

弘前学院大学英米文学

第 43 号

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Supernatural Beings in British Literature

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Introduction

British people have a great attachment to ghosts. There are many cultures related to the ghosts peculiar to the U.K. from the old days; there are many historical ghosts in a rumor that they often appear in the historic buildings such as the Tower of London; the ghost tour around the ghost spots has been held, many haunted houses are traded at a high price. In *British Literature of Ghost*, Kosai Ishihara comments that the characteristic of British ghosts has a legend. In Japan, there are many ghost stories. However, these have not been handed down for one century at the longest. Meanwhile, as you can see from the haunting in all the places of the U.K. from the Roman period, British ghosts have been handed down for a long time. For that reason, it seems that the existence of ghosts is close to British people. In addition, there are many world-famous British fantasy novels, and there are many works that the supernatural beings such as fairies, witches, magic and monsters as well as ghosts appear in British literature.

Supernatural beings in British works have been influenced by the complex relation between Christianity and the development of science; therefore, they have experienced a change in character from its beginning to the present time. In *British Literature of Ghost*, Masatoshi Kawasaki comments that the autobiographical ghost stories appeared in the eleventh century. The term 'purgatory' which shows a proper place for atoning for sin was used in stories around this time. Chapter 1 will examine the description of ghosts in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare (1564-1616); they are famous works in British literature in which ghosts appear in a significant way.

Chapter 2 will describe Gothic Romance. This genre's novels were popular in the end of eighteenth century to the beginning of the nineteenth century. Gothic Romance originated in the U.K. and has been regarded as the origin of the present-day horror novels. The origin of this genre's novels is regarded as *The Castle of Otranto* by a British novelist Horace Walpole (1717-1797). This chapter will examine the features of Gothic Romance, and what kind of influence the appearance of Gothic Romance gave on the history of British literature.

Chapter 3 will describe the fantasy novels and children's literature. The fantasy novels took the place of Gothic Romances and gained tremendous popularity in the end of nineteenth century. There are many masterpieces of fantasy such as *The Harry Potter* series and *The Chronicles of Narnia* series in the U.K. The development of British fantasy novels is related to the children's literature. This chapter will focus on children's literature that has a close connection with the development of fantasy novels and will describe the background of its development.

Chapter 1

Shakespeare's Ghosts

Witch. When shall we three meet again?

In thunder, lightning, or in rain?

Witch. When the hurlyburly's done,

When the battle's lost and won.

Witch. That will be ere the set of sun.

Witch. Where the place?

Witch. Upon the health.

Witch. There to meet with Macbeth.

Witch. I come, Graymalkin!

Witch. Paddock calls.

Witch. Anon!

All. Fair is foul, and foul is fair:

Hover through the fog and filthy air. (I. i. 1-11)

This is the opening scene of *Macbeth* in which the three witches appear. They predict the future of the life of Macbeth. Their prophecy drove his ambition forward. It seems that the existence of witches is the key as the story's development. The existence of the three witches are so related to the up and down of Macbeth's psychological turmoil that we cannot dismiss them as merely fantastic and fictional beings.

Many supernatural beings such as ghosts, witches, and fairies appear in Shakespeare's works. Above all, the works in which ghosts play an important role in his works are *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*. The dead king and father appearing in front of Hamlet to ask him to revenge in *Hamlet* and the king Duncan and the fellow man Banquo killed by Macbeth in *Macbeth* are known as the most famous ghosts in the history of English literature. This chapter describes the ghosts which appears in these two works.

The ghost which appears in *Hamlet* is described as a spirit of Hamlet's dead father. When this ghost appears for the first time, Hamlet says to him, "Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned" (I. iv. 40). This ghost answered as follows:

I am thy father's spirit,

Doomed for a certain term to walk the night

And for the day confined to fast in fires

Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature

Are burnt and purged away. (I. v. 9-13)

The words "fast in fires" express a traditional punishment in purgatory. This important matter here is the statement that this ghost came from purgatory. This description of purgatory is deeply involved in the religion issue at that time. When Catholicism was once

the predominant religion in the U.K., British people were taught that ordinary people, not persons like sinners, should go to hell so that they must pay for sins committed during their lives in purgatory before going to heaven.

Takami Matsuda comments, according to Jacques Le Goff who is a French historian specialized in the religious history of the middle ages, a proper place for atoning for sin called “purgatory” came to exist as a posthumous world in parallel with heaven and hell in the eleventh century. As a result, the dead were given three choices as a destination after death; heaven which is swayed by eternal bliss, hell which is filled with tortures eternally repeated, and purgatory where people are asked to atone for their own sins within a time limit. Moreover, the dead who atoned for sins committed during their life time were guaranteed to go to heaven. It was believed that the dead were thought to be sorted to either heaven or hell by the Last Judgement; they that could achieve their atonement for sin were allowed to go to heaven by the time they received the Last Judgement. It was thought that the spirits that were staying in purgatory would come back to this world, and these spirits were regarded as ghosts at that time. The ghost in *Hamlet* is described as one that came in this world from purgatory for a short period of time. When the ghost appears in front of Hamlet, he speaks the it thus:

HAMLET: Whither wilt thou lead me? Speak! I'll go no further.

GHOST: Mark me.

HAMLET: I will.

GHOST: My hours is almost come

When I to sulphurous and tormenting flames

Must render up myself.

HAMLET: Alas, poor ghost. (I. v. 1-4)

It is certain that the ghost has come from purgatory, because it speaks about its pain in the world after death. As we quoted above, the ghost is suffering from the pain of punishment

caused by “the foul crimes done in [its] days of nature”. However, this thought became to be criticized after 1534. The reason was that Henry VIII established the Anglican Church after he broke up the relation with the Roman Catholic Church, and then the U.K. became to be a Protestant nation. Protestants thought that it was impossible for the souls of the dead to return to this world from purgatory; to begin with, purgatory was the thing only made up by the Catholic. What is more, they believed that a ghost’s identity is nothing but an illusion which was made by the devil. Hamlet says concerning this ghost as follows.

The spirit that I have seen
 May be a de’il, and the de’il hath power
 T’assume a pleasing shape. Yea, and perhaps
 Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
 As he is very potent with such spirits,
 Abuses me to damn me! I’ll have grounds
 More relative than this. The play’s the thing
 Wherein I’ll catch the conscience of the King. (II. ii. 533-540)

Hamlet regarded this ghost as his dead father and swear to revenge himself on his uncle in the end; but he hesitated to do revenge until he made up his mind because he doubted whether this ghost was his genuine father or a devil. In addition, it seems that the famous line of Hamlet “To be, or not to be—that is the question;” (III. i. 55) more strengthened his hesitation whether to revenge or stop.

In *The Introduction to Ghost Study*, Shoichiro Kawai has described that his doubt about the existence of a ghost is involved in British historical backdrop of that time when Protestant’s power was expanding. Shakespeare’s time was a period in which there were two contrary thoughts; Catholic which accepted the existence of a ghost and Protestant which

denies one. For that reason, this scene can be interpreted to be indicating that Hamlet had been wavering between Catholic and Protestant.

On one hand, a spirit of Hamlet's dead father was described as a ghost from the beginning in Hamlet, but on the other hand a ghost which appeared in Macbeth was not clearly described as a ghost at the beginning. At first this ghost appeared as a vision of Macbeth who went out of his mind. When a banquet was held by Macbeth who is now aspiring for the throne, Banquo who was killed by hired assassins by Macbeth appeared.

Macbeth: The table's full.

Lennox: Here is a place reserv'd, Sir.

Macbeth: Where?

Lennox: Here, my good Lord. What is't that moves your Highness?

Macbeth: Which of you have done this?

Lords: What, my good Lord?

Macbeth: Thou canst not say, I did it: never shake

Thy gory looks at me. (III. iv. 44-50)

The ghost of Hamlet can be witnessed by others except Hamlet. However, the ghost of Banquo is recognized by Macbeth only. Although Macbeth is seated in front of the lords who have participated in the banquet, this scene shows that he speaks aloud to this ghost. For this reason, it is said that the spirit in Shakespeare's works are depicted as the uncertain and dubious existences for characters in plays.

Chapter 2

Gothic Romance

On the pleasant banks of the Garonne, in the province of Gascony, stood, in the year 1584, the chateau of Monsieur St. Aubert. From its windows were seen the pastoral landscapes of Guienne and Gascony,

stretching along the river, gay with luxuriant woods and vines, and plantations of olives. To the south, the view was bounded by the majestic Pyrenees, whose summits, veiled in clouds, or exhibiting awful forms, seen, and lost again, as the partial vapours rolled along, were sometimes barren, and gleamed through the blue tinge of air, and sometimes frowned with forests of gloomy pine, that swept downward to their base. These tremendous precipices were contrasted by the soft green of the pastures and woods that hung upon their skirts; among whose flocks, and herds, and simple cottages, the eye, after having scaled the cliffs above, delighted to repose. To the north, and to the east, the plains of Guienne and Languedoc were lost in the mist of distance; on the west, Gascony was bounded by the waters of Biscay. (1)

It is the opening scene of *The Mysteries of Udolpho* by Ann Radcliffe. This story is set in the sixteenth century France. The characteristics of the building which is depicted right at the beginning of this novel are considered to be the features symbolizing the ‘Gothic,’ because this building stood aloof with a grand view of “pastoral landscapes” and it is bounded by the “majestic Pyrenees;” and it seems to be an eerily quiet mansion. We can easily from this context that the scene of this story seems to be the place which is situated a long way from any human dwellings. In addition to this, the place of this grand mansion, the chateau of Monsieur St. Aubert, is described as “these tremendous precipices” surrounded by dense woods and cliffs is also typical of the setting of Gothic Romance. The historical backdrop of the story and buildings which is the very important elements for Gothic Romance.

In the eighteenth century, Gothic Romance came into fashion in the U.K. Gothic Romance deal with the horror which is provoked by some supernatural mysteries; in many works, the medieval buildings are used as part of their settings. This chapter will focus on features of Gothic Romance, and what kind of influence the appearance of Gothic Romance gave on the British literature.

In his book *A Dictionary of the British Culture*, Takashi Kinoshita points out that in the eighteenth century, poets who should be called 'Graveyard Poets' appeared. They were named so because they were fond of the circumstances where ghosts would likely to turn up. They aroused a horror and longing for death by making ghosts appear that are rampant at a ruined monastery and graveyard in the dark of night. The ruins of buildings were a fad; therefore, the ruins of buildings looking like real ones came to be built. An atmosphere where ghosts are likely to appear has come to be called 'Gothic' after a while." According to Hikaru Sakamoto, the term 'Gothic' originally refers to 'Goth' which implies a barbarian; in addition, it was used as derogatory term for the Germanic and Northern European cultures which were not refined. This term was mainly used in the field of architecture. It was used to refer to the medieval architecture, especially church architecture which had steeples from the twelfth to the sixteenth century. What is more, it also referred to the style of art of the same period.

In addition to this, the adjective or noun, 'Gothic' or 'Goth', have been used in many fields such as movies and music up to the present time. However, it shows that its similarity with Gothic Romance which was written from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, not Gothic styles of architecture and art. This paragraph limits Gothic Romance to one that was written from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century, because horror novels are occasionally called 'Gothic Romance', regardless of the time when they were written.

Hikaru Sakamoto says that Gothic Romance shows horror novels which were written from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century; its origin was *The Castle of Otranto*

by a British novelist Horace Walpole (1717-1797). The horror which is provoked by some supernatural mysteries was written in these novels; and the place where mysterious phenomena happen are old-fashioned buildings which usually stand in secluded areas such as mansions, castles, and monasteries. Many works are set in a foreign country or in the past times. The main characters of Gothic Romance encounter mysteries in a different space and a different time dimension that are far from reader's lives. For example, as in the mystery in *The Castle of Otranto*, the scene in which a son of the protagonist Manfred was crushed to death under an enormous helmet is depicted at its opening in the following way:

Where is my son? A volley of voices replied, Oh, my lord! the prince!
the prince! the helmet! the helmet! Shocked with these lamentable
sounds, and dreading he knew not what, he advanced hastily—But
what a sight for a father's eyes!—He beheld his child dashed to
pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, an hundred
times more large than any casque ever made for human being, and
shaded with a proportionable quantity of black feathers. (18)

In this passage, an almost impossible happening is described in a cool way: the son “dashed to pieces, and almost buried under an enormous helmet, a hundred times more large than any casque ever made for human beings.” How can a man die under a huge helmet falling down from overhead? It is a hardly unbelievable scene.

What is more, in the scene where Manfred who has lost his successor persuades a beautiful lady Isabella to get married with him, a mysterious event of his grandfather's portrait's moving by itself happens. The following is the strange happening: At that instant the portrait of his grandfather, which hung over the bench where they had been sitting, uttered a deep sigh, and heaved its breast (25). The portrait of his grandfather just looks like having a life: it “uttered a deep sigh and heaved its breast.”

In *The Introduction to Ghost Study*, Wataru Imamoto comments that the existence of ghosts plays an important role in *The Castle of Otranto*; however, they became to be dealt with lightly in Gothic Novels after *The Castle of Otranto*. In *The Mysteries of Udolpho* and *The Italian* by Ann Radcliffe (1764-1823) who is one of the most famous female Gothic Romance writers, something of ghosts very often appear in her stories. Nevertheless, a rational explanation or interpretation is always added in the later part of the stories. After all, it is revealed that they are not actually ghosts, but some accidental misunderstanding.

In addition, in *Frankenstein* which is one of the most famous Gothic novels by Mary Shelley (1797-1851), a monster which is made of a dead body but not a ghost appears. Thus, the real ghosts do not appear in most of Gothic Romances. What is more, in many works of Gothic Romance, after an encounter with mysteries, these mysteries are resolved in the final stage of a story. The world of a story comes around to a peaceful life and ending. The mystery that has been considered a supernatural phenomenon at the beginning of the story is explained rationally in the end.

There were many works in which ghosts appear before Gothic Romance came into being. However, the existence of supernatural beings such as a monster which was depicted in *Frankenstein* and a vampire which was depicted by Bram Stoker (1847-1912) is more creative and unrealistic than previous ones. The eighteenth century is not only the time when Gothic Romance came into fashion but also the time of the philosophy of the Enlightenment; therefore, many people of that time tended to think anything in a logical way. It seems that Gothic Romance was born because people's curiosity overwhelmed people's fear; it seems that science overpowered emotion.

The characteristic of this period is certainly different from that of the period of Shakespeare which we have considered in Chapter 1. This fact can be known from the way of

depicting and dealing with ghosts in each period's literary works. Shakespeare's ghost may or may not be real beings, which Gothic Romance writers' ghosts are completely fictional beings. Nevertheless, readers having denied the existence of supernatural things took an interest in these existences. It seems that Gothic Romance gained popularity because they had interest and nostalgia for something supernatural. In the history of British literature, the appearance of Gothic Romance established a novel's new genre in which the existence of supernatural beings such as ghosts and monsters is imagined and implied. Gothic Romance declined after the nineteenth century; however, the term 'Gothic' has been used in various genres, not only literature, but also movies, dramas, music and fashion today. Gothic and Goth things have continued to appeal to us throughout from the eighteenth century to the present day, changing its implied form and image.

Chapter 3

Fantasy and Children's Literature

'Petrificus Totalus!' she cried, pointing it at Neville.

Neville's arms snapped to his sides. His legs sprang together. His whole body rigid, he swayed where he stood and then fell flat on his face, stiff as a board.

Hermione ran to turn him over. Neville's jaws were jammed together so he couldn't speak. Only his eyes were moving, looking at them in horror.

'What've you done to him?' Harry whispered.

'It's the full Body-Bind,' said Hermione miserably.

(Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, 198-199)

It is one of the scenes of *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*; the first novel of the *Harry Potter* series by J. K. Rowling. This is one of the most famous British fantasy

novels. Hermione casts the spell '*Petrificus Totalus*' which is the spell of body binding to Neville who stands in their way. Thus, in the world of fantasy novels, the unrealistic things like using magic are common.

After Gothic Romance declined, fantasy novels won popularity in the nineteenth century. Fantasy novels are set in worlds different from this world and have different dimensions and describe supernatural existences and lives. In the history of literature, the origin of fantasy novel was from mythology, legendary heroes' stories that were written in ancient times. In the U.K., however, fantasy novels spread as entertainment like children's literature such as *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* written by Lewis Carroll (1832-1898). The genre of fantasy was treated as the field of children, and yet the target of readers gradually became adults as well as children, and this genre came to be developed fully well. This chapter will focus on children's literature that has a close connection with the development of fantasy novels and will discuss the background of its development.

According to Hisao Ishizuka, there have been many works of literature that include unrealistic elements from the Middle Ages; however, fantasy novels have been established as novels for enjoying the dereism of the self in unrealistic elements and worlds, and this genre has been developed from the nineteenth century. The literary works featuring unrealistic things largely include the novels that are set in the world of the future in which these exists unrealistic advanced technology like science fiction, while fantasy novels are set in the ancient or medieval world that accepts magic instead of the undevelopment of modern technique. For example, in *The Lord of the Rings* (1954-1955) by John Ronald Reuel Tolkien (1892-1973) which is one of the famous British fantasy novels, the scene is laid in the different-dimensional world where vast nature extends, and various tribes such as magicians, hobbits and elves appear. William Morris (1834-1896) who was active in the second half of

the nineteenth century had written many stories which included an element of fantasy, which greatly influenced Tolkien.

It is said that the second half of the nineteenth century was generally shaped into the golden age of British children's literature. Satoshi Ando comments that Humphrey Carpenter considers the era from the 1860s to the early twentieth century is the 'golden age' of children's literature; Margaret Drabble and Jenny Stringer point out that most of classical children's literature were published in the late nineteenth century; in addition, Virginia Haviland called the 1950s 'the secondary golden age' of British children's literature. The most important works of 'the primary golden age' are *The Water-Babies* by Charles Kingsley (1819-1875), *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* written by Lewis Carroll, *The Wind in the Willows* by Kenneth Grahame (1859-1932), *Peter and Wendy* by James Matthew Barrie (1860-1937) and so on. In the 1950s of 'the secondary golden age,' classical literature of the twentieth century was published; the series of *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) by Clive Staples Lewis (1898-1963), *The Borrowers* by Mary Norton (1903-1992), *The Children of Green Knowe* by Lucy Maria Boston (1892-1990), *Tom's Midnight Garden* by Ann Philippa Pearce (1920-2006) can be given as representative example.

What is more, Satoshi Ando comments that important works appeared in a concentrative manner in the 1860s, the 1900s and the 1950s in particular even if surveying with the field limited to the history of British children's literature; these three periods are the 'historical crisis' for some reason. In the 1860s, great children's novels like *The Water-Babies* and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* were published. Peter Hunt considers the factor of the promotion of children's literature's prosperity due to the reduced cost of books and the legalization of elementary education in 1870. What is more, Charles Robert Darwin (1809-1882) advocated the theory of evolution in 1859. This shook Christianity's old traditional

thought and left an impact on the British nation. These elements were regarded as the 'historical crisis' of this period.

The reasons why the 1900s was 'historical crisis' are the 1900s was a turning point of the century, that is, the end of Victorian era, and the period when the loss of the traditional landscapes came up to the surface because of the nation's industrialization. The end of Victoria era is an important historical event in particular. This era was an unprecedented prosperous age when British industry continued to develop, and the standard of living was raised by increasing prosperity. Therefore, the passing of the Queen that was a symbolic existence coupled with the pessimism of the end of the century promoted the anxiety of people at that time. In the 1930s *Mary Poppins* by Pamela Lyndon Travers (1899-1996) and *The Hobbit* by Tolkien were published. Just during this period, there were historical crises such as worldwide great depression, fascism, the popular front and the New Deal strategy.

The 1950s that Haviland called 'the secondary golden age' is regarded as an unprecedented golden age of fantasy in the history of literature, and many masterpieces like *The Chronicles of Narnia* and *The Lord of the Rings* were published. This period is the age when the wounds of the Second World War still remained in the hearts of people, and unidentifiable fear was prevailing among people in society. In addition, it was the age that there was much fear as the historical crisis in the U.K.; it included the economic crisis, the destabilized economy, the end of British Empire as a result of the independence of many colonies signified by Suez disturbance, the transition of the world economy's center to America. In the end of the twentieth century, the series of *Harry Potter* beginning with *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* by J. K. Rowling (1965-) continued to remain in the top rankings of the best seller. The cause of the prosperity of fantasy at this age is the rapid loss of fantasy elements from this world through the spirit of utilitarianism at Victorian era and the

development of technology at the twentieth century. What is lacking in reality has come to be made up with the worlds and text of fictional stories.

It is necessary for people in any age to look back on the past and to sometimes make an escape to the world of fantasy. In a sense, it has been always one of the ways that people manage to bridge the gap between the realistic and the un realistic. Therefore, the literary works that include many fantastic elements exist more or less in any age. It is no coincidence that so many a great fantasy novel were written in the 1860's, the 1900's and the 1950's, and these works were read widely and established the history of British literature. These two historical facts were closely related within the mind of people who had the sense of fear facing the 'historical crisis' of the age.

Conclusion

This paper has investigated supernatural beings in British literature from the age of Shakespeare to the present day. Chapter 1 has described the representations of ghosts in *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* by Shakespeare. Shakespeare considered the background of the religion at that time because he used purgatory in his works. Thus, there is a difference between the ghost in *Hamlet* and that of *Macbeth*, so it seems that the ghosts which were written by Shakespeare are uncertain existences for characters in plays. What is more, he used a description of witches as the key which develops the story.

Chapter 2 has examined Gothic Romance. Ghosts and visions played the important role in British literature until the eighteenth century. However, they disappeared because British people became to grasp things rationally. Gothic Romance brought the supernatural beings including ghosts into novels and established the new genre in the history of literature. Today, there are many cultures which are derived from Gothic Romance: music, fashion, and drama, so the Gothic elements continue to change their shape.

Chapter 3 has discussed the fantasy novels and children's literature in modern times. In the nineteenth century, the fantasy novels have been in popularity. This genre deals with unrealistic elements and the story is developed in a world of fantasy. In the U.K., the origin of fantasy novels is involved in children's literature. Fantasy novels as entertainment have been regarded as children's literature. The genre of fantasy has been treated as the field of children; therefore, at the first, the target of readers of fantasy was children, and it gradually involved adults as well as children. The *Harry Potter* series was originally intended for children; however, the series won popularity among adults. The appearance of the great literary works of fantasy in the 'historical age' was caused by people's fear and escaping from reality.

In British literary history, the depiction of supernatural beings was influenced by religion and the technological progress; therefore, it continues to change itself. The fantasy stories used to be for children, but these are fad in the world now. For that reason, in any age, we have interest and nostalgia for supernatural things and supernatural beings, and a world of fantasy is something of essential existence for our lives.

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弘前学院大学英米文学
第43号

2019年3月16日

発行者 弘前学院大学英語・英米文学会
代表者 佐藤 和博
編集者 フォーサイス・エドワード

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**The English Department Review
of
Hirosaki Gakuin University**

No. 43 March 2019

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**The Association of the Hirosaki Gakuin University
Department of English and English Literature**