cold chapel fags; and hears the long-drawn guttural vowels, amore and morte and mio bene, which rise up of an evening, with the boom of the surf and the scent of the lemon-fowers, as the young men wander up and down, arm-in-arm, twanging their guitars along the moonlit lanes under the olives? (Lee, 2005:11)

Another demonstration of Dionea's power was when she worked for Sor Agostino. Sor Agostino was an old man who tried to assault Dionea. One day, the lighting struck a huge olive tree under which Sor Agostino was resting, and he was killed on the spot. Later, Dionea told Doctor Alessandro that she had warned Sor Agostino: "if he did not leave me alone Heaven would send him an accident" (Lee, 2005:15).

From the examples above, it may be concluded that the villagers of Montemirto were the passive recipients of Dionea's supernatural power and that is why they were so afraid of her, while Dionea seemed to enjoy that:

> The priest has crusaded against her, and stones have flown at her as she went by from dissatisfied lovers; and the very children, paddling in the sea and making mud-pies in the sand, have put out forefinger and little finger and screamed, 'Witch, witch! Ugly witch!' as she passed with basket or brick load; but Dionea has only smiled, that snake-like, amused smile, but more ominous than of yore. (Lee, 2005:18)

The story reaches its climax when the artist Waldemar, a friend of Lady Evelyn, comes to the village with his wife Gertrude to make a sculpture of Venus. He had never made a statue of a woman before because he believed that: "the female figure…is almost inevitably inferior in

strength and beauty; woman is not form, but expression, and therefore suits painting, but not sculpture. The point of a woman is not her body, but (and here his eyes rested very tenderly upon the thin white profile of his wife) her soul." (Lee, 2005:19). However, his wife is determined in her wish to find him a female model and that is when she meets Dionea. After Waldemar saw Dionea he agreed to make a statue of Venus. However, the narrator detests Waldemar's cold treatment of Dionea: "Truly he carries out his theory that sculpture knows only the body, and the body scarcely considered as human. The way in which he speaks to Dionea after hours of the most rapt contemplation of her is almost brutal in its coldness" (Lee, 2005:21). However, after days of working on the statue of Venus, Waldemar starts to constantly talk about Dionea's superiority over the statue which may seem as though he has been possessed by Dionea's supernatural power. When he finished the statue, he asked Doctor De Rosis to lend him his altar because he wanted to make one for the statue, and that is when his obsession with Dionea became more obvious:

> I sent the altar to him: the lad who carried it told me that Waldemar had set it up in the studio, and calling for a fask of wine, poured out two glasses. One he had given to my messenger for his pains; of the other he had drunk a mouthful, and thrown the rest over the altar, saying some unknown words. (Lee, 2005:24)

Later that evening, he called to Dionea to stay by his statue to see them in an artificial light. He set fire with dry myrtle and heather, and he threw some resin to produce a smell of incense to create the setting for a ritual of sacrifice: "Before Dionea was the altar—the altar of Venus which he had borrowed from me. He must have collected all the roses about it, and thrown the incense upon the embers" (Lee, 2005:26). At the point, his wife Gertrude entered his studio and they found her in the morning: "lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes of the incense, her blood—she had but little to give, poor white ghost!—trickling among the carved garlands and rams' heads,

black ening the heaped-up roses.“ (Lee, 2005:26) The sculptor was also found dead at the foot of the castle cliff. Dionea was never found, and it may be that this ritual was a sacrifice which let Dionea return to the ocean. Most of the villagers tended to forget all about Dionea and strange events surrounding her, but some of them claim they saw her afterwards:

> a sailor-boy assures me, by all the holy things, that the day after the burning of the Castle Chapel––we never call it anything else—he met at dawn, of the island of Palmaria, beyond the Strait of Porto Venere, a Greek boat, with eyes painted on the prow, going full sail to sea, the men singing as she went. And against the mast, a robe of purple and gold about her, and a myrtle-wreath on her head, leaned Dionea, singing words in an unknown tongue, the white pigeons circling around her. (Lee, 2005:26)

3. Lot. No. 249

"Lot No. 249" is a short story written by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in 1892. The story is a Gothic tale recognizable for its elements of the supernatural and horror. It is set in Old College, a fictional college at Oxford, in the spring of 1884. The main character is Abercrombie Smith, a student of medicine who has just enrolled at Oxford University. The story is presented to the reader by an unknown narrator who, at the very beginning of the story, clarifies their point of view by indicating that, even though the story may seem unbelievable, the integrity of the main character and the unexplored notions of nature put the story outside of the realm of mere fiction:

> Yet when we think how narrow and how devious this path of Nature is, how dimly we can trace it, for all our lamps of science, and how from the darkness which girds it round great and terrible possibilities loom ever shadowly upwards, it is a bold and confident man who will put a limit to the strange by-paths into which the human spirit may wander. (Doyle, 2005:109)

The story continues by introducing Smith's old school friend Jephro Hastie. Hastie is a senior student who warns Smith of his neighbours in the dormitory, Edward Bellingham and William Monkhouse Lee. He particularly detests Edward Bellingham for whom he says that: "There's something damnable about him—something reptilian. My gorge always rises at him" (Doyle, 2005:111). Smith did not listen to his friend because he thought of Hastie as: "a good fellow, but he was rough, strong-fibred, with no imagination or sympathy. He could not tolerate departures from what he looked upon as the model type of manliness." (Doyle, 2005:113)

One day, Smith heard a painful, terrifying scream coming from Bellingham's room. He chose to ignore it when suddenly Lee appeared at his door calling him for help. They rushed into

Bellingham's room, which was more of a museum than a room because of all the eastern relics, and they found him with "widely-opened eyes directed in a horrified stare to the crocodile above him, and his blue, thick lips puffing loudly with every expiration" (Doyle, 2005:115). This very moment is the crucial point of the story because, as the reader will later find out, that was the first time Bellingham managed to bring the mummy to life. As Bellingham was an expert in Eastern Languages and Eastern Culture, and had thoroughly studied Egyptian history, he got to the formula that enabled him to awake the mummy from the sarcophagus. By making that happen, Bellingham became the character that has the agency over supernatural, i.e., the one who controls the mummy for his own benefit. He used his power to take revenge on students against whom he held a grudge.

His first victim was his colleague Norton, who hit him with a stick because Bellingham pushed an old woman into mud while walking on a narrow path. Norton depicted his attacker as "not human… two arms, which, he says, were as strong and as thin as steel bands" (Doyle, 2005:123). The second victim was Monkhouse Lee who rejected Bellingham's offer to be his partner in controlling the mummy and who broke off Bellingham's engagement with his sister. Soon after the argument, Lee almost drowned in the river, but he says that he did not fall into the river but was rather "thrown in" (Doyle, 2005:130). He then continues: "I was standing by the bank, and something from behind picked me up like a feather and hurled me in. I heard nothing, and I saw nothing. But I know what it was, for all that" (Doyle, 2005:130). Lee knew that Bellingham attacked him by setting the mummy out to get him, but he did not have the strength to act against it. The last victim of Bellingham's attack was the main character of the story, Abercrombie Smith. He was Bellingham's enemy because he figured out what attacked the aforementioned students and that is why he became a threat to Bellingham's secret power. Bellingham planned the attack to happen on Smith's way out of Old College to his friend Doctor

Peterson. However, while walking towards Peterson's house, Smith noticed that something was following him:

> It moved in the shadow of the hedge, silently and furtively, a dark, crouching figure, dimly visible against the black background. Even as he gazed back at it, it had lessened its distance by twenty paces, and was fast closing upon him. Out of the darkness he had a glimpse of a scraggy neck, and of two eyes that will ever haunt him in his dreams…As he rushed madly and wildly through the night, he could hear a swift, dry patter behind him, and could see, as he threw back a glance, that this horror was bounding like a tiger at his heels, with blazing eyes and one stringy arm out-thrown. (Doyle, 2005:133)

Long Norton, Monkhouse Lee, and Abercrombie Smith became passive recipients of the supernatural in that their lives were put in danger by Edward Bellingham who had control over the inhuman, dangerously strong mummy. However, one of the victims had the courage to stand up to Bellingham's cruelty – Abercrombie Smith. He came up with the plan to prevent the future attacks, as announced at the beginning of the story, "a bold and confident man who will put a limit to the strange by-paths into which the human spirit may wander" (Doyle, 2005:109).

Abercrombie Smith is described as a man who one does not want to have as an enemy, given that he is determined in everything he does. At this point of the story, Smith becomes the hero and Bellingham turns out to be the villain. Following the historical pattern of the literary battle between Good and Evil, Doyle sets Smith's natural goodness above Bellingham's supernatural evil, and he draws the reader's attention to the danger of dealing with the supernatural and letting the power consume its holder. We can see this from descriptions of the hero of the story – Abercrombie Smith:

> "With his firm mouth, broad forehead, and clear-cut, somewhat hard-featured face, he was a man who, if he had no brilliant talent, was yet so dogged, so patient, and so strong that he might in the end overtop a more showy genius." (Doyle, 2005:113)

and the villain of the story – Edward Bellingham who is depicted as an evil, twisted man with "his fat, unhealthy face all quivering with malignant passion" (Doyle, 2005:124).

The supernatural events in the story are introduced by Bellingham's "uncontrollable shriek of horror which chilled his [Smith's] blood and pringled in his [Smith's] skin" (Doyle, 2005:114). When Smith and Lee came to Bellingham's room, they found him unconscious. However, the fact that the first thing that he did when he came to was to glance at the mummy and then swiftly hide the roll of papyrus, suggested that he managed to bring the mummy back to life: "there was a suggestion of energy about the horrid thing which made Smith's gorge rise…He gave the impression of a man who has gone through an ordeal, the marks of which he still bears upon him, but which has helped him to his end." (Doyle, 2005:117). Another example suggesting the appearance of the supernatural occurred when Bellingham was in Smith's room and they could hear footsteps coming upstairs from Bellingham's room, which is why "Bellingham sprang up and stood helpless for a moment, with the expression of a man who is half incredulous and half afraid" (Doyle, 2005:121). After the attacks on Norton and Lee, the popular opinion amongst the students was that an ape had escaped the zoo, and was now attacking people at College. Just before the attack on Lee, Smith was going out to see his friend Doctor Peterson. On his way down, he stopped by Bellingham's room, and he saw that the mummy was not in its sarcophagus. He continued his way to the exit down the spiral stairs when something passed by him in the darkness. He went back to Bellingham's room, and he could that the mummy was in its case again:

> The door, which he had closed behind him, was now open, and right in front of him, with the lamp-light shining upon it, was the mummy case. Three minutes ago it had been empty. He could swear to that. Now it framed the lank body of its horrible occupant, who stood, grim and stark, with his black shrivelled face towards the door. The form was lifeless and inert, but it seemed to Smith as he gazed that there still lingered a lurid spark of vitality, some faint sign of consciousness

in the little eyes which lurked in the depths of the hollow sockets." (Doyle, 2005:129)

At the end of the story, Abercrombie Smith forced Bellingham, by pointing a gun at him, to destroy the mummy and the roll of papyrus that Bellingham used to control the mummy: "Bellingham left the university immediately afterwards, and was last heard of in the Soudan" (Doyle, 2005:140). By doing that, Abercrombie Smith stood up against Bellingham's agency over supernatural and ended his role of a passive recipient of the supernatural power.

4. Examining the representation of agency and the supernatural in "Dionea" and "Lot No. 249"

4.1.Symbols

Vernon Lee's "Dionea" and Arthur Conan Doyle's "Lot No. 249" are late Victorian Gothic tales which depict the occurrence of the supernatural that disrupts people's everyday life. Both stories are full of symbols that are crucial for understanding the narration.

The symbolism in "Dionea" is obvious from the recurring images of Dionea with pigeons that affirm the portrayal of Dionea as a goddess. In particular, Dionea's connection with pigeons resembles the way Greek goddess Aphrodite used to be portrayed with doves, the most important symbols of Aphrodite's divinity (West, 2000:137). The first situation that demonstrated Dionea's connection with pigeons is depicted at the very beginning of the story when she was a young girl in the convent:

> The number of pigeons she collects about her is quite amazing; you would never have thought that San Massimo or the neighbouring hills contained as many. They futter down like snowflakes, and strut and swell themselves out, and furl and unfurl their tails, and peek with little sharp movements of their silly, sensual heads and a little throb and gurgle in their throats, while Dionea lies stretched out full length in the sun, putting out her lips, which they come to kiss, and uttering strange, cooing sounds; or hopping about, fapping her arms slowly like wings, and raising her little head with much the same odd gesture as they. (Lee, 2005:7)

Throughout the story, Dionea is also constantly associated with myrtle bushes; she made myrtle bushes, under which she loved lying while in the convent, flourish and grow bigger than ever before, and later, when she grew up, she had a myrtle bush in front of her little house on the beach. As stated by Deas (1898:200): "the myrtle for the Romans, as for the Greeks, was before all an erotic plant, dedicated to Venus and to Hymen, god of marriage, and it is emblematic of pure

love and of fertility". The name of the protagonist - Dionea in Greek stands for 'divine queen'; moreover, "In myth, Dione bore Zeus a daughter, Aphrodite. Associations are to Mother Earth, to female sexuality, to the feminine powers of seduction and reproduction… To the Greeks, Dione and Aphrodite were considered to have foreign, Oriental origins: they were dangerous, impure figures in the pantheon of gods." (Luckhurst, 2005:266).

The association of Dionea with Venus, Dione, and Aphrodite contributes to her mysterious appearance: "the identity of Dionea with Venus, once made plain, would diminish the power of the story" (Maxwell, Pulham, 2006:32). Dionea never hid her origin in that she said multiple times in the story that she wants to go back to the sea. However, even at the end of the story when she is seen on a Greek ship, the reader cannot determine which goddess' Dionea ultimately embodies. Lee chooses that detail to remain unclear because, as she states herself: "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" (1881, 94). In other words, if Dionea's origin were made clear, if she were the obvious embodiment of the mythological Venus, Aphrodite, or Dione, her appearance as mysterious goddess and, ultimately, as a *ghost*, would disappear, which would consequently lead to limitation of the reader's imagination. However, what is more important is what these goddesses and implicitly Dionea come to represent in the story. Because they stand for sexuality and sensualism, their association with Dionea brings the story's depiction of the protagonist in dialogue with decadence, since "late Victorian decadence refers to poetry and prose which does not emphasize philosophical, historical, or intellectual concerns, but which does emphasize the value to be gained both from experience of all sorts and from indulgence in a life of sensation." (Goldfarb, 1962: 373)

On the other hand, the *ghost* in "Lot No. 249" has a very clear origin. Doyle chose a

mummy to embody the supernatural forces. He was inspired by the great discovery of sarcophaguses of thirteen pharaohs in late ninetieth century, however, he left his mummy nameless. In his "Lot No. 249" the mummy is described as a fast, tall, and dangerous male with supernatural strength, which, according to Deane represents: "the first steps of the mummy story's after migration into the precincts of pure horror" (1870–1914:193).

The holder of the supernatural power of the story Edward Bellingham is particularly interested in Oriental culture: "he just prattled to the Arabs as if he had been born and nursed and weaned among them. He talked Coptic to the Copts, and Hebrew to the Jews, and Arabic to the Bedouins, and they were all ready to kiss the hem of his frock-coat." (Doyle, 2005:111). The continuous depiction of Bellingham's obsession with eastern relicts and the comments such as: "to feel that one can command powers of good and of evil—a ministering angel or a demon of vengeance" (Doyle, 2005:119) slowly reveals the direction in which the story was heading. Doyle uses the Oriental symbols to create a setting for his *ghost* to come to life. Bellingham's room, the place of supernatural appearance, is described as more a museum than a room:

> Walls and ceiling were thickly covered with a thousand strange relics from Egypt and the East. Tall, angular figures bearing burdens or weapons stalked in an uncouth frieze round the apartments. Above were bull-headed, stork-headed, cat-headed, owl-headed statues, with viper-crowned, almond-eyed monarchs, and strange, beetle-like deities cut out of the blue Egyptian lapis lazuli. Horus and Isis and Osiris* peeped down from every niche and shelf, while across the ceiling a true son of Old Nile, a great, hanging-jawed crocodile, was slung in a double noose. (Doyle, 2005:114)

According to Edward Said, Orientalism: "can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing

views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (1979:3). In the "Lot No. 249" the supernatural power of the ancient Egyptian tradition is represented by the mummy: "not human… two arms, which, he says, were as strong and as thin as steel bands… something from behind picked me up like a feather and hurled me in… this horror was bounding like a tiger at his heels, with blazing eyes and one stringy arm out-thrown…" (Doyle, 2005:123,130,133) However, this same powerful being is defeated by the representative of English masculinity, the model type of manliness – Abercrombie Smith: "he was a man who, if he had no brilliant talent, was yet so dogged, so patient, and so strong that he might in the end overtop a more showy genius" (Doyle, 2005:113). As Luckhurst (2005: xxvii) concludes, "the mummy nevertheless suggests another area where the Gothic tropes of revenge, inheritance, and the consequences of possession were reanimated by the particular imperial context of the late Victorian era." It is the result of the change in England's relation to Egypt in 1882 when the British military occupied Egypt in order to control the trafficking through Suez Canal (Lockhurst, 2005:xxvii).

The Egyptian question refers to the relation between Britain and Egypt after the construction of the Suez Canal. At the time when Doyle's "Lot No. 249" was published, it seemed that the political situation in Egypt was stable under the General Consulship of Lord Cromer (1883 – 1907), but constant debates on the Egyptian Question in the Parliament and the newspaper articles revealed that in fact it was far from peace (Bulfin, 2011:413). The antagonist of "Lot No. 249" Edward Bellingham wanted to use the supernatural power to declare a reign of terror amongst students at the Old College. According to Bulfin (2011:413): "Given this geopolitical contextual framework, these narratives of ancient Egyptian curses can be read as symbolic of both the powerful desire for full control of the Suez Canal, and the corollary dread of losing access to it".

The interest in the unknown oriental traditions, awakened by the colonisation of the Orient, was a powerful influence on gothic literature, leading to the development of the Imperial Gothic. As stated by Alder (2016:1), the narrative of Imperial Gothic texts is characterised by "celebrating imperialism and masculinity in colonial adventures, while also expressing fears of foreign threats and a fascination with the exotic and the occult often used for horror". Doyle's "Lot No. 249" fits the genre of Imperial Gothic in that it demonstrates the possibly fatal consequences of dealing with the mythical symbols of Egyptian culture. At the same time, it depicts the supernatural ancient-Egyptian forces being defeated by the courageous strength of an English student– Abercrombie Smith.

4.2.The Supernatural

In Vernon Lee's "Dionea" the main character Dionea is depicted as an embodiment of a goddess who, thanks to her agency and supernatural powers, decides the fates of the villagers. At the very beginning of the story, the author subtly announces her personality: "overwhelming men's lives in sudden darkness" (Lee, 2005:3). Eventually, Dionea demands from Waldemar, a sculptor who fell under her influence, to sacrifice his wife to her: "We found her [Waldemar's wife] lying across the altar, her pale hair among the ashes of the incense, her blood—she had but little to give, poor white ghost!" (Lee, 2005:26) Catherine Maxwell in her article "From Dionysus to 'Dionea': Vernon Lee's portraits" describes Lee's ghosts as "the transcendent force of female power" (1997:265). She then claims that: "'Dionea' can be read as Lee's revision of the fatal woman motif, as an assertion of a specifically female form of Sublimity." (1997:265) Even though the villagers

did not want to talk about the events occurred in Dionea's presence, "the reported sightings of the singing Dionea in her boat with the painted eyes, are the remains or traces of that libidinal, pagan past that periodically make themselves visible on the consciousness of Lee's protagonists" (Thomas, 2010:272).

On the other hand, in Arthur Conan Doyle's "Lot No.249" agency over the supernatural powers is in the hands of a man who, with his interest in studying the Egyptian culture, managed to revive and control a mummy to his own benefit. With the British unofficial occupation of Egypt, which was necessary for the protection of Suez Canal – the route to colonized India, emerged: "a subgenre of Egyptian-themed gothic fiction…within which concerns over the Egyptian situation tended to find fictional expression in the form of the supernatural invader" (Bulfin, 2011:412). Edward Bellingham is an Englishman, but his exploration of Egypt's territory and broad knowledge of the Egyptian culture and languages enabled him to appropriate and to get accepted among the natives: "Bellingham seemed to take it as his right, too, and strutted about among them [old hermit Johnnies… who sit on rocks and scowl and spit at the casual stranger] and talked down to them like a Dutch uncle." (Doyle, 2005:111) Bellingham uses his knowledge to get rid of the students that stood in his way: "…it is tempting to read his Egyptian acculturation as the driver of it, a view supported by the ethnic characterisation of his criminality…" (Bulfin, 2011:431). However, even though Bellingham brought back a mummy "to invade Britain itself" (Alder, 2016:2), his plan was stopped by Abercrombie Smith, 'proper Englishman', whose threat: "You'll find that your filthy Egyptian tricks won't answer in England" (Doyle, 2005:132) resolves story and re-establishes the English supremacy over the Oriental. As Said claims: "…European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self." (1979:3)

Thus, the main differences between Lee's "Dionea" and Doyle's "Lot No. 249" is in the holder of the supernatural forces. In "Dionea" the agency over the supernatural belongs to a human manifestation of a pagan goddess, which makes her appearance in the story supernatural as well, while in "Lot No. 249" a student Edward Bellingham controls the supernatural events in the story.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, both "Dionea by Vernon Lee and "Lot No. 249" by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle belong to the "second wave" of Victorian Gothic stories (Lockhurst, 2005:ix) known as 'Late Victorian Gothic Revival'. Being short in form, the Gothic stories were ideal for the new type of publication – periodical publication, i.e., magazines.

"Dionea" and "Lot No. 249" depict the disturbance of everyday life caused by the appearance of the supernatural. Lee's protagonist Dionea caused the love pandemic among the villagers of Montemirto, which, ultimately, ended up with deaths of Waldemar and his wife. In Doyle's "Lot No. 249" Edward Bellingham brings mummy to life in order to cause fear and establish supremacy over other students at the fictional Old College of Oxford.

Vernon Lee in her famous statement regarding the creation of the story around the supernatural declares that the Past is the best source of symbols and characteristics of the supernatural: "That is the thing—the Past, the more or less remote past, of which the prose is clean obliterated by distance—that is the place to get our ghosts from." (2017:10) Her protagonist Dionea is the embodiment of Venus, Aphrodite, and Dione which relates her to the Greek and Roman mythology but at the same time distances her from them as unique:

> Her jaunty, but knowing, acts of sacrilege, her absence of what De Rosis call 'natural piety' (behaviour that conforms to a recognizably feminine type), her possible seduction of Father Domenico, and the elopement of Sister Giuliana with a sailor-boy from the port are all evidence of Dionea's systematic overthrow of the new religion. (Thomas, 2010:266)

Dionea is connected to Aphrodite, the goddess of love, in that she makes the villagers of Montemirto madly fall in love with each other, while, at the same time, she brings misfortunes like

Venus, the dangerous, 'impure' figure from the Pantheon of Greek Gods: "Lee's stories all concern a very material past coming to possess the present, forcing victims into compulsive repetitions and very strange trans-historical and trans-gendered identifications." (Lockhurst, 2005:xxii)

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's "Lot No. 249" is just one of the many Gothic stories that chooses a mummy as the embodiment of the supernatural. The British colonisation of Egypt caused the widespread interest in Egyptian history from which inevitably arose the appearance of a mummy. The mummy in "Lot No. 249" is described as "a horrid, black, withered thing, like a charred head on a gnarled bush, was lying half out of the case, with its clawlike hand and bony forearm resting upon the table" (Doyle, 2005:115). Doyle's mummy does not have a name and there is no evidence of its true origin: "'I don't know his name,' said Bellingham, passing his hand over the shrivelled head. 'You see the outer sarcophagus with the inscriptions is missing. Lot 249 is all the title he has now. You see it printed on his case. That was his number in the auction at which I picked him up.'" (Doyle, 2005:118)

"Dionea" and "Lot No. 249" are characterized by the appearance of supernatural, but the agency over it differentiates in the two stories. In "Dionea" the supernatural events are controlled by a mysterious goddess-like figure, who seems to use it for her own amusement as well as for the promotion of sensual love, while in the "Lot No. 249" the supernatural powers are in hands of a man who only uses it to take revenge on his acquaintances. In addition, "Dionea" ends with the triumph of the goddess over villagers of Montemirto, while in "Lot No. 249" the evil attempt of the holder of the supernatural powers is stopped and his source of power is destroyed.

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