

## FEMALE MONSTROSITY AND MADNESS IN SELMA LAGERLÖF'S "THE GHOST HAND"

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In the 1870s and 80s Swedish literature, like the rest of Scandinavian literature, was dominated by critical realism, a tendency inspired by the lectures of the influential Danish critic Georg Brandes, starting in 1871, where he proclaimed as the main task of literature to discuss the problems of modern society. But by the end of the 1880s, the critical realism and its aesthetics of discontent were more or less played out in Sweden. It was contemptuously called dull-weather literature, and in 1890 two authors representing a new generation, Verner von Heidenstam and Oscar Levertin, published a manifesto called *Renaissance* in which they proclaimed the catchwords for the new literature: fantasy, poetic expression, feelings, colour, and joie de vivre. Selma Lagerlöf was another author that became a representative of the new generation, and her debut novel *Gösta Berlings saga*, published in 1891, was the first work that matched these demands. But Lagerlöf can also be regarded as the principal Swedish representative of the gothic renaissance of the 1890s. *Gösta Berlings saga* contains a considerable number of gothic elements, such as Faustian pacts, antiheroes, demonic characters and fantastic events, and the gothic genre continued to be a strong influence all the way through her literary career. In Sweden, the gothic renaissance can be related to the shift from critical realism to a more fantasy oriented literature that emerged in the early 1890s, but also in general to the fin-de-siècle cultural climate with thoughts of decadence and degeneration, an increasing interest for psychology and for phenomena such as occultism, spiritualism and mesmerism.

This paper presents an analysis of Lagerlöf's gothic short story "The Ghost Hand" ("Spökhanden").<sup>1</sup> The story originally appeared in the 1898 Christmas edition of the Swedish magazine *Idun*, and was re-published posthumously in 1943 in *Från skilda tider I*.<sup>2</sup> The "Ghost Hand" is not one of Lagerlöf's better known pieces, and with the exception of a couple of brief commentaries it has not attracted the attention of the critics.<sup>3</sup> However, this unknown story is one of the most interesting examples of female gothic found in Swedish literature. In "The Ghost Hand," Lagerlöf deals with the social situation of the contemporary woman, and when reading it with the concept of female gothic in mind new dimensions appear as it becomes related to other members of the female gothic family.<sup>4</sup> One particularly illustrative parallel can be drawn between "The Ghost Hand" and a short story published in 1892 by the American author Charlotte Perkins Gilman, "The Yellow Wallpaper". In both stories the woman who challenges the dominant order is condemned to madness, and both Gilman and Lagerlöf add a frightening dimension to the relationship between man and woman by depicting the male protagonist not only as fiancé or husband, but also as a doctor. By doing this, they fortify his position as a powerful patriarchal authority, while also making him a representative of the scientific discourse. This reference to "The Yellow Wallpaper" does not implicate that Lagerlöf was influenced by Gilman's story. It only points to the fact that two female authors of the same period, independent of each other, express a similar conflict in a similar way. They use the gothic, the supernatural

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<sup>1</sup> The English translation of the quotes of this story is unauthorized and made by the author of this article.

<sup>2</sup> Quotes are from *Från skilda tider I*.

<sup>3</sup> Lagerroth (1963:134); Wivel (1990:165-168).

<sup>4</sup> Studies on female gothic, see for example Moers (1978), Gilbert & Gubar (1979), Sedgwick Kosofsky (1980), Ellis Ferguson (1989), DeLamotte (1990), Williams (1995).

and madness to criticize the patriarchal power, associated with science and the rational, trying to control women. But while “The Yellow Wallpaper” has been canonized by the feminist criticism in our days, and is considered one of the most important examples of female gothic, “The Ghost Hand” has yet to be discovered by the readers.<sup>5</sup>

“The Ghost Hand” tells the story about a young woman called Ellen, who since the death of her parents lives with her aunts. These spinsters (there are two of them) are nervous, superstitious and troublesome in general terms, and have nothing better to do, it seems, than to control and restrict the life of their young relative. To escape a slow suffocation in the unpleasant atmosphere of their house, Ellen asks them if she can leave to take a job, but they won’t let her. As a last resort she therefore accepts the proposal of the family doctor, although she doesn’t love him. Her worst nightmare is to repeat the miseries of the older generation of women and become like her aunts, and she fears that this will happen if she continues to live with them. Her argument for having a better life with a man that she doesn’t love is that, by comparison, she will have a certain amount of freedom as a married woman. The doctor at least leaves home for work, but her aunts never leave home, making her life a constant suffering with no time for herself.

The Gothic genre enters the text in the information to the reader that the house of the aunts is said to be haunted; there is a story about a ghost hand that appears in a certain room every time someone tells a lie. The story does not explain why, and neither do we know who the hand belongs to. The haunted room is the one Ellen chose for herself when she moved in with the aunts; unlike them she is not superstitious and so has nothing to fear. Jokingly, she tells the doctor about the ghost as she shows him around the house, apparently amused and even a little proud to

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<sup>5</sup> See for example Davison (2004:47-75); DeLamotte (1990:191ff.); Gilbert & Gubar (1979:89-92).

live in a room with such a mystery attached to it. But Ellen's attitude towards the supernatural changes as the hand really appears in the room, provoked by her false expressions of love for the doctor. Terrified by the ghost she calls for her fiancé in the middle of the night, returns the ring and reveals the truth: that she wanted to marry him only to get away from the tiresome spinsters. But she cannot love him, he is "too cold" (Lagerlöf 1943:206).

The story is complicated by being narrated almost exclusively from the doctor's point of view. He is a genuinely unsympathetic person, ruthless and calculating, which makes it easy to take sides with his fiancé. It begins *in medias res* when the doctor is being called to Ellen in the middle of the night. She is not well, and he is told that she has "seen something" (Lagerlöf 1943:200). The plot is enacted in the house of the aunts during this night, after the hand has appeared and Ellen, as a result, confronts her fiancé with the truth about her feelings. The story evolves around the meeting between the doctor and Ellen, in their conversation and in the thoughts of the doctor. It ends with the doctor using her fear and his authority to put the ring back on her finger. He manipulates her with faked emotions, telling her with tears in his eyes that he cares for her, and when she hesitates, he strikes:

"No nonsense", he said, when she tried to pull back her hand.  
 "But", she said. "I don't know, I don't dare -"  
 "I do", said the doctor. "I have never been that kind of a person who runs away from happiness." He went out in the hallway, found his coat and went back in again to get his cigar lighted.  
 "Poor thing", he said, taking a puff. "Bound to love me now, I assume. Otherwise, that hand will probably come and squeeze the life out of you" (Lagerlöf 1943:210).

The doctor thus uses his fiancée's supposed superstition to scare her back into their engagement. And the triumphant gesture of lighting a cigar, showing his masculine power, could hardly be more explicit.

An important characteristic of the tales of darkness, desire and power of the gothic genre is uncertainty, ambiguity and doubleness.<sup>6</sup> It is above all difficult to establish a limit between good and evil, natural and supernatural, dream and wakefulness, internal and external processes, or even between characters (the double being a frequent motif). "The Ghost Hand" could qualify as what Tzvetan Todorov calls a pure fantastic text, because it contains a hermeneutic ambivalence in relation to its supernatural element.<sup>7</sup> The reader hesitates whether the hand is supposed to be interpreted as really existing in the universe of the text, or if it is to be given a natural, psychological explanation. There is nothing in the text that can prove that the supernatural is only a psychological phenomenon. But this is how the doctor, the rational man of science and knowledge, interprets it. The doctor assumes that it is Ellen's bad conscience that makes her hallucinate, referring to the latest research in the field of psychiatry to support his interpretation. His fiancée belongs to a recently discovered refined race of humans with a more developed conscience than others, and her bad conscience combined with her (as he thinks) superstitiousness has provoked a hallucination in the shape of a ghost. As already mentioned, it is the point of view of the doctor that dominates the story almost entirely. But the only thing that he, as well as the reader, can base the interpretation of the supernatural on is Ellen's narration about what she has seen. The story about the encounter with the ghost is one of the few parts of the text where the point of view belongs to another character than the doctor, and certainly one of the most important parts, since consequently, the reader has access to the supernatural event only through the subjective perspective of a first-person narrator.

Ambiguity and doubleness can also be found on other levels in the "Ghost Hand". Its haunted room might at first appear to be

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<sup>6</sup> See for example Botting (2002:1-12).

<sup>7</sup> See Todorov (1975:44).

the direct opposite to a typical gothic environment, impossible to survey and control. A case in point is the archetypical castle with its darkness or twilight, shadows, winding stairs and seemingly endless corridors, dungeons, secret rooms or similar characteristics. But in "The Ghost Hand" Lagerlöf has depicted the gothic environment as an ordinary room in a perfectly ordinary house, located "in the middle of this actual, noisy reality" (Lagerlöf 1943:202). The room has white furniture and big mirrors and is intensely lightened up by all the lamps and candles that can be found in the house. The lighting has been brought there to help Ellen to get rid of her fear. There must be absolutely no shadows in the room, because the shadows terrify her and she must be able to see into every corner to be sure that the hand is not still there. But she is still terrified. Yet, with all the illumination, the haunted room in "The Ghost Hand" is thus, unlike a characteristically gothic environment, fully controllable and possible to survey. To Ellen, that is. To her fiancé, the dazzling white in the room has a very different effect, because when he opens the door it is "so bright, that he at first hardly could see a thing" (Lagerlöf 1943:202). He is dazzled and confused, because the white colour and the big mirrors combined with the glare make the room limitless to him, and it transforms into a gothic room, as uncontrollable and confusing as the darkness and intricate architecture of a gothic castle.

The doctor incarnates the realistic code of the text. By his profession, he represents natural science and reason; this is emphasized since he is never mentioned by name, but only appears as "the doctor". And, as indicated above, he explains the supernatural by referring to the latest scientific research. But when he enters the room, he starts to fantasize about the ghost as though it really existed, influenced by the atmosphere. A split becomes visible in the previously so solid character of the doctor, and he is for a moment no longer the man of reason, the rational scientist. This double or contradictory image of the doctor questions the authority of realism. Not even the

foremost representative of realism in the text can hold his position at all times.

The gothic can also be interpreted in terms of transgression, and when the doctor enters Ellen's haunted room this night he transgresses a limit, entering the unknowable (Botting 2002:6-13). As he crosses the doorstep, the limit between realism and fantasy is no longer clear, either to him or to the reader. But even more interesting is that our man of reason is confronted with another transgression as well in this room, not by himself but by his fiancée. She has passed a limit and is transformed into someone else, someone barely recognizable. To the doctor she looks like a ghost or a madwoman and he finds her new shape repelling and fearsome. The doctor has no problem rejecting his momentary fantasy of the supernatural, but the change in his fiancée is not that easy to deal with. She has transformed into something far scarier to him than any ghost: a woman who with her new insight might possibly try to emancipate herself.

As it turns out, the engagement is one of convenience not only to Ellen, but to the doctor as well. He wants to marry her not out of love, but because she has seemed to be that perfect angel of the house he needs:

Never in his life had he seen someone suiting him better. Not too good looking, but not ugly either, and no other relatives than the two aunts, and of course with a strict upbringing, used to stay at home, a good housekeeper, calm (Lagerlöf 1943:202).

There is a big difference between this calm, peaceful young woman that he knew from before and the new, wild and ghostlike character. This is what strikes him when he sees her now:

It was too bad about her beautiful bright eyes. They had always rested upon the one she spoke to with a peaceful beam, like sunshine. They were more brilliant now, perhaps. But they had

that kind of brilliance that he didn't wish for at all (Lagerlöf 1943:205).

What is it that this brilliant, but for the doctor undesirable look in the young woman's eyes represents? In "The Ghost Hand" the illumination of the room has a metaphorical relation to the emotional and intellectual enlightenment of the woman. When the hand appears, and all the lights and lamps are brought into the room, Ellen realizes her situation. On a personal, emotional level, this means that she realizes that she can't marry a man she doesn't love. On a more general, intellectual level, this also implies an awareness of the current situation of the woman in society. The horror that she feels when the hand appears is not only the fear of the supernatural, but also, and perhaps above all, the horror of her imprisonment in life. And this enlightenment, which also contains a potential threat to the doctor, a rebellion, is what the brilliance in her eyes expresses.

By the end of the nineteenth century, darkness and light was a recurrent pair of metaphors where darkness stood for degeneration, chaos, instinct, savagery, and the feminine; while light, by contrast, represented progress, order, reason, civilization, and the masculine. The content of this dichotomy encompasses all the ambitions of the period, but what is most important in this context is that it clearly illustrates the strong polarization between man and woman and its implications. The man was associated with culture, action and reason; the woman, with nature, care and emotions. The life of men where dynamic and turned outwards, the life of women where vegetative and turned inwards. His place was in society and in the working life; her place was the home. In "The Ghost Hand," the metaphor of light thus stresses the fact that the female protagonist represents a menace to the bourgeoisie ideology of sexual segregation. Ellen's change might possibly make her challenge this theory of the woman as being inferior and complementary to the man, and this is reflected in her eyes.



The gothic setting is often related to imprisonment, or even being buried alive. Thus, the ambiguous character of the gothic setting stands out: at the same time as it represents a claustrophobic place, imprisoning the character or burying him or her alive, it is a place without limits, it appears measureless and infinite (Leffler 2001:49). For Ellen, the room becomes claustrophobic when she realizes that she will end up in this marriage (buried alive). But for the doctor, who is against the woman's emancipation, the illumination of the room has a different meaning and he perceives it as limitless and uncontrollable. And his conception of the room fuses with his notion of this version of his fiancée: he cannot control her and he does not know how to grasp her changed character. He finds her ghostlike and half-mad, and that is a very different image from the one he had of her before this night.

One might also say that Ellen becomes a monster from the doctor's perspective. To him, she is repelling and scary, and without clear shape and form. And by definition a monster is a union of incompatible elements, such as human and animal, human and machine, living and dead, or, in this case, masculine and feminine. Further, a confrontation with a monster implicates a dissolution of limits. A physical attack by a monster can be regarded as the external representation of the threat that the monster poses to the identity of its victim, like in the case of the vampire, whose bite will transform the victim into the un-dead, dissolving the former identity of the victim. The same happens if the limit between the masculine and the feminine is dissolved. From the doctor's point of view the emancipation of the woman would involve the dissolution of the dichotomy masculine/feminine, since the emancipated woman can take on qualities or enter areas reserved for the man. The confrontation with Ellen in her enlightened state is therefore a threat to the identity of the doctor. And since the female threat in "The Ghost Hand" is related to the metaphor of light, the tendency of dissolution between masculine and feminine is made more distinct. Ellen becomes a hybrid, an in-

between form, threatening to invade the area of the masculine. The gothic is often described as exploring the cultural fears and anxieties of its time. One object of anxiety of the late nineteenth century was the new woman, striving for independence in a society dominated by patriarchy, and when Ellen reveals the potential to become emancipated, she is transformed into a fearful object to the patriarchal doctor.

As a solution to the problem the doctor diagnoses his fiancée with hysteria, that is the only way he can relate to the new shape of her character. "I have to think about her as a patient now, not as my future wife", he thinks to himself (Lagerlöf 1943:205). As a consequence, the relationship between man and woman in the text is now all of a sudden also the relationship between the doctor and his patient, and the importance of his profession is thereby emphasized even more. At the end of the nineteenth century, the modern doctor was born, one of the principal representatives of patriarchy. The development in medical science had fortified his position, and what used to be a more unpretentious and serving profession had become highly prestigious. The doctor was now a scientific expert, a great authority with a great deal of power. So, in addition to the power that the doctor in the short story has as a man, his profession makes him even more powerful.

The diagnosis of hysteria is very relevant to the interpretation of this story, something that becomes evident after a closer look into the history of this illness. It had a very conspicuous role at the last turn of the century, and especially between 1870 and the First World War, it was a very popular diagnosis for women. It was not considered possible for men to become hysterical. Through Charcot's famous clinic for hysterical patients at La Salpêtrière in Paris it received a most curious status. During the 1880s his lectures attracted people from all Europe, much due to a very spectacular method, using the influence of suggestion on his patients to make them simulate hysterical attacks. In general, hysteria was an illness

surrounded by myth. It was mystical and elusive and could be explained in various ways, neurologically, psychiatrically or even gynaecologically. The term itself originates from the greek *hystera*, uterus. Disorders of the womb or unsatisfied sexual desires had since antiquity been considered as causes for the illness, something that finally ended up in Freud's libido theory. At the last turn of the century the hysterical woman had become a feminine stereotype distinguished by the full expression of the feelings and enhancing all negative qualities in the female character. The symptoms were violent outbursts of feelings with a large and varying repertoire of gestures. Also, a showing off of the illness and an enormous sexual appetite were part of the picture. Hysteria was consequently associated with the female sex and female sexuality (Johannisson 1994:156ff.).

In "The Ghost Hand," we thus find the doctor, one of the authorities of the period, marking his fiancée with an illness considered to intensify all the negative qualities of the woman. Foucault has described the tendency to see the woman as hysterical as a repressive action by those who have the power, that is, patriarchy. But hysteria is not only associated with female subordination. It can also be regarded as a way for the woman to receive attention and take control over those closest to her. Many modern feminists have interpreted hysteria as an unconscious protest of bourgeois women against the oppression of the patriarchal society.<sup>8</sup> In the context of the last turn of the century, hysteria thus had a special meaning, related to the patriarchal control of the woman, and to the image of the woman as an object of fear. Ellen is yet another version of Gilbert and Gubar's madwoman, who represents female rebellion and has to be locked up by her husband.

The diagnosis of hysteria might also be associated with the fantastic element in Lagerlöf's text. The negative qualities that

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<sup>8</sup> See for example Gilbert & Gubar (1979), Bronfen (1998).

was supposed to be intensified by this illness, and that were regarded as typically feminine, were among others egotism, untruthfulness and capacity to dissemble (Johannisson 1994:157). This implies that if we accept the doctor's diagnosis we can interpret the supernatural experience not only as a hallucination, but even as a lie, made up by a scheming woman. On the other hand, hysteria could also be provoked by shock or trauma, which means that Ellen could be both hysterical and telling the truth. Nothing in the text actually supports the doctor's interpretation: that the apparition of the ghost hand is the hallucination of a superstitious and easily scared woman. Ellen is not described as superstitious at all; on the contrary she is described as a very calm and rational person. Consequently, none of the realistic explanations of the supernatural are completely irrefutable.

Like many of its relatives in the gothic genre, "The Ghost Hand" is a hybrid between psychological realism and ghost story, and in this case we might also add between the critical realism of the 1870s and 80s and the fantasy-oriented literature of the 1890s. The ambiguity and doubleness on all levels of the text is enhanced by this fantastic aspect. Depending on the point of view, the female character is victim or monster, the haunted room is claustrophobic or limitless, masculine and feminine identity become blurred for the character, and the fear of real life and the fear of the supernatural are intertwined. Nevertheless, the critical aspect of the text is a constant, dealing with the limited life of women at the last turn of the century in a society dominated by patriarchy.

As one danger that threatens the character in gothic fiction is to be locked up or buried alive, this can be regarded as representing the threat of the past to the young generation, which has to liberate itself from the older generation to be able to develop an identity of its own. The gothic environment is filled with the past, represented by such properties as ruins, old castles or family mansions, ghosts, etcetera, or by motifs like

inherited sins or curses, and this makes it suffocating and destructive to the young generation. This is particularly interesting in relation to the young woman of the late nineteenth century, who had to create a new identity in a new time. She risks becoming a victim, a mirror image of her female ancestors, repeating the tragic story of all married women forced by convention, or, as in Ellen's case, we can also talk about a mirror image of the old spinster, without place or function in society. Her identity suffers a double threat, both from patriarchy and from the older generation of women.

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