

## THE MISTY WORLDS OF ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE

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**Abstract:** Arthur Conan Doyle's interest in spiritualism and all kind of natural mysteries of the material world is well known. The paper aims to trace how the writer's devotion was reflected in his works of fiction. Conan Doyle tried to depict ghosts and spirits in many of his writings, basing the images on his own experience, evidences of other people and, obviously, imagination. The paper traces how the genre form can influence the imagery. It is shown that Doyle demonstrated different approaches in his writings concerning the supernatural phenomena. The close interlacing of the Gothic elements with pragmatic scientific approach of the author form strong artistic effect. His mystical stories of the 1890-1910s leave place for the reader's imagination even when they give rational explanation of the strange events and thus they can be defined as typically neo-romantic in their origin. The naturalistic description of paranormal phenomena in *The Land of Mist* aimed to prove their reality makes the miracles look fake and ridiculous. Doyle's attempt to use the form of the adventure novel and familiar popular characters to show his readership the importance and beauty of Spiritualism failed. The novel turned into a manifesto of spiritualism.

**Keywords:** English literature, Arthur Conan Doyle, short stories, *The Land of Mist*, Spiritualism, spirits, Victorian Gothic.

**1. Introduction.** Arthur Conan Doyle's creative works had a great impact on 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century culture all around the world. Being an educated medic and thus having a good knowledge of biology he managed to make great scientific prophesies, showing for example a zoological world unknown in his time but open to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (*the marracote deep*). His historical novels and short stories develop Walter Scott's traditions on the one hand, but on the other, form, together with R.L. Stevenson writings, a new model of history prose. However, he is mainly known for his detective stories about Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson, and science fiction novels *the lost world*, *the poison belt*. Some of his writings are connected with the problems of the supernatural. As many of his contemporaries Doyle approached the supernatural as a yet unexplored part of the objective world and tried to understand the natural origin of these phenomena.

**2. Methods.** To a large extent Conan Doyle's interpretation of supernatural was based on the more general processes in Victorian culture and literary fashion of his time. "Because the advances in science were so rapid, the natural and the supernatural often became blurred in popular thinking, at least for a time. And no area of the literary culture of the Victorians was left untouched by this interplay of science and magic." [Luckhurst, 2014]. Thus it is no wonder that The Spiritualism, as a belief in existence of communication between the dead and the living formed around 1840<sup>th</sup> in the USA, soon spread widely in Victorian England. "Paradoxically, Victorian Spiritualism was the natural child of rationalism and loss of religious faith; a strange hybrid of science and evolutionary metaphysics which attracted the minds of many people at the turn of the nineteenth century." [Dinejko, 2013, Metsämuuronen, J. (2018)].

The devotion to Spiritualism starts to predominate in the last decades of Conan Doyle's life and was reflected in his writings. The main part of literary research concentrates lately on Sherlock Holmes stories, revealing new sides of the classics of detective genre [Pascal 2000, Lycett 2007, Dirda 2012, Escobar, Edison Stiven Castro. 2018]. Most critics and biographers mention his interest in spiritualism, speak about his spiritualistic beliefs, lectures, and propaganda of the Spiritualist Church [Miller 2008, Booth 1992, Stashower 1999], but his short stories and the novel dedicated to the topic are not explored enough yet. Though not all of these Conan Doyle's writings possess high artistic quality, they are very representative of the time and his creativity in general, thus requiring a more detailed study. Different forms of representation of supernatural phenomena in literature attract attention of the recent literary criticism. [Shchepacheva, 2017, Karasik, 2017, Shamina, 2016, Khabibullina, 2017, Bobileva, 2017].

We aim to show how Conan Doyle's spiritualistic views were reflected in his novel *The Land of Mist* and trace their roots in the earlier novellas, written in the 1890–1910s.

**3. Results.** Doyle's attitude to the supernatural was quite complicated. His deep interest in it reveals his searches of the spiritual side of the material world. Due to his educational background he always tended to think about it as some unknown form of material. By the moment he started his literary career in the 1890s he got to know many of the investigators of the paranormal, Sir Oliver Lodge among them. In 1893 Doyle himself joined the Psychical Research Society. It was at this time that he met with Spiritualism face to face, but was yet rather skeptical about it.

The collection of short stories known as *The Captain of Pole Star* belongs exactly to this period. Many of them deal with the supernatural phenomena. (*The Specter Hand*, *The Coachfull of Ghosts*, *The Veiled Portrait*, *De Profundis*, *The Captain of the Pole Star*). Though being to a certain extent imitative, most of them possess a high level of artistic endeavor. They are full of poetry, bright imagery, strong plot structure and sensational mystery.

*The Specter Hand* is written as a typical bride ghost story. A Danish officer Carl Holberg being deadly wounded during the battle is mysteriously saved by the deceased daughter of the count in whose house the survivor hero finds shelter after the battle. The young man is so enchanted by her that they exchange rings. It can be interpreted as a mystical betrothal on the one hand, or madness caused by the wound on the other. Later it comes out that the girl, bound by his delirium vows, is doomed to live, waiting for the posthumous meeting with his ghost bride, and in the final commits suicide, not able to bear the burden of the enchantment.

The description of the apparition is given gradually. At first it is seen by Carl in the painful delirium as an intangible ideal creature. Then after giving this emotional description the hero presents a detailed portrait of his vision. The image of the supernatural phenomenon is built on a contrast of romantic and realistic approach. On the one hand we see the perception of the apparition's beauty as something unreal, but on the other hand the apparition has a rather ordinary nice face, the solemn vow and the picture *photographed* in protagonist's brain and heart.

The protagonist of *The Captain of the Pole Star* searches his beloved in a fierce and mad rush, risking the life of his crew in the Arctic sea and in the final seems to meet with her on the edge of physical and eternal life. The vision is described from two perspectives: materialistic and idealistic: "To my eyes it seemed but a snow-drift, but many of my companions averred that it started up in the shape of a woman, stooped over the corpse and kissed it, and then hurried away across the floe. <...> Sure it is that Captain Nicholas Craigie had met with no painful end, for there was a bright smile upon his blue pinched features, and his hands were still outstretched as though grasping at the strange visitor which had summoned him away into the dim world that lies beyond the grave" [Doyle, 2000, p. 248]. The poetical image of the last kiss taking the form of a snow-drift reveals the hidden hope of the lovers meeting after death in some other world.

It is the force of love which gives people the power to see "through the veil", to overstep the edge of physical existence. The stories speak mainly of purely spiritual, sensual, but not of physical qualities of the apparitions. There are usually two narrators: the story-teller, pretending, or sometimes being, the mouthpiece of the author, and the protagonist of the story. The first often is not the evidence of the mystical apparition, or does not believe in its supernatural source, the possible rational explanation of the supernatural phenomenon is usually given from his perspective. The second is emotionally living it through and perceiving it as a real but absolutely unexplained fact. The reader is given freedom of his own interpretation.

It is also possible to speak of one more type of Conan Doyle's stories which depict a kind of reincarnation or ability of the heroes to see through the mist of times. They were written later, after the Boer War, and belong to another collection - *The Last Galley* (1911).

*Through the Veil* shows us how a common middleclass couple visiting the ruins of a Roman fort somewhere near the Scottish Border have a strange dream at night revealing to them their historical past, and thus nearly ruining their present. The husband sees himself as a wild and fierce Pict who tries to kidnap the young Roman girl. Conan Doyle explains the case as a vision of the past, possibly reincarnation or the sign from their ancestors: "For an instant the curtain of the past had swung aside, and some strange glimpse of a forgotten life had come to them. But it closed down, never to open again" [Doyle, 1911, p. 162].

This text on the one hand forms a vivid and trustworthy image of Roman Britain as the other stories of the collection, but on the other, shows how easily the supernatural can thrust itself into routine human life and change it drastically. The main artistic force of the story lies in the combination of accurate history reconstruction and mysterious event in the life of the characters.

*The Silver Mirror* bearing certain reminiscences of E.A. Poe's *The Oval Portrait* in its plot tells how the hero, overstrained by intellectual work, while sitting over it in late hours in a half-delirious state visions strange pictures in his old mirror. Night by night the visions come to him forming strange and unknown for him episodes from the bygone times. Telling the story to his friend the hero finds out that what he saw was the murder of Rizzo by the Scottish nobles in the presence of Mary, Queen of Scots in March 1566. The mirror reflected and "remembered" the episode. The historical characters appear as if through the veil of mystery of the mirror, which makes it more fascinating for the reader. The mystical flavor of the first part of the story in which the vision contrasts with the dry scientific information about the event seen in the mirror.

After the Great War Conan Doyle not only became a devoted spiritualist, but also started fierce propaganda of this Church all round the world. By this time his understanding of supernatural becomes absolutely materialistic, he considers apparitions to be the part of material world. He publishes large quantity of works, dedicated to the subject (among them: *The New Revelation* (1918), *The Vital Message* (1919), *Wanderings of Spiritualist* (1921), *The Coming of the Fairies* (1922), *History of Spiritualism* (1926)). In 1926 the writer's new novel *The Land of Mist*, initially called *The Psychic Adventures of Edward Malone* was published.

To make the story more attractive for the reader, the writer revives two of the popular heroes from his science fiction novels – Professor Challenger and the journalist Malone. The plot is built around journalistic investigation aimed to find out whether spiritualism is a form of mass hypnosis or ghosts really come to people during spiritualistic meetings. Later when Malone and his bride Enid, Professor Challenger's daughter, after several obvious cases accept spiritualism as a fact, the plot line leans aside; now the aim is to persuade Challenger that the unseen world really exists. The novel can also be regarded as a depiction of the process of scientific research: first experiments, proving or denying some presupposition, then building up the system of arguments based on the experimental work and theoretical conclusion as the result. The system of characters is organized to pursue the same goal: a journalist (Malone), a warrior

(Roxton), a lawyer (Mailey), a priest (Mason), a young ambitious girl (Enid) and Professor Challenger as their opponent. That makes the range of opinions wide and at the same time schematic; the text becomes entertaining and understandable for the readers, actually opening the way for the real propaganda of spiritualism.

But the general atmosphere of the novel is far from being romantic. The houses where the spiritualist meetings take place are shabby and dirty, causing squeamishness. The explanations given by the organizers that it is only due to the poverty of the Spiritualist Church also makes the reader suspect them of greediness when they collect money from unhappy people coming there hoping to meet with their dead. The social discourse actualizes the narrative.

The ghosts and specters are also visualized mainly in a casual, dull manner. It is difficult to understand whether they really do exist or are just illusions created by charlatans. The only marker for the reader is the reaction of the main heroes when they experience real contacts with the spirits. It happens in the beginning when Malone receives a message from his late teacher, later when he sees the ghost of his mother. Challenger himself becomes convinced in the reality of the phenomenon when he knows that his friends had died naturally and had not been poisoned by him. The reader is to be convinced in the facts only because the characters believe in them.

Sometimes the descriptions of the contacts with the spirits are so simplified that create a comic effect: "You! Yes, you, with the red feather. No, not you. The stout lady in front. Yes, you! There is a spirit building up behind you. It is a man. He is a tall man —six foot maybe. High forehead, eyes grey or blue, a long chin brown moustache, lines on his face. Do you recognize him, friend? The stout woman looked alarmed, but shook her head." "Well, see if I can help you. He is holding up a book —brown book with a clasp. It's a ledger same as they have in offices. I get the words 'Caledonian Insurance'. Is that any help?" [Doyle, 2006]

What was unseen in the stories of the 1890s now is openly revealed to the reader leaving no space for the imagination. Several cases are presented just as anecdotes.

Conan Doyle's perspective helps the reader to classify the spirits, according to their nature, background and so on. Depicting the evil dangerous spirits which frighten people and damage their property Conan Doyle is mostly expressive. He obviously pays tribute to the popular Victorian Gothic stories.

In the end of the novel the main goal is achieved – Challenger is converted to Spiritualism. The reader is also meant to become an adept of this belief.

**4. Discussion.** This sentimental ending also comes to a certain contradiction with the aim declared in the beginning, where the writer stated that the romance of Malone and Enid is not interesting for him. Unfortunately this and other artistic defects of the novel prevented it from gaining the popularity of his other stories about Professor Challenger and his friends. According to D. Stashower, "Conan Doyle once declared that he would gladly sacrifice whatever literary reputation he enjoyed if it would bring about a greater acceptance of his spiritualist message. To a large extent, he made the sacrifice without achieving the objective" [Stashower, 1999, p.13]. In his attempt to serve popular tastes and to promote his spiritualistic views he creates a handbook of spiritualism.

**5. Conclusion.** Tracing the reflection and artistic interpretation of the supernatural in Conan Doyle's fiction from the 1890s to late 1920s it can be seen how his attitude to the phenomenon changes. In the early mystical novellas he places the problem more in the field of human psyche. Most of the visions come to the heroes in their borderline psychological conditions of physical pain, sufferings, dream, delirium or intellectual overstrain. In the stories about historical topics Doyle combines the fictional plot with factual material thus making the unusual situation more convincing and real for the reader. At the same time his mystical and ghost stories of the 1890-1910s leave place for the reader's imagination even when they give rational explanation of the strange events and thus they can be defined as typically neo-romantic in their origin. The close interlacing of the Gothic elements with the scientific approach forms strong artistic effect. Following the popular tastes of his epoch he sometimes simplifies the characters. In the 1920s after becoming an adept of the spiritualism his message becomes more propagandistic and the general intonation preaching. The naturalistic, dull description of the ghosts and all kind of paranormal phenomena in *The Misty Land*, aimed to prove their reality make all the miracles fake and ridiculous as fairy cutouts on the scandalously famous photos. Some of the episodes, though, written in the manner of English folk ghost story, make the novel more alive and add some humorous flavor to the generally dull propagandistic narration. Doyle's attempt to use the form of the adventure novel and familiar popular characters to show his readership the importance and beauty of Spiritualism failed. The novel turned into a manifesto of spiritualism.

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