THE IMAGE OF WOMEN IN FANTASTIC STORIES

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Abstract: *Our paper focuses on female characters in several Romanian, English and American fantastic stories and their analysis is based, on the one hand, on the distinction empirical vs. meta-empirical characters and, on the other hand, on the opposition victim / aggressor. Meta-empirical (female) characters, specific to fantastic stories, appear as witches and thanatological apparitions. Most female characters in Romanian fantastic stories play the role of aggressors, while female characters in Anglo-American fantastic stories prove to be mostly victims.*

Keywords: *empirical characters, meta-empirical characters, victim / aggressor.*

1. The Character in Fantastic Stories

The characters in fantastic prose can be divided into empirical characters and meta-empirical characters, according to the universe to which they belong[1]. Empirical characters belong to the empirical world and their traits do not differenciate them from the characters of non-fantastic prose; some may show or develop a special interest in the occult, a strenghtened melancholy or an unusual hypersensitivity, traits which foreword the fantastic experience, while others are, on the contrary, extremely reasonable, sensible and down-to-earth, and therefore opaque to the supernatural. Meta-empirical characters belong to the meta-empirical universe and, in some cases, represent the main exponent of this universe (when the fantastic experience lies in the contact of one or more empirical characters to one meta-empirical character). Consequently, female characters in fantastic prose may pertain to one of the two categories, empirical or meta-empirical, and this first classification triggers a second according to the psychological involvement into the fantastic experience: victims (usually empirical characters), aggressors (usually meta-empirical characters) and witnesses (usually empirical characters).

For our analysis, we have selected four texts of the fantastic belonging to literature written in English: Charles Maturin's *Leixlip Castle*, Jospeh Sheridan Le Fanu's *Schalken the Painter*, Edgar Allan Poe's *The Fall of the House of Usher* and Ambrose Bierce's *The Middle Toe of the Right Foot* and four fantastic texts belonging to Romanian literature: Ion Luca Caragiale's *La hanul lui Mânjoală (Mânjoală's Inn)*, Cezar Petrescu's *Aranka, ştima lacurilor (Aranka, the Spirit of the Lakes)*, and Mircea Eliade's *Domnişoara Christina (Miss Christina)* and *La ţigănci (The Gypsy Women)*.

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[1] We have used the term proposed by Filipe Furtado, who, inspired by philosophy, refers to the fantastic using the concept *meta-empirical phenomenology* (see Furtado, 1980: 19-33). The term *meta-empirical* is more generous than *fantastic* as it includes both supernatural elements (that is the elements belonging to a different universe than ours) and the phenomena in the real world that cannot be explained through the laws of the real and, therefore, are perceived as strange, alien, odd.

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2. Female Empirical Characters

The characters in the above-mentioned texts may be analysed in their connection to the fantastic experience, taking into consideration the degree to which this experience operates or not a (temporary or permanent) change into them. The empirical character in general conveys versimilitude to the fantastic story, therefore his/her construction mirrors his/her deeply realistic traits. In fantastic prose, there are two types of empirical characters: the ones open towards accepting the fantastic, attracted to superstitions and supernaturals beliefs, and the skeptical, sensible characters who cannot accept the insertion of the fantastic in everyday life. Less numerous are the neutral characters.

Plenty of examples of female empirical characters ready to accept the fantastic can be found in the texts we have selected for analysis. This could be explained by the traditional approach to women as irrational and led by instincts and feelings. A set of such examples is offered by Mircea Eliade in his *Domnişoara Christina (Miss Christina)*, where most female characters are "vulnerable" to the fantastic experience given their attraction to poetry and fairy tales. Thus, Mrs. Moscu usually recites poems by Eminescu, Sanda knows extremely numerous (to Egor's standards) autumn poems, Simina invents meaningful tales. There are books everywhere in the Moscu house and they seem to be wrapped in the negative aura of the entire house:

> "I am lucky to still have enough books ... Here it is, I've fetched some for Sanda, for several days of reading..." She pointed to them, it was a whole pile. Mr Nazarie cast an eye on them: *Jean Sbogar*, *René*, *Ivanhoe*, *Les fleurs du mal*, *Là-bas*. "From Christina's library", she added. "Her favourite books. Mine too, of course." (Eliade, 1994: 66)[1]

What distinguishes the female characters in this story from the two main male characters is the nature of their relation to Miss Christina. For the men, Miss Christina appears as an unknown person that comes up, all of a sudden, in their lives, while the women are already familiar to her presence; even if Sanda and Simina have never met her, they know so many details about her as if she were alive, in their house; Mrs. Moscu, driven by the feeling of guilt (she was supposed to be dead in Christina's place) is almost worshipping her. The three women permanently feel Christina's presence as real, but only Sanda perceives her as repulsive although she never ceases to evoke her.

The Anglo-American fantastic texts also offer examples of female characters open to accept the fantastic experience. Such are two of Sir Blaney's daughters, Jane and Anne, in Charles Maturin's *Leixlip Castle*. Although Jane's supernatural disappearance is only briefly mentioned, its circumstances show her readiness to accept the fantastic: she was ten and had a natural bending towards fairy tales and therefore the agent of disappearance - the old woman in the *Fingallian* dress - was easily associated by the girl to a fairy or a witch, on account of the two rushes in her hand and of the ritual-like gesture of throwing one of them over her shoulder.

Anne Blaney, whose fantastic experience is the most important in this story, seems to have all the biographical data for accepting and experiencing the fantastic: "living in solitude, and partaking only of the very limited education of Irish females of that period, was left very much to the servants, among whom she increased her taste for superstitious and supernatural horrors" (http://www.litgothic.com/Texts/leixlip.html). Jane's disappearance as well as Anne's friendship with the servant nicknamed Collogue

[1] We have offered our own translation for all the quotations from Romanian texts.

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– a witch who took pleasure in spreading horror all around her – facilitate Anne the accomplishment of a ritual through which she can see her future husband's face, a ritual which, although planned by Collogue as an eerie joke, turns into a meta-empirical experience. No details about the women's physical appearance are given in this story, except the fact that Jane remains physically unchanged ten years after her disappearance in the forest, as if time had left no trace on her body.

Unlike Maturin, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu describes in detail, either directly or indirectly, his empirical characters. The female character of the story *Schalken the Painter*, Rose Velderkaust, stands out as a young beautiful woman whose intuition associates her mysterious suitor to the portrait that used to scare her in St. Laurence Church in Rotterdam (association approved by her tutor, also). After she gets married, Rose changes radically: when she returns home, she appears as a crazy woman, wearing "a white woollen wrapper, made close about the neck, and descending to the very ground" which was "much deranged and travel-soiled" (Le Fanu 1964: 42), talking nonsense, showing extreme thirst and hunger and having odd requests (asking for the priest, forbidding the others to leave her alone in the room). Her final appearance as a specter or, possibly, a dream character, circularly marks a return to her initial portrait: there was no trace of horror in her and she "wore the same arch smile which used to enchant the artist" (*ibidem* : 46).

3. Female Meta-Empirical Characters

Meta-empirical characters hide under the mask of the real, taking empirical appearances that deceive the empirical character(s) whom they meet, as well as the reader. Just as in most cases the fantastic explodes out of the real world, the supernatural characters hides behind the mask of some realistic, empirical characters, too. Few are the cases when the meta-empirical character stands out as such from the very beginning.

The selected texts develop two types of female meta-empirical characters: witches and thanatological apparitions.

Witches. The category of witches perfectly illustrates supernatural female characters concealed under the mask of realistic human characters. Through their use of supernatural "procedures", witches set up direct connections to the supernatural itself. They are usually of age, since wisdom comes with age, and their physical appearance displays various degrees of ugliness or caricature. In Western beliefs, witches initiate witchery with the help of twigs and sometimes travel on broomsticks. As a consequence of the witch-hunt initiated by the Inquisition in the 15th century, the negative connotations of witches, seen as an exponent of heresy, have increased and penetrated into the literature of the fantastic. (see Chevalier, Gheerbrant, 1995: 472-473).

An example of witch, acknowledged as such by the local folklore ("others [suspect her] of practising magic" - Caragiale, 1984: 143), is Mânjoloaia in Ion Luca Caragiale's *Mânjoală's Inn*. She first appears in the text watching the oven, this action suggesting the potential secret boiling of magic potions; moreover, the absence of icons inside the inn suggests she practises black magic (since in Orthodox culture, every Orthodox believer ought to keep an icon in his house as a cult object necessary for the daily act of praying). Mânjoloaia's magic powers are revealed gradually: first of all, Marghioala proves to know exactly the destination of Fănică's trip although she has not been informed about it; secondly, her "extraordinary" eyes can cast the evil eye upon people around her; thirdly, she has the power to put a spell on Fănică's fur cap; fourthly,

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and most important, she can spoil the weather so as to have Fănică return to the inn and live there as her lover. Besides her own magic powers, Mânjoloaia uses a tomcat and a goat kid (which can equally be one and the same creature) as animal "assistants" to accomplish her spells. The end of the story also bears a significance related to witchery: Mânjoloaia's inn is destroyed by fire, once with its owner, thus evoking the burnings of witches in the Middle Ages, rituals thought to reestablish order and the supremacy of good.

The "gypsy women" in Eliade's homonymous short story represent another type of witches, but their nature is not explicitly confirmed by the text. They evoke the traditional Romanian *iele* on account of their sharing the same extreme power of seduction. According to tradition, the *iele* represent "female aerial spirits dressed in white and appearing at night to bewitch men" (Levițchi, 1994:398); in some regions (Oltenia) they are three, the exact number of the "fairies" in *The Gypsy Women*: the gypsy woman, the Jewish woman and the Greek woman. As in the case of other Romanian texts (e.g. Gala Galaction's *In Cotoşmana's Forest*), supernatural otherness is rendered by foreign otherness – the three witches belong to foreign identities, while the empirical character, Gavrilescu, is Romanian. Another folk element used in Eliade's story encourages a fresh association: the *iele* - the walnut tree, a tree with negative connotations, with devilish features in many folk beliefs. According to Romanian tradition, "the walnut tree cannot be planted in people's yards or gardens because no other plant grows under its shadow". (Evseev, 2001: 128) This tree adorns the garden of the gypsy women and attracts Gavrilescu under its shadow that protects him from the heat wrapping the whole city. The traditional dance of the "iele" (their main instrument of seduction) changes, in Eliade's text, into a "guess-the-gypsy" game, the player, Gavrilescu, being unable to solve the mystery. He is offered a magic potion under the form of a coffee which makes him dizzy and puts him to sleep. A last but equally important traditional element is represented by the effect of the experience upon the "victim": the man who has seen the *iele*'s dance is said either to die or to go crazy, in other words he suffers a radical change – as is the case of Gavrilescu, who cannot adapt to the empirical word when he returns to it, as if his stay at the gypsy women's has lasted for many years, and he is finally forced to return to the meta-empirical world in order to survive.

In the Anglo-American text *Leixlip Castle*, the witch is represented by the old woman in Fingallian dress, "suddenly started out of a thicket" who can be identified with a witch because of her two wands (similar to the fairies' magic wands) with which she accomplishes a strange ritual: "she had in her hand two rushes, one of which she threw over her shoulder, and giving the other to the child [Jane Blaney], motioned to her to do the same. […] [T]hey then disappeared." (http://www.litgothic.com/Texts/leixlip.html). The meeting with the witch takes place in a symbolically magic place, the forest, thus assuring an appropriate background for the entire experience.

Thanatological apparitions (the living dead). This type of supernatural character appears under the mask of a real, empirical character, yet what betrays his/her meta-empirical nature is either his/her appearance as such (which is beyond any logic by its sudden and temporary character) or because the respective (wo)man has been long dead and so the apparition is a nonsense. The thanatological apparitions in our texts share the fact that they trigger somebody's death, thus suggesting the vampirism line of interpretation in the sense explained by Claude Lecouteux (2002: 73, 79): the vampires (Romanian "vârcolaci") represent dead people who come back into the world

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of the living in order to provoke somenone's death, usually through the concrete act of sucking their blood. Only the unclean dead people have these attributes, that is all those who died prematurely or those who were not buried according to the traditional rituals of burial and memorial services. (see Lecouteux, *op cit.*: 26-35). In order to annihilate these creatures, the vampire should be killed shortly after (s)he has been identified, act which supposes the existence of at least one victim; the criminal methods vary from the "kindest" ones (splashing holy water on him) to the most violent (staking the vampire into the heart, destruction of the dead body, decapitation) (see *ibidem*: 100-110). The theme of vampirism represents only a pretext for creating characters in our texts, because not all the traditional ingredients of this topic are preserved; yet we shall analyse all the stages of the theme of vampirism and the extent to which they are applied in our texts.

First of all, we should see into the cases of unclean death of the living dead in our texts. Miss Christina is a proud and cruel noble woman, cruelly assassinated by the peasants whom she has oppressed and barracked, thus accomplishing all the conditions for coming back to the living world as a vampire. Aranka died in her youth in mysterious conditions, either killed, or having drowned in the marshes. The implicit apparitions in *The Middle Toe of the Right Foot* are the victims of a crime (therefore a violent and premature death): Mrs Manton and her children have been killed by Mr. Manton and the same is true about Poe's lady Madeline, prematurely buried in the subterranean vault by her brother.

The next stage of the vampire theme, somebody's death caused by the thanatological apparition, is present in all our texts (except Cezar Petrescu's). Miss Christina causes, after her repeated apparitions, Sanda's death; Minheer Vanderhausen provokes the death ("disappearance") of Rose Velderkaust; the apparitions of Mrs Manton and of her children cause Mr Manton's death; lady Madeline's comeback from the tomb coincides with her brother's death. In the three cases when the circumstances of the vampire's death are explicitly presented, the death (s)he provokes as (s)he comes back from the dead has a vindicative nature: either the victims of the crimes take revenge upon their aggressors, killing them (as is the case of Mrs Manton and of lady Madeline), or they intend to solve some frustrations which persist after death (Miss Christina takes revenge on Sanda because she is Egor's lover – her frustration being that of not having enjoyed the pleasures of love at the fullest). Aranka provokes a pseudo-death - the narrator (her victim) lies unconscious for two weeks after the experience of meeting her, but then goes on with his life.

As for the third stage, the killing of the vampire, the tradition is fully respected only in Eliade's story, when Egor stakes the vampire Christina into her heart. In Poe's text, lady Madeline is eventually fully destroyed once with the fall of her house, but her destruction is thus caused by "external" factors. In the other texts, this stage is skipped offering an open ending to the story which fits perfectly to the purpose of the fantastic – that of preserving the ambiguity till the end.

Thanatological apparitions mostly achieve their human-empirical pseudo-camouflage through the appearance they had when they were alive. Since in some cases, the witnesses have not met these characters during their lives, they get to know their appearance through a portrait, this being the case of Aranka and Miss Christina. Aranka literally climbs down from her own portrait, in her white gown, and the phosphorecent eyes she has in the portrait hypnotize the narrator as they watch his every movement and gesture thus making him wonder if those eyes are not, by any chance, alive. As it gets dark, Aranka simply becomes a material being getting out of the portrait and

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insistently calling the narrator to go out in the marshes. “The phantasm stopped, turned around to wait for me. Then, the two phosphoric still lights looked like the sovereign lucifers of the dancing constellations underneath.” (Petrescu, 1986: 145)

Miss Christina appears in Egor’s dream exactly as she was represented in her portrait. She is described in detail during every apparition and these descriptions convey power of seduction, feminity, and, above all, the mixture of life and death which fissures her living human camouflage. When she first appears in Egor’s dream, he identifies her as a meta-empirical character: he knows she is dead and therefore her appearance in this world is nonsensical. Her camouflage seems perfect: her face is identical with the face in her portrait, but she wears different clothes; her presence is made real with the help of visual details (her face, her clothes), auditory details (her words, the sound of her footsteps, the swish of her dress), olfactory ones (her perfume of violets), tactile details (her breathing, her warm hand). Yet, there is one detail that cracks her seemingly perfect camouflage: her hand had “an unnatural, nonhuman warmth” (Eliade, *op. cit.* : 54), the whole body had an “artificial disgusting warmth” (*ibidem* : 55). During her second apparition, Christina herself confirms her belonging to a meta-empirical universe, a universe different from Egor’s who is unable to understand it: “You are but a living man. I come from a different place. You are not going to be able to understand it, nobody is.” (*ibidem* : 81) During her third and last apparition, Christina’s camouflage is totally destroyed, passing from the alive-dead mixture (“Her flesh was so cold and hot at the same time..” – *ibidem* : 121) to her total detachment from the real world:

> Under his pale fingers, Christina’s body started to shiver. And yet, he heard no sigh, no breathing on her wet open lips. Christina’s flesh lived in a totally different way; closed in itself, without vapours, without whispers. [...] His fingers had touched a wet warm wound; *the only warm* place on Christina’s unnatural body. [...] The wound was still fresh and so alive that Egor had the feeling it had been cut just a few moments ago. The blood was gurgling. And yet, how come it did not penetrate her girdle, how come it did not redden her dress? (*ibidem* : 123-124)

The two Anglo-American thanatological apparitions also wear the human camouflage of their living appearance. Although she never appears directly in the text, Mrs Manton can be easily detected thanks to her footsteps in the dust of the deserted house:

> ‘Look at that!’ he cried, pointing with both hands at the nearest print of the woman’s right foot, where she had apparently stopped and stood. ‘The middle toe is missing – it was Gertrude!’ (Bierce, 2006: 177)

Lady Madeline is easily recognized by the narrator who has also seen her for a moment when alive: he is struck by her total resemblance to her twin brother. When she appears as a living dead, she has some spots of blood on her clothes.

4. Female Characters as Victims or Aggressors

Generally speaking, the female character as victim pervades fantastic literature written in English, while the one written in Romanian deals mostly with female characters as aggressors, this different treatment deriving from two different cultural roots. Fantastic literature written in English is mostly indebted to the Gothic novel, whose ingredient, among other necessary ingredients such as the gothic castle, an ancient prophecy, etc (see http://www.virtualsalt.com/gothic.htm) is a female victim to

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masculine aggression, in accordance with the general concepts of victimology according to which the main three categories of victims are: children, women and old people. Thus, the texts in English present a weak woman, unable to protect herself, therefore easy to aggress physically and psychologically and unable to show any opposition to aggression. In other words, it is the type of woman feminism tries to fight against, the woman who needs a man to save her from evil, who cannot deal by herself with the threats of the evil forces – therefore the woman who defines herself only in connection with a man.

In opposition, the texts in Romanian impose the figure of a strong woman who uses her power for negative purposes: all her weapons (mostly, her power of seduction) are used in order to hurt men. Thus, although seen as a powerful creature, she is endowed with a negative value, in a folk-Biblical tradition of negatively valuing women: women as the followers of Eve, diabolical creatures good at plotting and without scruple. Therefore, this different image of women is not in the line of feminism, too, as long as women are characterized as essentially negative. It is to be noted, nevertheless, that in some cases, women's aggressive character develops as a counter-reaction to a previous victimization produced by a male (e.g. Miss Christina had been cruelly assassinated and raped and she comes back to take revenge).

The female character as victim. In the Romanian texts, there is only one example of female character as victim: Sanda Moscu in *Miss Christina*. She is a kind woman who falls little by little under Christina's spell; as a result she gets ill, lies in bed for many days and is finally sacrificed since Christina perceives her as a rival in Egor's heart. From a woman full of life at the beginning of the text, Sanda turns into a shadow under the vampire effect of Christina who sucks away little by little all Sanda's vital energy. Sanda represents the woman in love who would do anything to protect her lover: she even asks her mother to force Egor to leave their house only because she fears he may be in trouble when things have turned from bad to worse.

In order to describe the woman as a victim, the writers of the fantastic resort to gothic motifs given the fact that the gothic novel specialized in presenting this type of women: fainting, cries, the maiden locked in a room (for more details see http://www.virtualsalt.com/gothic.htm). Eliade uses these three motifs himself: thus, after Egor got engaged in secret to an ill and crying Sanda, she faints and he subsequently locks her in her room for fear Mrs Moscu or Simina may harm her. Sanda's strange illness which the doctor fails to diagnose correctly ("An excessive anaemia and, possibly, the beginning of a flu, a very strange flu, in fact..." - Eliade, *op. cit.* : 84) sends her to bed thus limiting her activities. Sanda's attitude to what happens to herself is one of resignation and acceptance of fate, and her hypersensitivity concords with her role as a victim. Here is, for example, how she behaves after her secret engagement to Egor: "The girl stopped crying, looked at him frightened, then put her arms around his neck. It was her first gesture of a lover. […] « If only I would not die till then…» Sanda whispered with a shudder of fear." (*ibidem* : 89) When the doctor last consulted her, the girl seemed "exhausted, yet calm and resigned", and when he realized her medical condition got worse, her words and voice are edifying: " 'I feel much better now', Sanda whispered. Mr Nazarie startled. What a subdued, tearful voice... He had felt to the bottom of his soul the approaching of death. It was a voice that was preparing for the great silence." (*ibidem*: 103) The main aggressor of Sanda is Miss Christina, but her "assistants", Simina and Mrs. Moscu, also contribute to Sanda's victimization. Thus, it is obvious, for example, that Sanda is totally submissive to Mrs Moscu: "As you wish, I'll do as you wish..." (*ibidem*: 103)

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Similar to Sanda in many aspects is Rose Velderkaust, who is also the victim of a character belonging to the category of the living dead (but having also demonic features) and she similarly ends tragically (although the English text is not as explicit about her death which is presented rather as "disappearance"). The image of Rose when she returns home in despair after the marriage to the strange Vanderhausen is much indebted to the style of the gothic novel, having a great emotional charge and displaying feelings ranging from fear to horror and terror. Unlike Sanda, who appears as passive, she acts violently: she "rushed into the room", then asked for wine and she drank it "with a haste and eagerness which surprised them" and asked for food, and catching a roast joint "with her hands and even with her teeth, she tore off the flesh and swallowed it." (Le Fanu, *op. cit.* :42)

The three motifs from the gothic novel are also used in describing Rose's actions: as soon as she enters the room of her tutor, Rose faints on the floor; after she appeases her thirst and hunger, she "began to weep bitterly and to wring her hands" (*ibidem*). Then she is accidentally locked in a room. The motif of desperate cries seems to be a favourite of the Irish writer who applies is at large in this text:

> Shriek after shriek burst from the inner chamber, with all the piercing loudness of despairing terror. [...] the screams seemed to increase in loudness [...]. One last shriek, so long and piercing and agonized as to be scarcely human, swelled from the room, and suddenly there followed a death-like silence. (*ibidem* : 45)

The portrait of Rose as a victim is completed with her description when she appeared in the room: "She looked wild, fierce and haggard with terror and exhaustion, but her dress […] consisted of a kind of white woollen wrapper, made close about the neck, and descending to the very ground." (*ibidem* : 42) and with her displaying the behaviour of a mentally deranged person: she speaks incoherently, she has the odd requirements of not being left alone for one single moment and of having a priest sent for. In the text by Le Fanu, Rose's victimization is achieved all of a suddden, at one single point towards the end of the text, therefore the effect upon the reader is all the more powerful, it surprises and horrifies. The image of Rose before marriage, a calm girl, pretty and intuitive, in love with Schalken, constrasts with the image of Rose after marriage, a woman in despair, horrified and almost insane.

Leixlip Castle resembles both Le Fanu's and Eliade's texts in creating the female character as victim. Sir Blaney's youngest daughter, Jane, reappears ten years after her encounter with the old woman in the forest just as Rose reappears after her marriage, all of a sudden, by surprise and extremely changed: she is suffering from cold and hunger, she is "shrunk to half her usual size, and covered with rags" (http://www.litgothic.com/Texts/leixlip.html). His middle daughter, Anne, is the victim of the servant Collogue and performs the rituals suggested by the latter in order to see who her future husband will be. This ritual proves a horrifying experience because immediately after completing it she comes back with a pale face and fixed eyes "as those of a dead body" in an "insane and breathless state", and from that night "she grew stern and solitary" (*ibidem*). Anne's change develops gradually, just like Sanda's.

The female character as aggressor. All the texts in Romanian selected for this paper feature women-aggressors as main characters, three of their names are used as titles for the respective stories: *Aranka, Miss Christina*, *At the Gypsy Women's*. With the strong personality specific to a she-master, these characters have the psychological premises necessary to develop the role of aggressors. Their violent actions are targeted at males perceived as enemies: the narrator in Cezar Petrescu's text, Egor and

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Gavrilescu in Mircea Eliade's texts, Fănică in Caragiale's text. Males turn into enemies and victims as a result of a love-hate game in which the woman-aggressor resorts to seduction as the main weapon to subdue her victim. The most seductive "object" seems to be represented by the woman's eyes: Mânjoloaia charms Fănică with her "extraordinary" eyes, capable of casting the evil eye; Aranka uses her phosporecent eyes to guide the narrator through the marshes; Christina's eyes in her portrait behave as if alive watching Egor all around the room, and during her direct (onyrical) apparitions they are glassy; the gypsies constantly exchange mysterious glances, a fact which worries Gavrilescu.

Before the aggressive act, the female aggressors impose as strong personalities, thus being psychologically credible. Mânjoloaia, significantly characterized by Fănică with the epithet "such a robust woman!" (Caragiale, *op. cit.* : 143), has remained the mistress of the inn after her husband's death succeeding not only to save it from bankruptcy but also making it profitable. Moreover, in a situation that had become a legend, she defended the inn against robbers with a man-like behaviour: "she raised the axe and so hard did she hit that he [the robber] fell down in an instant." (*ibidem*). Her specifically female traits complete her portrait: she is a perfect housekeeper, an oven watcher, a great cook, she keeps the whole inn perfectly clean and tidy.

Countess Aranka appears from the very beginning as a powerful and independent woman, with specifically male hobbies: wolf and fox hunting, ice fishing, boating. During World War I she works as a charity nurse; when Kemény castle is attacked by revolutionary troops, she shoots two soldiers then refuses to take refuge so as to escape their revengeful actions.

Miss Christina is more than just a strong personality, as she displays an unimaginable cruelty, a sado-masochistic behaviour: she had the bailiff whip the peasants to blood in front of her, she wrung the neck of chickens, yet she did not fight back while being raped by the peasants.

In three of the four cases discussed above, the process of aggression against the victim develops under the mask of an erotic relation: Marghioala's charms make Fănică stay at the inn much longer than intended; Christina overwhelms Egor with sensual touches, caresses, kisses and sweet words; the almost naked "gypsies" are famous in Bucharest for practising prostitution. Yet all these erotic episodes degenerate into psychological aggressive acts against the male victims who refuse to follow the steps imposed by the female. Thus, Fănică refuses to put into practice his hostess's erotic promises, so she takes revenge by having him wander around the inn on a terrible weather and finally return to her. Christina offers herself to Egor during her last apparition and Egor's rejection triggers Christina's flight, the house-destroying fire and Sanda's death. Gavrilescu fails to guess the gypsy woman so the three women start their crazy dance to cast him into a space and identity confusion. Aranka is the only character who does not use her charms for an erotic purpose but mostly for the sake of knowledge: she hypnotizes her victim in order to have him find her dead body.

The aggressors use specific tools to reach their goals, either objects or living things – animals or human beings. Thus, Mânjoloaia uses the goat kid and tomcat as her "assistants", then she captures the victim's hat in order to charm it for controlling its wearer. Christina uses her image in the portrait, but mostly the other two female characters which she controls, Mrs Moscu and Simina (in the erotic episode in the cellar, Simina proves to be Christina's *alter ego* through her extreme sadistic behaviour towards Egor). The gyspy women use coffee to put Gavrilescu to sleep, but they aso resort to other instruments for confusing their victim: the paravans, the pale light, their

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deceiving appearance. Aranka uses her portrait, and especially the image of her eyes in the respective painting, to "control" the narrator, but also the secondary character Gyula who contributes to inoculate fear into her victim's heart.

In the texts in English, women-aggressors do not have a very convincing psychological background; moreover, two of them appear as victims at the beginning of the text and become aggressors as a method to take revenge upon their former aggressors. Thus, Mrs Manton was killed in cold blood by her husband and she comes back as a specter to take revenge on her criminal whom she will eventually (and passively) kill only by provoking him an abolute terror. The same cause of death, utter terror, applies in the case of Roderick Usher and of her sister, Madeline Usher, whom he had buried alive. The old woman who abducts Jane Blaney does not manifest violently, she just accomplishes a peaceful ritual of magic rushes. The only woman in the English texts who appears as powerful and finds real pleasure in spreading horror around her by telling her victims – the servants and Anne Blaney – "the most horrific histories she knew" (http://www.litgothic.com/Texts/leixlip.html) is Collogue in *Leixlip Castle*. Aware of her victims' weaknesses, Collogue takes advantage of her manipulatory skills and makes fun at the horror she inoculates into her victims.

Women-aggressors have episodic roles in the English texts, unlike in the Romanian ones. Mrs. Manton only appears in the last paragraph of Bierce's text but not fully: her presence is inferred from the traces of her footsteps on the thick dust lying on the floor; Madeline also appears towards the end of Poe's story to immediately fall down upon her brother's body; the old woman in the forest appears only to cause Jane's disappearance. Their aggression is not under the form of a violent physical action, as in the case of the Romanian characters: it is their simple (passive) presence which causes the victim's death, being rather a psychological aggression. Collogue's presence lasts longer in the text only to serve the author's detailed description of the ritual planned for the eve of October 31st.

In most cases of women-aggressors, the aggression itself represents the core of the fantastic in the respective text, even if sometimes the involvement of the female character is not explicit. Thus, Fănică's wandering around the inn on the terrible weather – which represents the central fantastic episode in *Mânjoală's Inn* – seems to be a stage in Mânjoloaia's plan to have Fănică stay at the inn. Although it is not explicit that Mânjoloaia changed the weather, it is more explicit that she charmed Fănică's fur cap and sent out the goat kid to make sure that the man would return to her inn, where she would use her magic powers to keep him as long as possible. Then, Christina's dream apparitions represent the main fantastic experience for Egor, by the palpable proofs left behind (the smell, her gloves), and her final apparition is the most palpable proof, as is the killing of the vampire by Egor. The gypsy women contribute fully to the general confusion Gavrilescu finds himself into, especially when they suddenly disappear, leaving him alone in an unfamiliar space from which he will eventually come back to the real world where he will never find his place again. Aranka's portrait comes to life and guides the narrator to the marshes in a crazy run at night.

Women-aggressors intend to erotically subdue the male character selected as a partner and to eliminate their female rivals, where this is the case. Thus, Mânjoloaia aims at having Fănică with her at the inn as an erotic partner for the rest of her life, in spite of the fact that he was engaged to Iordache's daughter. She achieves her goal for a short period of time since Fănică's future father-in-law takes action to have him out of the inn and, after two relapses, he is finally cured through "fasting, kneeling and praying" in a "mountain cloister" where he is taken by force "bound hand and foot"

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(Caragiale, *op. cit.* : 148). Miss Christina in turn, tries to solve the erotic frustrations of her short life by her erotic relation with Egor, but the relation fails because of the man who, although charmed until the end, cannot help accomplishing the moral role of killing the vampire which he feels he ought to play. The regrets he feels after this "crime", underlined in the text, clearly suggest how deeply the woman-vampire charmed her male victim: "He had killed her himself; and now, what else could he hope for, whom else could he pray to and what miracle could bring Christina's warm thigh close to him again?!…" (Eliade, *op. cit.*: 144-145). On the other hand, since Egor is in love with Sanda, Christina also aims at eliminating her rival by making her ill and finally (and indirectly) killing her. The purpose of the gyspy women is not very clear in the other text by Eliade: it may not be to establish an erotic relation, but rather to play a game and, possibly, to tempt the victim into remaining in their meta-empirical universe - and, if so, both aims are achieved: Gavrilescu plays the game but understands nothing out of it; then when he returns to the empirical world, he fails to find his place in it again so he has to return to the gyspy women's where he finds his first love, Hildegard, with whom he goes into the forest. Aranka's aim is purely of truth discovery: she chooses the narrator who spends the night in her room to show him the place where her dead body had been lying for several years.

We encounter in Mircea Eliade's *Miss Christina* two secondary female characters which can be considered both victims and aggressors: Mrs Moscu and Simina. They are Miss Christina's victims ("servants"), as she controls them, but they become her instrument of aggression, thus being aggressors, too. It is knowns that in the vampire traditions, whoever is bitten by a vampire becomes a vampire himself / herself and this seems to be the case of these two characters. Mrs Moscu looks rather like a spectre, at times she is totally absent, does not pay attention to the discussions in the room and to the people around her. Yet, she has sudden awakenings to reality and they occur when any detail regarding Christina comes up in a discussion. Athough Mrs Moscu is the one who takes care of her daughter Sanda, she paradoxically contributes to deepening her suffering by repeatingly and sickly mentioning Miss Christina. On the other hand, Simina has the task to "terrorise" Egor either by telling him her nurse's horror stories or by looking out for him in the house or in the yard, culminating with the sado-masochistic erotic episode that takes place in the cellar. So, the two female characters are given different responsibilities by Christina: the former contributes to killing the rival, Sanda, the latter contributes to charming the victim, Egor.

A last observation on women-aggressors refers to the fact that their aggressive features appear as a psychological mimetic reaction to the aggression they suffered themselves previously. Characters such as Mrs Manton or Madeline Usher were first victims and they eventually became aggressors against their initial aggressors. Mr Manton who killed his wife finally becomes her victim; Roderick Usher who buried his sister alive is finally killed by her apparition.

Conclusions

1. Female characters in fantastic prose may be empirical (mostly open towards accepting the fantastic, given their sentimental and intuitive nature) or meta-empirical (witches and thanatological apparitions), according to the universe to which they belong.

2. According to the psychological involvement into the fantastic experience, female characters in fantastic prose may be victims (usually empirical characters),

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aggressors (usually meta-empirical characters) and witnesses (usually empirical characters).

3. Romanian fantastic prose favours female characters as aggressors, such as Mânjoloaia in Caragiale's *Mânjoală's Inn* and Christina in Eliade's *Miss Christina*.

4. Anglo-American fantastic prose follows the Gothic line of women as victims, creating characters such as Rose Velderkaust in Le Fanu's *Schalken the Painter* or Anne Blaney in Maturin's *Leixlip Castle*.

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