TYPES OF FEARS IN ROMANIAN HORROR SHORT STORIES

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to present the elements that create a horror story. I analyzed eight different short stories by Romanian authors. They depict many types of fear: of oblivion, of the unexpected, of change and maturity, of failure and of the unknown. When ellaboratting their texts the writers used: themes(survival; ghosts of the past; madness and illness); motifs(revenge, the double); shift of roles; the mirror effect; typical spaces (foggy woods at night time, abandoned plains, mansions with hidden dark chambers); horrid and grotesque descriptions.Writers of horror attempt to illustrate various characters with faults as well as qualities so that we may connect with them. Trapped in impossible circumstances, they fight back their fears and hesitations in order to save their lives and the ones dear to them. Overcoming moments of tension is possible with particular interventions and unbelievable plot turns. At the same time a good short story includes an impressive theme, a wonderful rendition of climax, an unpredictabele ending such as ironic or funny, a need-to-know feeling and it must leave the reader with a lasting impression. It doesn't matter if it's good or bad as long as you remember that title. Awful readings are good readings since they help you make the difference.

Keywords: fear of change and maturity, the motif of the double, mental crisis, murder, grotesque description.

In *Credit Restant*(*Residual Loan*) Tibi and Tina are hidding from sniffers and engines that may come for them at any given time. They are secluded in a forest, fighting for their lives like in a *Hunger Games* scenario. The two are but pions in a system that uses them in a cat-and-mouse game. This system is based on power and money, luring people into taking bank loans. Then, if you don't pay back the loan they come to take away your children. If there's an ambulance then they take someone for organs or they force you to donate a leg, an arm or an eye. If there's a grey car then they take your child to another family who will adopt him/her. The corrupt, wicked authorities take everything away from the townspeople and play dirty, not looking at the disaster they leave behind. For example, Tina had both her son and daughter taken away. When her husaband Robert died in a car crash the bank refused to pay the life insurance claiming that during the autopsy doctors have found a drug in his system.

A divorced man, Tibi knows his young son is safe because he left the town with his mother. Loving and skillful, Tibi enncourages Tina they will survive. They are presented as frightened, with shabby clothes and no left food but positive regarding their future. Although Tibi knows they can be kidnapped by an engine at any time, he supports the depressed Tina telling her about their plans together. Since every second might be their last, the two take Hibernol that will keep them asleep for several months. This is a cheaper way to cope with the unpredictable, dark fears. They are stuck in an apocalyptic setting resembling a world war.

Răzbunarea Mută(*The Silent Revenge*) describes Antonia as a tricky character that keeps the reader confused until the end. The third person narrator pulls your leg by building the text from appearances. Antonia, a cat nanny has an unpleasant surprise when she receives an e-mail

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with a request from an old client. Following her client Helena's instructions, Antonia is taken by Thomas, Helena's driver, to the mansion. It is there where she will take care of Kathy for the next two weeks. Antonia felt uneasy about the whole story from the start. Helena's e-mail sounded familiar and strange coming from someone whom she hardly knew. The message was unclear, sloppy and written in haste. Helena's unrestored and old mansion made her look careless. These traits weren't typical for Helena, an ambitious, cold hearted business woman. Once she enters the mansion and revisits thoughts from the past the reader is presented the real Antonia. Silent and enraged all these years, she never took action in doing justice to herself. She inherited a mansion and was supposed to marry her lover Thomas. But he secretly loved Helena, Antonia's wicked cousin and they excluded her by taking over the inherited domain. Antonia never did anything because she didn't feel up to it. She buried inside herself all the anger and disappointment. The two wrongdoers took advantage of Antonia's naivety, fear and lack of self-respect. Now alone in Helena's mansion, Antonia finds herself back more than fifty years ago, alongside the young versions of her cousin and Thomas. The two plan to kill Antonia in order to get their hands on the domain but the victim surprises them. Antonia prepared a gun long before and kills the cousin she despised as well as Thomas. She is glad he is now her eternal lover.

This story describes Antonia's unfinished business. Her life is stuck in the past although initially I didn't see any connection between her and the fifty years younger Helena and Thomas. There is no reference whatsoever to Antonia's age and background but she has a gun ready early in the day when she meets Thomas. She had planned to rearrange her past for a very long time. Since the text abounds in Antonia's thoughts and references to her past I believed it was all her fantasy. She accessed a surreal world in her mind where she gets the sweet taste of revenge yearned for years. Past misery, lies and deception made Antonia's present dark. Before the past catches up with the present completely, Antonia becomes wiser; she defeats her fear, hesitation and gets out of her mind by listening to her impulse. Her present can change if she puts past deeds into order.

Păpușa (*The Doll*) describes a world in which artists and performers are replaced by dolls. They are human look-a-likes and can imitate people perfectly. Once the system is started, these robots cannot be shut down. This information is presented in a negative, threatening tone as if these dolls will take over the world in the near future. Laura, a successful singer and actress is apalled by the prospect that the doll Suzy will take her place. Laura's obsession with Suzy starts the moment this new doll is brought to the theater. For, these days, performers are replaced with dolls who can interpret perfectly. The robots observe the artist's performance and register the information thoroughly: the artist's gestures, voice, mimic. Gradually, the doll learns to imitate precisely. During a rehearsal, to everyone's shock, Suzy interferes in Laura's speech. The robot soon becomes the actress' nightmare. Terrified by the idea that she will soon be given the sack, Laura becomes extremely sensitive and paranoid. She forgets or mistakes the lines during the rehearsal to the director's despair. Now forty five and with a stoned son, Laura looks at her future with a sad eye. Her fame in the theater starts to fade and so does her self-respect. In the opening evening of *Phaedra*, Laura is confronted by Suzy who looks exactly like her. The doll kills her replica.

George, Laura's son, has a mysterious role in the text. He is always on drugs and listens to his mother's music in the headphones. This way, his intention and thoughts cannot be taken seriously. Apparently, he seems to push his mother's buttons and lead her to a nervous breakdown. That's because, while on drugs and delirious, he mumbles ideas about death,

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monsters and darkness. Moreover, someone unlocks the door and lets Suzy out of the closet to wander in and out of the theater.

Caleb from *Un Crâmpei de Lumină*(*A Fragment of Light*) is the typical character never taken seriously by everybody else. In his village he is seen as a troublemaker, a nosy young man who medles in everyone's business. Like Mrs. Marple, Hercule Poirot or Sherlock Holmes he asks questions and gets involved in things he finds curious. Eversince he was a child the villagers have complained to his mother about his bad conduct. Although he was naughty and stubborn, his mother was wise to let him be himself and not punish him. For, she couldn't help but love him since all they had was each other. Reverend Butler, the spiritual leader of the community is apparently a devoted Christian who expects more involvement from his fellowmen. But his attitude reveals a selfish, cold-hearted man who treats the people with contempt. In the last few months numerous villagers were found dead in the forest. Their faces showed absolute terror with eyes and mouths wide opened and the only marks on their bodies were some stinges. They died of fright and had blood taken from their arms. Caleb's suspicions about Reverend Burt prove to be right since one night while wandering in the foggy woods he sees the priest talking to a dead man. He is Thomas Kant, one of the victims found in the forest. According to their plan they will unleash hell in the village with the help of the reverend's black magic and bring Thomas back to life. After Caleb tells the other people about the priest they catch him red-handed and manage to restore peace in the village. In the end the community appreciates Caleb for his brave heart and bright mind. It seems that his curiosity and need-to-know impulse saved everyone.

The character in *Spaima*(*The Fear*) goes through a mental crisis, feeling he is undergoing physical changes. He is a young, successful painter and poet on the verge of maturity. The perspective of significant change in his art and conduct terrifies him. The man believes he is going slightly mad the moment he observes his hands are older, darker and with long nails. His hands had always been white and tidy. He then goes through various states of mind leading to a tragic outcome. First, he leans on the concrete, close-by reality like the armchair he is sitting on. He thinks he must have done something wrong to somebody in the past like inhabitating someonelse's body. Now that person came back for his/her body. Nonetheless, his self-esteem goes so low that he sees himslef the armchair he is sitting on: lifeless, worthless, not deserving any attention. That's because he believes it's his fault only for the terrible situation he has to deal with. Like any young artist the man becomes exceedingly analytic and tries to find out the reason for his wretched state of mind. Lately, his talent has faded; the poems and paintings are not as good as the previous ones. Normally, he would access that source or piece of information and get inspired. Carrying out a poem or a painting would be second nature to him. That was until he lost it. Comparing himslef to others he felt it wasn't fair that he had these wonderful gifts and other people didn't. At times he felt thankful, if not extremely proud and didn't like that about him. As a result, he distanced himself from entering that state of dreaming or meditation. The state that would offer him inspiration. At the same time, since he was growing up he started being more cold and organized when carrying out a piece of art. This change of style and the departure from that wild, inspiring energy affected him deeply. It also lead to the development of an incessant fear.

After panicking and becoming delirious he concludes that someone else is inhabiting his body. Otherwise his nails wouldn't be so long to resemble a monster's. The man thinks who knows what these horrible, murderous hands might do next. He feels he's losing control and that he'll never find his true self. Fancying that in the universe there is his ideal double he will

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forever search, the character decides to hang himself. But in the opposite corner of the universe his alter-ego is tired, disappointed of his lack of motivation and creation. The character's inner crisis is caused by the unforeseeing future and unavoidable changes. He's an intellectual that goes mad at the peak of his career.

Omul cu Șobolani sub Piele(*The man with rats under the skin*) introduces Johnny, a medicine student who goes mad in the last year of study. A brilliant young man, he unfortunately does the wrong experiments: implanting rat embrios in his intestines and injecting hormones and estrogen from a rat female. He gave birth to rats who still live underneath his skin. Johnny believed his mission in life was to make everyone else happy. The greedy, selfish rats ate all his good enery and lead him to possess a twisted, sick perception of reality. The young man thought of himself as a hero, a martir for the people around him. Johnny would lure his female victims in the park at night and drug them. Then he would trap them in a cage and tie them with a rope that wounds the victim to death. At the end the rats would lick the blood caused by the wounds. Once the girl was dead, Johnny would take the body in a glass cage with salt. The bulks of salt in contact with skin ate by rats would give the victim a particular glitter. The girls behind the window glasses looked like mermaids or ice queens. Johnny's next victim, the protagonist in the text was kept asleep for one week after he drugged her. She's lucky because he likes her and she gets to meet the murderer's sister: a short girl with black hair and pale skin. The girl decides to help her brother's victim. She gives her a tour of the house, in the torture chambers where the murders take place.The young victim learns Johnny's story from his sister and becomes terrified after the girl shows her Johnny's collection of victims. The two girls manage to stop Johnny's killings by drowning him in the pool of the house.

In *Scurtă Întâlnire*(*Short Meeting*) a young but extremely clever girl wanders around town; she seems careless but is masking a worrisome state of mind. She is watched closely in the big shop by a mysterious man, a rapist. He is the night time guardian of the shop. Taking advantage that the girl is in a dark corner far from the crowds, the kind man approaches her. He tells the young lady it's almost closing hour and tries to find out as much information about her as possible. While chatting, the girl's discourse amazes the man. Looking at her attitude and choice of words she seems to be a woman in disguise. The girl knows exactly who the man is and what his intentions are. Still, she plays her role claiming she had an argument with her mother and came here to look for something to eat. She is blond, beautiful, blue eyed and tempts the murderer, playing with his mind. He snaps and tells her about his previous rapes and killings. To his amazement, the girl is thrilled and not frightened by what he says. The moment the man loses his temper, she turns into a giant creature and eats him. She then returns into the shape of a little girl and is approached by a mid-aged woman. Apparently a murderer or a rapist, she mistakes the girl for a victim the way the guardian did. The text presents a typical plot: a conversation between a lost girl and a guardian during one late evening. But the characters' discourses are fascinating, revealing multiple roles: the hungry monster disguised as an innocent girl and her mission; the anxious rapist disguised as a likeable guardian and his horrible plan; the mysterious woman's intention regarding the young girl. The story ends in an ironic tone: no one can tell for sure who plays the cat and who plays the mouse or hunt to not become the hunted. At every new sequence and change of characters the two roles may switch. It's funny this should be the world we are living in. But in a symbolic way, it is the jungle we face day by day whether we're in or out of the house.

Arhanghelul (*The Messenger*) describes a mysterious murder of a young couple a hundred years ago in the county of Alba in Apuseni mountains. The narrator learns from his

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friend the inspector of this terrible yet fascinating story. The investigation takes an unpredictable turn when the inspector starts to question what really happened. He comes across a booklet in the dead woman's luggage that only included a chapter entitled *The Journey*. It describes a miner's ordeal when he suspects his wife is having an affair with a land owner. Moreover, he believes the two lovers shall run with the small fortune he gained all his life. Disappointed and betrayed, he became ill and needed to release the burden from his shoulders. He confessed his turmoil to the local priest, Ion Biceanu, a pillar of the community. He gives the man a wise piece of advice like letting everything go and leaving the two to run with the money. God will punish the both of them. To the inspector's shock, character Ion Biceanu builds a wagon and plans to murder the two lovers so as to render justice in the world. After he kills the two in the woods, the priest puts the bodies in the wagon and pushes it in a precipice. After he finishes reading the chapter, the inspector finds out to his horror that the title of the booklet is *The Messenger* and the author is Ion Biceanu. The inspector believes the character and the author is one and the same person because the chapter reveals intimate ideas and details of moral pain. The story had the form of a confession. Ironically, after the inspector informed the police of what he discovered, everybody wanted to read Biceanu's books. The fact that the priest serial killer had hidden the miners' gold in the forest whereabouts made everybody search and dig in the area to find it. This was happening after decades of silence and stiffness in Alba. Here, every human activity stopped after all the gold mines were closed. And now investors were considering re-opening the mines to start an industry in the county famous for its murders. As soon as the narrator hears about the phenomenon going on in Apuseni mountains he gets ready to go there and start digging for gold. However, it is in this moment that the inspector tells him the news. After thinking things through, the inspector realizes the truth behind Biceanu's game. His stories describe murders, beatings, rapes and thefts that happened according to real events, to what each local man or woman confessed to him. He knew his writings would be successful if he places himself as central character, evil doer or murderer. In addition, he placed his books at the crime scenes; the text describes the bloody scene accordingly. This way the priest becomes part of the frenzy that now brought Alba county back to life. The clever Ion Biceanu didn't want his community to be forgotten and so he mastered his plan skillfully. But he included as well his own place in the public memory and into eternity.

The fear of oblivion governs Ion Biceanu's mind; feeling useless in a community of faulty people he wants to leave something behind. The miners' suffering can be felt looking at their lifestyle: working from dusk until dawn, spending the little they earn on alcohol and parties, being left with nothing. As a result they react in an aggressive manner and ultimately repent and confess to the priest. Biceanu, nonetheless, is affected by his peoples' despair and depression. He works hard to pass on the events that shaped his life from one generation to another.

Tina and Tibi fight for their lives not knowing what comes next; they are driven by the fear of the unexpected. The two girls struggle against Johnny and Caleb's against Reverend Burton have the same argument. The plot is constructed in a manner that keeps the reader and the characters in suspense; they come across surprises like Caleb's discovery of Burton's evil plan. The reverend seems the last person capable of working with the devil and of sacrificing his fellowmen. Compared to reckless Caleb, the protagonist that becomes Johnny's victim is helped by his sister. Another of his experiments, the short, frail girl supervises the victim in order to escape their tormentor. Tina is unbalanced following the drama she experienced when her children were taken away; it is this and her husband's death that makes her reluctant about

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her future with Tobi. They team up and dare to dream of a bright near future doing simple things like after-noon readings. In the same respect, Johnny's sister decides to stop witnessing his cruel acts and to take action.

Antonia and Helena as well as Laura and the young artist have to deal with the fear of change and maturity. Undergoing physical change can be a shock for an artist who enjoyed success most of his/her life. At least this is the case for actress Laura and the painter who goes through a mental crisis. The former is desperate that she might lose her job and be replaced by robot Suzy. The latter believes he goes mad since the concrete world plays tricks on him; he observes his hands have turned into a monster's. The man isn't prepared to grow old and accept numerous changes including his craft. Compared to Laura, for Helena and Antonia it is not growing old that worries them but the psychological maturity. Antonia is the woman who has been sorry all her life and never did anything for herself only; she didn't matter for no one and had no self-respect whatsoever. Her opposite is successful Helena who used boldness and audacity to take everything away from Antonia including lover Thomas. The fact that roles are reversed and shy, naïve girl takes over proves that fear cuts both ways. Antonia who was afraid to take risks all her life took advantage of Helena's weak point: fear of failure. The business woman's life was not what it seemed and soon as the poor cat nanny saw her moment, she attacked. Just like Helena, Laura's fear of failure drives her to a tragic end. Living in a dystopian future world, the actress is appalled by the perspective of human like robots replacing artists and performers.

In *Short Meeting* it is the fear of the unknown that brings tension in the text and pushes everyone's buttons: both the characters' and the reader's. The guardian is the average criminal who lures an apparently innocent girl one late evening. The girl's discourse has sexual connotations and includes references to sadomasochism. She questions him on his methods of killing and plays with his nerves until he loses his temper. The man as well as the reader are puzzled by the girl's conduct but find it justified when she unveils her mask. The oppressor disguised as a protective figure is killed by the monster-hunter disguised as a victim. The introduction of a third character, the elegant woman, and her intentions ends the story with a question mark; with a prolonged state of doubt and of need-to-know.

In constructing their texts the writers used: themes(survival; ghosts of the past; madness and illness; appearance vs reality; rituals and sacrifice; pacts with the devil; happy ending); motifs(revenge, the double); shift of roles; the mirror effect; time standing still; typical space(foggy woods at night time, abandoned plains; glass cages and compartments; claustrophobic rooms; mansions with hidden dark chambers; parks at night; dark corners on busy streets); horrid and grotesque descriptions.

In order to survive Caleb makes the difference between friend and foes. The young man's and the priest's dislike of each other is clear from the start. Furthermore, Reverend Burton turns the mob against Caleb by creating him a reputation of a meddler and an obnoxious person. Ironically, it is the same mob made up of villagers that Burton wants to sacrifice for the sake of Satan. Laura is faced with Suzy, her replica, and this leads to an ongoing battle between alteration and perfection. Finally Suzy kills Laura as if Laura's consciousness destroyed her body from within. The actress' singing voice is heard throughout the text in George's headphones and at the final scene, in the cabin, where Suzy rests triumphant. It speaks of an immediate tragic end and it scolds Suzy for what she had done. The use of dolls in the text symbolizes people's obsession with perfection and high expectancies such as the hope for a long happy life. If *The Doll* deals with physical standards and paranoia, *Silent Revenge* analyzes

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the opposition between past and present. In the past Antonia is scared and humble compared to Helena; but the roles reverse in the present. Familiar settings and being revisited by old figures and circumstances gives Antonia the chance to change her current situation for the good. This time her past self haunts her for good luck. The young artist's state (*The Fear*) is similar with Laura's; he must deal with his consciousness and try to make logical connections to what's happening to him. His double is at the opposite universe having opposite traits: despair and depression caused by the lack of talent and inspiration. Suicide for an artist. But in the main character's case it is self-doubt and heavy introspection that takes him on the brink of death. Nonetheless, he experiences transformations of the psyche that resemble madness. The young artist and Johnny, the brilliant doctor, are genius but for the worse. Johnny believes he does good to humankind by killing young girls in a cruel manner. Overwhelmed with surgery experiments and his collection of victims he even maims his own sister. The story, however, ends in a positive tone since the last victim and the sister move on and everything comes back to normal. The same ending is used in *A Fragment of Light*, as the title suggests. Caleb and the villagers leave the dark forest followed by a fragment of light that symbolizes hope, the fact that people's lives will change for the better. Burton, an example of wickedness, mastered his plan skillfully looking at the way he tricked Thomas Kant. The man was killed and then turned into a living dead by the reverend for his sole purpose: to have an assistant. In addition, the cunning priest promises Thomas he will turn him back human if they complete the last and most important ritual of sacrifice. With a distorted point of view, Johnny sees human sacrifice as something he is proud of. Burton and Johnny's surgical experiments on their fellowmen illustrate their idea of flesh and unity as a melting pot; as made of body parts or multiple identities. For, these mad men are different and special; they resemble normal but incomplete humans. "*Within the gothic genre one may witness the relentless destruction of "the human " and the unfolding instead of what I will call(…) "the abhuman". The abhuman is a non-quite-human subject, characterized by its morphic variability, continually in danger of becoming not-itself, becoming other.*"[1]

Antonia is driven by revenge while completing her task in killing her deceitful cousin and lover. What matters for both her and Ion Biceanu is justice for all. From a humble priest he pretends to be a serial killer who confesses his sins in his books. He is actually a messenger, the avenging angel who leaves behind numerous books that bring life back in Apuseni mountains. On the other hand, the role of the pale girl, Johnny's sister, in the text is unclear at first. Her hesitation in helping the last victim keeps the character and the reader in suspense. For, it's her decision that influences the victim's outcome.

Dark rooms enable the gloomy atmosphere. Caleb encounters a huge bell with a dark depth when he finds the reverend's hiding spot. The bell's depth announces the sacrifice scene where the giant, hideous monster comes out from the depth of the foggy pond. This scene is also announced by Caleb's experience in the foggy woods at night; he hears whispers and sees strange shapes flying around his head. Suzy's mechanical grin before attacking Laura shows a cold murderer's mind. The doll has originally a glass cage and afterwards is held in a closet; a killing machine, she is like an intelligent beast or a surreal creature resembling a woman. It is also in glass cages that Johnny keeps his victims; they are in one of the dark rooms in his huge mansion. The short, pale girl shows the victim the secret paths while explaining the surroundings.

[1] Hurley, Kelly, *The Gothic Body*, Cambridge University Press, Great Britain, 1996.

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While her past repeats itself, Antonia observes her companions and the space around her. Thomas smells like rotten meat and both he and Helena are cold as ice. The sky and the plain are leaden and there is no sound. At first, the victim doesn't believe Johnny's sister when she tells her about rats living underneath his skin; then, the girl shows the victim the man's X-ray as a proof. Funny enough, all through the tour the sister is bored and cold; even when the victim throws up at the sight of the dead girls, the sister says with a tired, bored tone that she will have to clean that later. The achievements of horror and mystery writers are the following: the construction of a complicated plot; the insertion of funny or ironic scenes; the lessons both the character and the reader learn; the thrill one has when faced with unexpected sequences; climax points built gradually; the addiction it gives one when discovering a new, intense emotion; the reading experience of a different literary genre.

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