
VICTORIAN DRAMA IN GOTHIC SETTING (“Lady Audley’s secret” by Mary Elizabeth Braddon)

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The article analyses thematic and figurative connection between early Gothic novels by English writers and Mary Braddon’s Victorian best-seller “Lady Audley’s Secret”, especially in terms of chronotope. Braddon’s literary creation follows the main principles of sensational fiction, featuring a thrilling plot and magnetic characters, but the problem set behind the family drama is closely interwoven with the topical issues of Victorian society — stereotyped view of female depravity, social and gender inequality, connections between mental illness and moral corruption. Combining Gothic and sensational elements, Braddon makes her novel more complicated and controversial, than the plot and subgenre suggest.

Key words: chronotope, literary Gothic, Victorian society, sensational fiction, family drama, mystery.

English Gothic novel in its classical form — as a phenomenon of Preromanticism — has barely outlived the XVIII century itself. Throughout this period most examples of the genre closely followed a set of rules established by the author of the first Gothic novel, Horatio Walpole (1717—1797). His whimsical book, “The Castle of Otranto”, 1764, promoted the fashion for Gothic in London no less effectively than his queer architectural construction, Strawberry-hill, imitating a medieval castle. The gloomy atmosphere of the building with its dark passages, turrets and merlons could have produced — or at least influenced — the setting and the plot of Walpole’s novel, which is centered on a powerful image of the castle. The castle Otranto seems to acquire the status of the central character, exceeding its role as a mere background in the story. This transition is reflected in the title, which puts chronotope above all the other characters, even self-willed Manfred and chivalrous young Theodore.

Most novels written in Gothic style after Walpole either imitated or modified his principles of the newly introduced genre, turning them into widely recognized conventions. One of the principles required special attention to the chronotope, in most cases represented by a half-ruined castle or an abandoned abbey. Such gloomy scenery can be found in many English novels of the given period, up to the beginning of the XIX century, when the exhausted clichés of the genre became the fuel for literary wits and parodists like T.L. Peacock with his “Nightmare Abbey” (1818).

This emphasis on the chronotope used to reveal itself in the titles of the Gothic novels, plainly indicating the central setting: “Castles Athlin and Dunbayn” (1789), “The Mysteries of Udolpho” (1794) by Anne Radcliffe, “The Castle of Wolfenbach” (1793) by Eliza Parsons and a few more. By the end of the century a typical Gothic chronotope included a range of essential and only slightly varied elements, such as a secret passage or chamber, a labyrinth of staircases, not infrequently disappearing in the darkness of the vault, a room with some kind of mystery — mostly shadows or at least portraits of the former inhabitants. Supernatural presence was rarely depicted in the classical literary

Gothic, though Walpole's unbridled fantasy populated his novel with walking skeletons and huge knights. It was rather his involuntary critic, Clara Reeve's tendency, with her highly sensible version of "Otranto" that predominated in the Gothic novel of the first generation. Reeve's moderate supply of literary horrors demanded nightmares instead of real frights whereas hints and suspicions replaced the products of Walpole's vivid imagination. Most female Gothic writers of the XVIII century followed her example, avoiding graphic violence and disturbing otherworldly presence in their novels. However, even in their texts, especially by Radcliffe, the reader will undoubtedly come across the extended descriptions of the decayed Gothic buildings with gloomy passages and disturbingly empty rooms.

Aesthetic aspects of the chronotope in early Gothic novels were specified by the concept of the Sublime. It became a substitution of the neo-classicist idea of the Beautiful. The development of the Sublime as artistic foundation of Preromanticism can be observed through the works of Richard Hurd and Edmund Burke. The former reflected upon medieval imagery as a new source of inspiration for the writers of the romances (*Letters on Chivalry and Romance*, 1762), while the latter created an elaborate classification of the forms and functions of the Sublime in art, especially in literature (*A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, 1757). The literary devices which could produce deep impact upon the reader included, according to Burke, dimness and obscurity, vastness and infinity, magnificence and the feeling of power, but in the first place the striking contrasts of dark and light, silence and loud sounds, joy and grief. The whole range seems to become an essential part of Gothic novels, from Walpole to Maturin, though the most scrupulous disciple was certainly Radcliffe, whose novels comprised extensive descriptions of nature — with its picturesque sublimity — and ruined buildings.

The beginning of the XIX century witnessed the last surges of interest to the Gothic novel before it ceased to exist in the form familiar to the XVIII century readers — especially to the female audience — and became the ground for the parodies and the source for other literary genres and trends. The most vigorous interest to the Gothic literary inheritance expressed the Romantics and later — the Victorian novelists. Gothic plots and motifs play an important part in the works of Bronte sisters, Charles Dickens, Elizabeth Gaskell, Sheridan le Fanue, but only one genre of Victorian literature can be considered a direct heir of the classical Gothic novel — a novel of sensation.

Sensational literature of the XIX century combines aesthetic principles of the Gothic literary style with topical themes of Victorian epoch, revealing the problems of the contemporary society. The most painful of them were the issues of female deprivation and vulnerability; latent violence in the families; high crime rate and poverty; social and gender inequalities. "Society is a vast magazine of crime and suffering, of enormities, mysteries and miseries of every possible description..." [1. P. 745].

An essay "Mary Elizabeth Braddon" by famous novelist and literary critic Henry James (1843—1916) underlines the connection between Gothic novel and literature of sensation. The two genres are close in structure and artistic purposes, though the setting seems to have changed dramatically: «Instead of the terrors of "Udolpho", we are treated to the terrors of the cheerful country-house and the busy London lodging. And there is no doubt that these were infinitely the more terrible" [1. P. 742].

Mary Braddon's name was chosen for the essay about sensational literature for obvious reasons — she is the acclaimed author of the best examples of the genre. One of her numerous novels, the most popular one — "Lady Audley's Secret" (1862) — clearly illustrates what result can be achieved by blending the Gothic and Victorian traditions under one book-cover. Braddon's debt to the literary Gothic in this novel is accentuated by the dedication of the book to Sir Edward Bulwer-Lytton (1803—1873), whose own literary career was greatly influenced by his interest to occultism and mysticism.

The plot of Braddon's most famous novel at first sight seems to be rather predictable and looks like a set of novelettish clichés. A beautiful young governess marries a widowed baronet, generous and considerate. He has got a nephew, reserved and eccentric but rather shrewd, whose presence in the novel could bring the plot to the trivial adultery story — but instead turned it into a gripping thriller.

The plot is centered on the title heroine, charming Lady Audley, who appears before the reader in a sequence of stunning transformations, from a darling home angel, everybody's favourite, to a cold-blooded murderer, and then a captive of the elite asylum. All these changes in heroine's character and fate bring us back to the topical Victorian issues, especially concerning female status in the society, narrowed down to two possible variants — either a respected matron, virtuous and lacking improper emotions and impulses, or a social outcast, stigmatized as disreputable, rebellious, criminal or at least insane — all for ignoring or violating the rules. The consequences of this contradiction were familiar to Mary Elizabeth Braddon herself. For a long time she occupied a vulnerable position a mistress to a married man, whose wife got insane and was confined to an asylum. This fact can make us look at Lady Audley's character and behavior from a different point, not jumping to hasty conclusions. Having experienced public disgrace herself, Mary Braddon could have desired to take a deeper look at female psychology and behavior in stressful situation — and her heroine is certainly going through one in the novel.

All the events in Lady Audley's life are connected with, controlled or subdued by men. Her heavily drinking father seeks to sell her "to the highest bidder", who turns out to be young officer, whose rich father resists this match and withdraws the allowance. Desperate young husband abandons Helen with a baby and leaves for Australia, hoping to make a fortune. While Helen was trying to start a new life, she received the chance she didn't even dream of. And again, it was coming from a man — rich, generous and adoring. It was the safety of an ancient family mansion, and the perspective of a better life, protected and provided for, that attracted her, rather than Michael Audley's wealth and position.

The most drastic events in heroine's life are connected with the house, which seems to haunt her, turning from a quiet shelter into its gloomy double — mental hospital for "special" patients. The image of an abode which becomes a prison is common both for Gothic novel and for Victorian literature of sensation. Braddon intensifies the connection between two literary traditions in her book by using a few classical motifs of the Gothic novel: a building with a secret, a hidden passage, a fateful portrait, and a family curse — insanity.

Like in the original Gothic novel, the setting in Braddon's book comes to the fore and plays a crucial part in the plot. Its importance is underlined by its title position. Aud-

ley-Court, which belongs to a baronet and represents his wealth and power, for young Helen becomes a shelter and then some kind of private domain, embodying her dream of a new life, though built with the help of deceit and crime. Her new name, a false and delusive one, not only places her under protection and guidance of Michael Audley, but also makes her life interwoven with the house bearing the same name, eventually turning this place into the symbol of her fickle and deplorable fate. Braddon evens seems ironic upon this point — the chapter which starts with a detailed description of Audley Court is called “Lucy”, which is one of heroine’s false names.

The house appears in the novel long before the main characters are introduced to the reader — in the very first lines of the novel. The scenery painted by Braddon seems to follow Burke’s principles, combining picturesque and sublime with mysterious and dark: «It lay down in a hollow, rich with fine old timber and luxuriant pastures. To the right there were the kitchen gardens... and a broken ruin of a wall, in some places thicker than it was high, and everywhere overgrown with trailing ivy, yellow stonecrop, and dark moss. To the left there was a broad graveled walk, down which, years ago, when the place had been a convent, the quiet nuns had walked hand in hand; a wall bordered with espaliers, and shadowed on one side by goodly oaks, which shut out the flat landscape, and circled in the house and gardens with a darkening shelter... At the end of this avenue there was an old arch and a clock tower” [2. P. 3].

The picture created by Braddon would immediately remind a sophisticated reader similar scenery from numerous Gothic novels of the previous period, but more than anything else — Radcliffe’s famous passages of the same nature. In one of her early books we find a matching description, close in tone, atmosphere and even details: “It stood on a kind of rude lawn, overshadowed by high and spreading trees, which seemed coeval with the building, and diffused a romantic gloom around. The greater part of the pile appeared to be sinking into ruins, and that, which had withstood the ravages of time, shewed the remaining features of the fabric more awful in decay. The lofty battlements, thickly enwreathed with ivy, were half demolished. Huge fragments of the eastern tower, which was almost demolished, lay scattered amid the high grass, that waved slowly to the breeze” [3. P. 15]. Gothic elements in both extracts include ruins, towers, arches, ivy and other sorts of trees, creating shadowed passages, signs of decay, and thick vegetation, which strives to conquer the territory, hiding the reminders of human passions, ambitions and sufferings. Though Radcliffe describes an abandoned abbey, while Braddon portrays a still inhabited family mansion, the similarity between two pictures is remarkable. Even the past of the two buildings coincides, as Audley-Court also used to be a monastery (which was a very popular type of Gothic chronotope from Radcliffe to M.G. Lewis and Maturin). This resemblance can provoke a few questions which Braddon leaves without response. Is the state of the abbey in Radcliffe’s novel, abandoned and decaying, the destiny Audley Court is facing, after banishing its unlawful mistress? Depicting Audley Court in the terms of a Gothic novel, whom did Braddon appoint as a Gothic heroine, lonely, vulnerable but persistent — beautiful Helen, wicked and desperate, or baronet’s young daughter, Alicia, self-willed but charming? Both are far from being happy in this ancient quaint house, which has accumulated dramas and mysteries of numerous generations living there.

The age of this house makes it a peer of the castles from original Gothic novels: "a house that must have been the handiwork of that good old builder, Time, who, toppling down a chimney coeval with the Plantagenets, and setting up one in the style of the Tudors; shaking down a bit of Saxon wall, allowing a Norman arch to stand here; and joining on a dining-room after the fashion of the time of Hanoverian George I, to a refectory that had been standing since the Conquest, had contrived, in some eleven centuries, to run up such a mansion as was not elsewhere to be met with throughout the county of Essex" [2. P. 4]. Giving this enumeration of epochs, reflected in the outer look of the mansion, as well as in its atmosphere, Braddon turns Audley Court into a set of quotations, literary and architectural, like Horatio Walpole did when designed Strawberry Hill, this simulacrum of a Gothic castle.

Thus the house which at first glance could produce the impression of a respectable country residence starts revealing its dark secrets. The narrator mentions another detail which is typical for both Gothic and sensational chronotopes — a hidden room. In Braddon's novel its existence in the house is explained through reference to history: it was used as a hiding-place for Catholic priests in the period of prosecution. There were a few other obscure moments in the history of the house — one of them is mentioned by the lady-maid's guest, Luke: "It's a mortal dull place; I've heard tell of a murder that was done here in old times" [2. P. 25]. The effect is supported by the surroundings of the mansion: "The very repose of the place grew painful from its intensity, and you felt as if a corpse must be lying somewhere within that gray and ivy-covered pile of building — so deathlike was the tranquility of all around» [2. P. 21].

Some of such hints are left unexplained — Braddon just uses them to intensify detective atmosphere of her novel. But due to them we are reminded again of secret rooms and passages, long-forgotten murders and other darkly events of the past which constituted an essential part of the plot in classical Gothic — the examples can be drawn from the above-mentioned "Romance of the Forest" by Radcliffe and other novels of the kind. Besides, in "Lady Audley's Secret" the hidden passage symbolically represents Helen's double life and the sinister aspect of her character, her latent disease, which began to reveal itself under pressure of circumstances, Robert Audley's curiosity and persistence being one of them, her first husband's unexpected, unimaginable arrival — another.

The most symbolic part of the house, however, is Lady Audley's room, where she shelters from inquisitive eyes of visitors and servants, her husband's tiresome tenderness and her stepdaughter's hostility. This room is a typical high society Victorian lady's residence — richly furnished and exquisitely decorated, elegant and comfortable, but certainly not cosy, on the opposite — gloomy and disturbing. This contrast of luxury and stifling atmosphere is emphasized by a sincere astonishment of a person, unaccustomed to such wealth. We see Helen's room with the eyes of her maid's cousin, rude and unsophisticated lad, whom the lady's rooms seem to be the English equivalent of Ali-Baba's cave full of treasures. The entrance to the room is covered with "a heavy green cloth curtain" — both the colour and the idea of theatricality are conspicuous, exposing the duplicity of the local resident. The folklore associations of green colour

with faeries and, consequently, with treachery and evil, are emphasized by mentioning “a fairy-like boudoir” [4; 5]. These motifs point at Lady Audley’s double nature, her elf-like attractiveness and a soul of a changeling.

But all the treasures of her sanctuary fail to disguise her perilous secret — “a baby’s little worsted shoe rolled up in a piece of paper, and a tiny lock of pale and silky yellow hair, evidently taken from a baby’s head” [2. P. 26], which she kept as a reminder of her bitter past. There’s another object in her room, though, which presents even more powerful threat to Helen’s present placidity, and it is also characteristically Gothic. Sinister or mysterious portraits can be found in all Gothic novels of the XVIII—XIX centuries, with very few exceptions. The tradition, again, could have possibly be set by the first text of the genre — the motif of portrait plays a significant part in the imagery of “The Castle of Otranto”, moving successfully from Radcliffe to Lewis and Maturin, afterwards to their literary heirs like Le Fanue with his “Carmilla” (1872). In Braddon’s novel the portrait helps to speed up the development of the plot — George recognizes his wife on it, while considering her dead and lost for him, — and also serves as a warning for Helen’s main antagonist, Robert Audley. The picture of Lady Audley was painted by some unknown artist, who, eager to follow a fashionable style — pre-Raphaelite, as the narrator asserts — unwillingly imparted such features to Helen’s appearance, which were completely unimaginable on her pretty doll’s face, but at the same time seem to express her true nature: “No one but a pre-Raphaelite would have so exaggerated every attribute of that delicate face as to give a lurid brightness to the blonde complexion, and a strange, sinister light to the deep blue eyes. No one but a pre-Raphaelite could have given to that pretty pouting mouth the hard and almost wicked look it had in the portrait. ... My lady, in his portrait of her, had something of the aspect of a beautiful fiend” [2. P. 57].

Both times when Lady Audley’s sanctuary is intruded, it’s women — first her maid, then stepdaughter, who betrayed her because of their envy and jealousy, bringing men to this spellbound shelter. And men make Lady Audley’s dream turn into a nightmare: while her inert husband rapidly renounces his elevated feelings to a former idol of his heart, Robert Audley organizes Helen’s confinement to a mental asylum, which shares a few Gothic features with Audley Court, making the reader wonder if baronet’s house was (or would have become later) just a different kind of prison for a mentally unstable woman branded by her family and former friends as a criminal. The similarity between Audley Court and a mental institution where Helen is placed is emphasized by the fact that she enters both under a feigned name, though the second time not upon her own will. Her confinement and her false name helps Robert clarify his and his uncle’s name, as well as Helen’s first husband, and her father’s, if it comes to that. Helen is deprived of her past, her identity and connections, and any hope for future is also denied to her. This denouement is supposed to represent the victory of virtue over crime and sin. But Gothic quality of two buildings which are closely connected with Helen’s life make her look rather like a victim, than a defeated enemy. Even Robert Audley, the lady’s chief persecutor, feels uncomfortable and even guilty, leaving her behind, doomed to a dismal kind of existence, which she correctly describes as “a living grave”. Though

evil seems to be punished in the novel, its source remains outside, in the society of that time, which accuses the heroine mostly because she presents a threat to its patriarchal order.

Allusions and references to Gothic novels, especially works of female tradition, help to present Braddon's title character in a broader view, not merely as a female villain, but as a complicated image, illustrating some controversial issues of Victorian society.

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ВИКТОРИАНСКАЯ ДРАМА В ГОТИЧЕСКИХ ДЕКОРАЦИЯХ (роман Мэри Элизабет Брэддон «Тайна леди Одли»)

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Статья посвящена анализу тематических и образных перекличек между ранними готическими романами и произведением Мэри Элизабет Брэддон «Тайна леди Одли» преимущественно на материале хронотопа. Роман Мэри Брэддон следует основным канонам сенсационной прозы, сочетая захватывающий сюжет с притягательными образами главных героев, но основная проблема, представленная в форме семейной драмы, тесно связана с противоречиями Викторианского общества, с его стереотипным представлением о женской порочности, социальным и гендерным неравноправием, убежденностью в связи душевных заболеваний с развращенностью. Соединяя готические и викторианские черты, Брэддон превращает свой роман в более глубокое и многогранное произведение, чем подразумевают границы данного жанра.

Ключевые слова: хронотоп, готический стиль в литературе, викторианское общество, сенсационная проза, семейная драма, тайна.