

Portrayal of Addiction and its Psychological effects in Sheridan Le Fanu's "Green Tea"

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Abstract

This paper aims to show that Sheridan Le Fanu's short story "Green Tea" is a portrayal of addiction and its issues. The paper begins by discussing the Victorian attitude to mental health in general and addiction in particular, finding that it was lacklustre in both cases. The paper then analyzes Le Fanu's "Green Tea", arguing that the author portrayed addiction and its effects in a sensitive manner, contrary to dominant Victorian ideas. To do so, the paper argues that Jennings' afflictions are psychological in nature, that the supernatural monkey was a result of hallucinations borne out of substance-abuse related disorders such as HPPD. It also unpacks the symbolism of green tea and points out at Le Fanu's understanding of the nature of addictiveness of any substance. Finally, the paper also focusses on certain textual lines that are concrete proof of the author's deliberate portrayal of addiction and related issues. The paper concludes by finding Le Fanu's discourse of addiction to be sensitive and humane – unlike Victorian moralistic condemnations of it – and many of his ideas to be foreshadowing developments in psychology and psychoanalysis of the twentieth century.

Keywords: Gothic, addiction, mental health, Victorian, psychology

Introduction

It is possible to posit that the corpus of Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873) is, in recent times, enjoying a critical re-evaluation. The heart of this new critical discussion is his brilliant novella *Carmilla* (1872). Indeed, *Carmilla* can be argued to be his most complex work – not

only because it features one of the earliest vampires in the English Gothic novel (eight years before *Dracula*) – but since it also interweaves a number of subtextual ideas into a complete whole that invites critical interpretation from a number of angles. The reason why Le Fanu was able to foreground such layered subtext is because he acknowledged the psycho-social (or socio-psychological) role of literature. In other words, much like M.R. James, Le Fanu wanted to communicate a message to society, through horror literature. The same can also be argued for his expertly written short stories. However, out of all his shorter texts, it his 1869 short story “Green Tea” that bears its most prominent proof.

This paper aims to show that Le Fanu has portrayed addiction and explored its issues in “Green Tea”. The paper first dives into the Victorian attitude regarding addiction and mental health and explores its negative perception. It then critically evaluates the text, pointing out the portrayals of addiction and its related issues, using our contemporary knowledge of addictive disorders. This is done based on the rationale that ignorance about the existence of a disorder does not mean erasure of suffering, that is, the Victorians suffered from addictive disorders even though they may not have named them so. To achieve this, the paper focuses on, among other factors, the image of monkey in the text, and argues it to be a psychological hallucination of Jennings, caused by his addiction to green tea. At the same time, the paper also highlights Le Fanu’s discourse on substance-abuse – through the diagnosis offered by Hesselius – which contradicts the negative moralistic stance of Victorian society.

Sheridan Le Fanu can be considered to be one of the most important English language Gothic writers of the nineteenth century, although not greatly appraised by his contemporary readers. His works embodied the kernels that would later be developed in full by post-Victorian horror authors. *Carmilla*, as discussed above, is a good example, and similarly “Madame Crowl’s Ghost” (1871) can also be cited in this regard. “Green Tea” is also such a pioneering text because it grounds the psychology as the subject of horror literature. This is not to say that

Gothicism had hitherto ignored discourses on the unconscious but that Le Fanu adds to that discourse by uniting psychological with the social. In effect, thus, “Green Tea” is psycho-social. This enables Le Fanu to engage with the issue of addiction and explore it without moral biases of Victorian society. Thus, his portrayal of the issue is humane and this sensitive portrayal is the subject of this paper.

Addiction and the Victorian Era:

It should not come as a surprise to anybody that mental health was not given prominence in the Victorian period. However, paradoxically, this was also the era when the first public asylums opened; and first laws regarding neurodivergence, or at least what was labelled as neurodivergence, were instituted (Stevens 10). However, state-sponsored asylums did not mean that there was any deeper understanding of mental issues. A whole range of mental disorders were simply classified under the label “nervous condition” and the actual psychoanalytical reasons were not clearly understood. When it came to women patients, mental health aid often was a way to assert control over them (Boyle).

Therefore, if mental health was not appropriately perceived, addiction – a complex mental state – was even more shrouded in ambiguity. Again, the Victorian paradox regarding mental health can be seen here. According to Berridge, addiction was not seen as an important issue but certain “attitudes” were already emerging (437) and that organizations of doctors were advocating regulations in intake of addictive substances like opium (452-454). However, she also notes that these developments did not affect people substantially, and that the issue of addiction found but only a little space in the public discourse (460-461). This Victorian attitude towards addiction must be kept in mind when exploring its portrayal in “Green Tea”.

Addiction in “Green Tea”:

Using our understanding of Victorian view of addiction, we are now in a position to interpret Le Fanu’s “Green Tea”. Undoubtedly, the author has explored addiction and its related

psychological issues in this story. Jennings is not afflicted by a spiritual entity but is suffering the effects of addiction. The being that he sees – a black monkey with red eyes – is nothing but a hallucination caused by prolonged substance abuse. According to *DSM-5*, substance-induced disorders can result in delirium, sleep disorders and neurocognitive issues (481). Moreover, *DSM-5* also notes that substance-induced disorders can too, sometimes, result in “hallucinogen persisting perception disorder” or HPPD (489) which is a prolonged state of perception related issues and hallucinations (530) where patients see “geometric hallucinations, false perception of movement in the peripheral visual fields, splashes of color [...] trails of images of moving objects [...] perception of entire objects, positive afterimages” (531). Thus, it is entirely possible to argue that Jennings was suffering from addiction related issues and maybe even from HPPD. Of course, these terms and diagnoses were still undiscovered in the Victorian age, however, that does not mean the disorders were absent. People suffered from substance-induced hallucinations but lacked appropriate linguistic or technical expressions. The events portrayed in “Green Tea” certainly point to this aspect. It is the sharp observational and artistic capabilities of Le Fanu that enabled him to recognize the issue, although he, living in nineteenth-century, similarly lacked the psychiatric knowledge. Nonetheless, he wrote “Green Tea” to address the issue to the best of Victorian era’s abilities.

Furthermore, the fact that Jennings was hallucinating can also be backed up with anthropological evidence. In the brilliant paper on culture and hallucination, Luhrmann argues that “spiritual training may make sensory overrides more likely” (79) and provides examples of religious people experiencing auditory hallucinations (77). Jennings too is a clergyman and he also reports hearing the monkey speak to him. It is the monkey that asks Jennings to commit “crimes, to injure others, or myself” (Le Fanu 118) which is consistent with Luhrmann’s findings that psychotic patients in the West feel as if “some external force has placed thoughts

in one's mind or taken them out" (79). Lastly, we shall also examine the imagery of the monkey itself. The use of this specific animal – monkey – is a deliberate choice on the part of Le Fanu. Darwinian theory of evolution had a massive impact on Victorian sensibility. It "intensified the process of doubt that came to characterise the Victorian century" (Choudhury 219). There was massive debate regarding the veracity of Darwin's notions but the notions themselves were known to, if not all, the educated sections of society, of which Le Fanu was a part. Thus, the author's choice of the monkey has Darwinian subtext. Much like how a monkey might be taken to represent the past human, Jennings' monkey can also be seen as a symbol for the ideas that we repressed in our unconsciousness during the course of our psychosexual development. We are, of course, speaking in terms of Freudian uncanny¹. If the notion of uncanny is to suddenly come face to face with the ideas one repressed as a child, then we can see those ideas to be an old – indeed past – form of our psyche. Thus, the monkey image here is nothing but the Darwinian rendering of a Freudian idea. Hence, this image again connects the text with its psychological ideas, enabling Le Fanu to remind us that the text is not about supernaturalism but about the psychological distress a person with addiction experiences. Therefore, for all these reasons, it will not be incorrect to argue that Le Fanu has portrayed the character of Jennings as a patient suffering from addiction and its related issues.

However, a question must be posed here – if indeed we agree that Le Fanu has portrayed Jennings as a man suffering from substance-induced disorders, then what is the substance in question? In other words, what is the source of his addiction? The answer lies in the title of the story itself – green tea. As Jennings himself admits "Tea was my companion [...] I drank a great deal, and increased its strength as I went on [...] I began to take a little green tea. I found the effect pleasanter [...] it became a habit with me to sip my tea – green tea – every now and then..." (Le Fanu 109-110). Perhaps this answer seems ridiculous for it is well known that green tea

has no addictive substance in it. Although Dalrymple cites a “National Institute of Health website” that argues taking eight to ten cups of green tea might cause delirium (957), we need to understand that addiction does not always rely on the addictiveness of a substance to work on our minds. Shows like TLC’s *My Strange Addiction*, despite the cruel and very insensitive portrayal of people suffering from addiction, does point out that it is fundamentally human to be able to develop an addiction to any substance, whether or not the substance has addictive properties. Certainly, even the so called “good habits” of contemporary bourgeois culture – working-out and fitness, for example – can also turn out to be addictions (consider the idea of a ‘gym rat’, for example). The ‘substance’ in this case is not an object but an act – exercise – that does not contain inherently addictive properties. Thus, it should not be too surprising that one can also easily be addicted to green tea. On the other hand, it is unlikely that Le Fanu here is specifically talking about green tea. Rather, green tea is to be seen as a symbol representing addictive substances in general. The use of green tea is a brilliant choice by the author. By using a typically non-addictive substance, Le Fanu is able to ignite the critical view of the reader and invite them to focus more on the psychological aspects of the tale. This is because if Le Fanu had portrayed a substance commonly understood to be addictive – such as opium – his contemporary (Victorian) readers, under influence of social prejudices, would have easily resorted back to dominant views of addiction which were, during this age, overwhelmingly negative. It would have defeated the purpose of the story, taking the readers away from the subtext. The portrayal of green tea resists this tendency. Moreover it also points out the truth that a substance need not be constituted of addictive materials for one to be addicted by it.

Finally, to declare green tea as the substance of abuse for Jennings we must negate two more possible causes – his research on paganism and reading of Swedenborg. It might be argued that Jennings’ affliction is after all supernatural and emerges from his research on

paganism. However, Le Fanu has given us only one single reference to paganism. It is almost presented as a reference in passing and it will not be correct to argue that this minor reference has major effects on the entire plot of the story. In the same vein, we must also reject the affliction's origins in Swedenborg. We must note that Jennings read Swedenborg's texts *after* he starts to see the monkey and not before it, and thus it cannot be the source. All we can say about Swedenborg is that the texts might have aggravated Jennings hallucinations (Burwick 75) but could not have caused it. Thus, it is safe to say that Le Fanu, in the story, has used green tea as a symbol to generally represent any substance leading to addiction.

Reading the Lines:

The fact that "Green Tea" explores the psychological issues resulting out of addiction, is also directly hinted by Le Fanu. He has used certain lines that openly reveal the psychological aspects of the story. For example, when Martha informs Lady Mary that her uncle (Jennings) was feeling "low and nervous" (Le Fanu 107), Mary thinks of it as nothing special. However, Dr. Hesselius takes it seriously and writes "...low and nervous. In those words, of which healthy people think so light, what a world of suffering is sometimes hidden!" (Le Fanu 107). This is a clear indication that the subtext of "Green Tea" is overwhelmingly psychological. "Low and nervous" is how a patient – who is not aware of mental health discourse but feels psychological distress – would explain their problem. Even in our own contemporary times, people who are not so educated on ways of the mind complain of issues like Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) or depression as "feeling nervous", "feeling tense" or "feeling low". In the Victorian era – where the linguistic expression and technical knowledge of mental health was scant – a patient would obviously define their condition as feeling "low and nervous" even though they might be experiencing intense psychological distress, "a world of suffering" (Le Fanu 107). Thus, this line is indicative of the story's psychological subtext. Similarly, in the tenth chapter, Hesselius advises Jennings that "he must regard his illness strictly as one depended on physical,

though *subtle* physical, causes” (Le Fanu 118). The phrase “subtle physical” is indicative of the psychological nature of Jennings affliction, since opposed to fully physical ailments – which are more or less visible – psychological suffering is hidden deep within the sufferer. It can only be gauged by the actions, behaviours or the language of the patient. Thus, it is “subtle physical” (Le Fanu 118) – it is inside the patient’s psychology but it is one hundred percent real and painful, and in most cases even more painful than physical ailments.

Finally, it must not elude our attention that the concluding chapter of the story is titled “A Word for Those Who Suffer”. Here, the sufferers are no others but those suffering from addiction. It is further exemplified by the fact this chapter contains Dr. Hesselius’ diagnosis which redirect the readers’ attention towards a medical or at least a proto-medical explanation of the clergyman’s experience. Thus, the heading of this concluding chapter also, much like the other quoted examples above, directly indicate that Le Fanu has explored psychological aspects of addiction in “Green Tea”.

The Doctor and the Diagnosis:

“Green Tea” is structured as an edited publication of a record found among the “voluminous notes of cases” (Le Fanu 97) that Dr. Martin Hesselius made during his travels in England. In other words, this is a medical case study. This is a deliberate choice on the part of the author. According to Burwick, since the rise of “aberrational psychology” Gothic novels have featured doctors as characters (73). Le Fanu also conforms to this trope and by making Hesselius the chief narrator, he aims to draw the readers’ attention to the medical-psychological aspects of the tale. This is further true because “authors of the Gothic tales were aware of contemporary accounts of debility and derangement” (Burwick 77) and thus could incorporate such awareness into their stories. Use of a doctor-narrator also enables Le Fanu to direct the readers’ focus on the medical (rather than the supernatural) aspects of the story. Moreover,

although Dr. Hesselius is declared to be a “medical philosopher” (Le Fanu 98), he strives to be scientific in his diagnosis². Thus, Dalrymple calls Hasselius’ method “agnostic multifactorialism” (957) because it is open to investigating multiple reasons for Jennings’ affliction, and is not committed to a spiritual pre-conclusion. This allows for Le Fanu’s psychological subtext to flourish.

The diagnosis Hasselius provides is also important in this regard. It is similarly not an occult discourse, rather, it tries to scientifically analyze Jennings’ disorder.

He begins firstly by grounding a psychological understanding of the brain “...my tract on The Cardinal Functions of the Brain [...] I there [...] prove [...] a circulation arterial and venous in its mechanism, through the nerves. Of this system [...] the brain is the heart” (Le Fanu 123). In other words, this is analogous to our present day scientific conceptions of the nervous system. However, then Le Fanu enters uncharted territory. Hesselius is now made to speculate on the idea of brain fluid. Here we see the brilliance of Le Fanu. As the doctor explains, fluids pass through the nerves and this fluid is “spiritual, though not immaterial, any more than [...] light or electricity” (Le Fanu 123). This is nothing but a symbolic representation of neurochemistry. Today, we know that bodily chemicals like serotonin or cortisol can alter our moods³ and Le Fanu too is pointing out the same idea, albeit in a less scientifically-advanced form. The latter half of Hesselius’ argument is even more important – that the fluid is not immaterial and much like electricity or light – for it firmly takes away the diagnosis from the world of the supernatural to the realm of the scientific.

Next, he presents to us a medical answer to the clergyman’s disorder. He argues that “By various abuses, among which the habitual use of such agents as green tea is one” (Le Fanu 123) the fluid’s quality might change and it might be produced in a higher rate than usual (Le Fanu 123). Present day readers, in the age of our attention economy, can readily realize that this is an early idea of the concept of dopamine. When we participate in a pleasurable activity

or consume something we like, our brain produces pleasure-inducing neurochemicals (like dopamine), making us feel temporarily happy. However, the overproduction of dopamine can lead to problems. Le Fanu, thus, shows here that habitually indulging in pleasant-inducing substances – symbolically green tea – can lead to an addiction like state. Again, this part of the diagnosis also clearly hints that Jennings’ disorder is not of an occult nature but a result of substance-abuse. Victorian era had developed initial ideas about neurochemistry and so Le Fanu’s implementation of it turns our attention, yet again, to the medical and psychological aspects of the text.

This does not mean that all of Hesselius’ diagnosis is scientific in nature. His argument that consolidation of brain fluid allows “a surface unduly exposed, on which disembodied spirits may operate” (Le Fanu 123) does not have any basis in science. However, we must note that this discrepancy is due to on the part of the doctor being a medical philosopher, and on the part of Le Fanu being limited by Victorian epistemology. However, through Dr. Hesselius’ diagnosis, the author anticipates many ideas that would go on to be explored in psychoanalysis and psychiatry of the coming century, which also is a testament to Le Fanu’s superb literary ability.

Conclusion

Thus, we have ample reasons to conclude that in “Green Tea”, Le Fanu has explored addiction and its related psychological issues. The portrayal of the “occult” monkey, the symbolic representation of green tea, the way certain lines are phrased as well as the final diagnosis, all point to the same conclusion. Moreover, Le Fanu also argues that addiction is curable. Dr. Hesselius concludes his diagnosis by stating that a patient suffering from Jennings’ disorder (i.e. addiction) can be fully cured if the sufferer does not take steps to aggravate or surrender to the ailment – “If the patient do not array himself on the side of the disease, his cure is certain” (Le Fanu 124). Hence, he asks the victims to not give up on themselves, not

abandon hope but seek professional help. All of these are sharply against, firstly, the insensitive Victorian moral ideas of addiction (Berridge 456), and secondly, the turn of century eugenic ideas of substance-abuse (Berridge 457-458). Le Fanu's idea of addiction is thus humane and sensitive. He contradicts Victorian otherization and argues for a medical, psychological, and indeed, human understanding of addiction. Doing so, he also foresees many advanced ideas in psychology that were to be discovered and discussed in the twentieth century. How was he able to anticipate them? Perhaps what Marquez recorded Neruda saying in *Strange Pilgrims* gives us an answer – ““Only poetry is clairvoyant”” (68).

Endnotes:

1. Uncanny, because to argue that Jennings' monkey is not an uncanny being or that Jennings does not feel uncanny in present of the monkey would both be incorrect.
2. “Philosophy” here is used in the sense of “metaphysics” and not in reference to the other rational branches of this great human discipline. Neither does it mean philosophising about medicine or any early form of Medical Humanities.
3. These chemicals can alter our mood but what *life events* result in their production is outside the purview of neurochemistry and in the realms of the arts, psychoanalysis, and philosophy. Neurochemistry can show that serotonin makes us happy, but it cannot explain why the same event experienced by two persons results in production of serotonin in Person A but cortisol in person B.

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