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Gathering at Samhain:

Women Writers and the Irish Gothic Tradition

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Introduction

The origins of this thesis lie in the encounter with *Bending to Earth: Strange Stories by Irish Women* (2019), a collection edited by Maria Giakaniki and Brian J. Showers that brings together supernatural tales written by Irish women between the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Apart from Lady Wilde, whose name remains familiar due to her connection with Oscar Wilde and her work as a folklorist, many of the authors included in the collection have received relatively little critical attention. The collection is particularly significant because it brings together a group of authors who, despite their contribution to Irish literary culture, have often occupied a relatively marginal position within both Gothic criticism and Irish literary studies. The tales included in the volume invite reconsideration of the relationship between folklore and the Gothic in Ireland, while also raising broader questions about the existence of a specifically Irish Gothic tradition and the role of women writers in its development.

The questions raised by these texts become particularly significant within the Irish context, where folklore, literature, and cultural identity are deeply interconnected. Unlike many Gothic traditions, which draw primarily upon literary conventions, Irish Gothic fiction frequently emerges from a rich body of oral narratives, supernatural beliefs, and local traditions. The persistence of figures such as the banshee, the fairy woman, the ghost, and the hag reflects not only the survival of folklore within literary culture but also the continued importance of the supernatural in Irish conceptions of history, memory, and place.

At the same time, nineteenth-century Ireland was marked by profound political, social, and religious tensions. The relationship between the Protestant Ascendancy and the Catholic population, the cultural consequences of colonial rule, and the trauma of the Great

Famine all contributed to shaping literary representations of Irish identity. These complexities make it difficult to speak of a single Irish experience and suggest the need to distinguish between Anglo-Irish and Catholic Irish writers, whose engagements with folklore and the Gothic often reveal different cultural perspectives and concerns.

Because of these historical and political complexities, this study distinguishes between Anglo-Irish and Catholic Irish women writers. While both groups drew upon folklore and supernatural traditions, they often approached similar themes from different perspectives. Anglo-Irish writers frequently engaged with concerns surrounding property, inheritance, social status, and the decline of the Ascendancy, whereas Catholic authors tended to draw more directly upon folk belief, Celtic traditions, and the cultural consequences of colonialism, poverty, and emigration. Examining these differences makes it possible to understand both the diversity and the coherence of Irish women's Gothic writing.

This thesis, therefore, investigates the relationship between folklore, women's writing, and the Gothic through the analysis of a selected corpus of seven supernatural tales by Charlotte Riddell, Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde, Isabella Augusta Gregory, Rosa Mulholland, Katharine Tynan, Anna Maria Hall, and Ethna Carbery. Particular attention is devoted to supernatural female figures such as banshees, female ghosts, hags, and fairy women, whose appearances repeatedly challenge distinctions between life and death, reality and imagination, familiarity and estrangement.

The study also argues that these figures cannot be separated from the landscapes in which they appear. The Atlantic Ocean, islands, mountains, and windswept coasts are active participants in the narratives. Indeed, many folkloric traditions seem to emerge directly from the natural environment itself. The banshee's lament, for example, is frequently associated

with the sound of the wind, while fairy beliefs and Otherworld traditions are often linked to specific geographical locations. The supernatural in these tales is therefore inseparable from the Irish landscape, which functions as a repository of memory, folklore, and cultural identity.

By bringing together Irish Gothic studies, folklore studies, and Irish women's writing, this thesis seeks to demonstrate that these authors made a significant contribution to the development of a distinctly Irish Gothic mode. Through their engagement with folklore, supernatural belief, and the complexities of Irish history, they transformed traditional narratives into sophisticated literary explorations of gender, memory, identity, and belonging.

Chapter One: Historical and Cultural Framework

1.1 Definition and Origins of the Gothic

The term Gothic includes a wide range of meanings and, before coming to denote a distinct literary mode, was employed across multiple fields, including architecture, art, and history. As a literary category, it has come to be associated with narratives that focus on terror, the sublime, and the uncanny, often through settings and tropes that evoke decay, fear, and the past. In *The Literature of Terror: The Gothic Tradition*, David Punter identifies a set of recurrent features that characterise Gothic fiction: “an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense are the most significant” (1).

Such attempts to define the term reflect its historical consolidation as a recognisable and codifiable tradition by the late eighteenth century. This process is illustrated satirically in an anonymous 1797 text that humorously presents a “recipe” for composing a Gothic novel:

An old castle, half of it ruinous.

A long gallery, with a great many doors, some secret ones.

Three murdered bodies, quite fresh.

As many skeletons, in chests and presses.

An old woman hanging by the neck; with her throat cut.

Assassins and desperados, ‘quant suff’.

Noise, whispers and groans, threescore at least. (*Gothic Documents* qtd in Jarlath Killeen 2)

While the passage clearly parodies the formulaic tendencies of the genre, it also demonstrates that, by the late eighteenth century, Gothic fiction had acquired a sufficiently stable set of conventions to be easily recognisable. Punter identifies a group of authors who shaped the development of the Gothic novel between the mid-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Writers such as Horace Walpole, Ann Radcliffe, Matthew Lewis, Charles Robert Maturin, and Mary Shelley are often cited as central figures in establishing the conventions of Gothic fiction during the period roughly spanning the 1760s to the 1820s. The first work to be widely recognised as a Gothic novel is Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764).

However, the set of characteristics and “ingredients” previously mentioned, while useful in outlining the genre's early tropes, does not account for the wide range of literary forms and thematic variations that the term has acquired over the last two centuries. Such feature-based definitions risk reducing the Gothic to a set of formal conventions, overlooking its function as a historically contingent mode shaped by cultural anxieties. As Punter further suggests, the Gothic emerges as a mode particularly attuned to expressing social and psychological anxieties, especially those connected to power, repression, and the return of the past (5), concerns that acquire distinctive meanings within the Irish context.

As Gothic studies have expanded, scholars like Julian Wolfreys, Jarlath Killeen, Maurice Levy, Robert Mighall and Fiona Robertson have increasingly emphasised that the genre is fragmented and according to Wolfreys in *Victorian Hauntings: Spectrality, Gothic, the Uncanny and Literature* (2001):

The gothic can then no longer be figured from the 1820s onwards, as a single, identifiable corpus. [...] Escaping from the tomb and the castle, the monastery and mansion, the gothic arguably becomes more potentially terrifying because of its ability to manifest itself and variations of itself anywhere. (9)

The Gothic has therefore evolved into a flexible literary mode capable of adapting to different historical, cultural, and geographical contexts:

The gothic becomes other than itself, the meaning of the term changing, metamorphosing beyond narrow definition, promising the destabilization of whatever it comes to haunt, while it is itself destabilized in itself and from itself. At the same time, the promise of the gothic was – and still is – a promise of a certain return, a cyclical reversion. (Wolfreys 10)

In this sense, the Gothic becomes a mode characterised by perpetual return and reinvention so much so that “In the Gothic the past is never completely finished with; instead, it has a nasty habit of bursting through into the present, displacing the contemporary with the supposedly outdated” (Killeen 2). This historical adaptability is particularly evident in the nineteenth century, when Gothic aesthetics and sensibilities became deeply embedded in Victorian culture, according to Killen, “to us, the Victorian age is the Gothic age” (10). The period witnessed a great proliferation of Gothic imagery and sensibility across literature, architecture, and visual culture. The Gothic Revival in architecture, the fascination with death and mourning rituals, and the popularity of ghost stories and sensation fiction all testify to the persistence of Gothic themes within Victorian society.

As Wolfreys describes, the material culture of the period itself reflects a distinctly Gothic sensibility: “all that black, all that crepe, all that jet and swirling fog [...] These and

other phenomena, such as the statuary found in Victorian cemeteries like Highgate, are discernible as being fragments and manifestations of a haunting, and, equally, haunted, ‘Gothicized’ sensibility” (25). The Gothic thus permeates not only literary production but also the symbolic and aesthetic structures of nineteenth-century culture more broadly.

It is therefore possible to affirm that understanding the Gothic requires engaging with its central aesthetic principles. Anglo-Irish writer Edmund Burke’s *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) provides a theoretical framework for the emotional and psychological effects of Gothic literature. Burke distinguishes between the beautiful, which produces pleasure and harmony, and the sublime, which elicits awe, terror, and a complex form of pleasure that arises from confrontation with vast, powerful, or threatening forces (36). For Burke, experiences of obscurity, magnitude, and danger, such as storm-swept landscapes, decaying architecture, or shadowed interiors, generate the sublime, stimulating both fear and admiration:

Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain, and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling [. . .] When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and [yet] with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience. (36)

Burke’s enquiry underpins Gothic aesthetics; however, while providing a useful framework, it also reflects Enlightenment assumptions about subjectivity and perception that may not fully account for the Gothic’s later political and cultural dimensions.

As an Anglo-Irish writer, Burke also occupies a culturally hybrid position that has prompted further critical reflection. Terry Eagleton in *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* explains that:

There may be something distinctively Irish about Burke's enthusiasm for sublimity. For if the sublime is that which beggars description and baffles representation, then the ultimate name for it is God; and a society in which theology plays a major role is bound to find itself somewhat more sceptical of a representational epistemology than the empiricist English. (Terry Eagleton, *Heathcliff and the Great Hunger* 50)

The Burkean sublime, therefore, acquires a specifically Irish inflection, one that reflects deeper tensions between rationalism and belief, as well as between visibility and obscurity.

Gothic fiction translates these aesthetic principles into narrative practice through haunted houses, crumbling castles, and monstrous or deformed presences. An example can be found in *Frankenstein* (1818, 1831) by Mary Shelley, where the moment of the creature's animation transforms Victor Frankenstein's scientific ambition into horror:

I beheld the wretch – the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. [...] Oh! No mortal could support the horror of that countenance. A mummy again endued with animation could not be so hideous as that wretch. I had gazed on him while unfinished; he was ugly then; but when those muscles and joints were rendered capable of motion, it became a thing such as even Dante could not have conceived. (58)

In this passage, the creature's monstrous body exemplifies the Burkean sublime, allowing both Victor and the reader to engage with themes of human vulnerability, moral

uncertainty, and the blurred boundaries between the natural and the supernatural. However, as Jack Halberstam observes in *Skin Shows* (1995), *Frankenstein* marks a significant shift in the “Gothic locus” of terror. Whereas the Gothic romances of the late eighteenth century generally associated horror with external settings and sublime landscapes, Shelley relocates fear to the body itself. As Halberstam argues, “Frankenstein's monster makes flesh itself Gothic” and thereby creates “a new geography of terror” in which “fear [becomes] a by-product of embodiment rather than a trick played upon the body by the mind” (28). Consequently, “the architecture of fear in this story is replaced by physiognomy, the landscape of fear is replaced by sutured skin” (Halberstam 29). While Victor repeatedly encounters the sublime through the vast and threatening Swiss landscape, the creature ultimately becomes a more immediate source of terror, relocating the Gothic from the external environment to the human body itself.

The creature exposes the fragility of the categories that structure human society and demonstrates how monstrosity can function as a form of embodied difference. Anticipating later Gothic representations, the figure of the monster becomes a projection of social, cultural, and political tensions. This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of Irish Gothic, where questions of alterity, identity, and exclusion are shaped by colonial discourse. Just as Shelley’s creature is constructed as a being that is both created and rejected, Irish Gothic frequently employs supernatural figures and haunted spaces that embody forms of marginality and displacement. The monstrous body, therefore, provides an early model for understanding how the Gothic gives narrative form to anxieties surrounding difference, a concern that will become central in representations of Irish identity.

While early Gothic fiction in Britain established a recognizable set of narrative conventions, later developments demonstrate that these elements are continually reinterpreted and reshaped. As Wolfreys suggests, the Gothic is defined precisely by its capacity for transformation and recurrence, a mode that “becomes other than itself” while simultaneously returning in new and unsettling forms (10). Similarly, Killeen’s emphasis on the persistence of the past within the present highlights the Gothic’s enduring engagement with historical anxiety and cultural memory, suggesting that its relevance extends far beyond its original literary context.

As previously mentioned, in Ireland, the Gothic acquires distinctive features shaped by specific historical and social realities. As Christina Morin in *The Gothic Novel in Ireland, c. 1760–1829* argues, Irish Gothic should not be understood merely as an extension of British models, but rather as a form that reworks and transforms Gothic conventions in response to local conditions (3). The familiar imagery of haunted landscapes and spectral figures is thus relocated within an Irish context, where it becomes enmeshed with questions of identity, colonialism, and cultural memory. It is precisely through this lens that the following section will examine the emergence of the Gothic in Ireland, situating it within the historical, political, and cultural conditions of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

1.2 The Rise of the Gothic in Ireland (18th–19th Centuries)

Christina Morin and Jarlath Killeen, in the introduction to their work *Irish Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, approach the subject by first interrogating the very nature of the term itself. Their enquiry is rooted in the debate on whether Irish Gothic can be said to exist as a coherent genre at all. Scholars such as W. J. McCormack and Richard Haslam have long discussed how Irish Gothic should be defined, questioning whether it is more appropriately

understood as a mode, a tradition, or simply a loose set of recurring themes and conventions. While W. J. McCormack argues that Irish Gothic “does not amount to a tradition” (“Irish Gothic and After (1820-1945)” 833), Richard Haslam suggests that the term “tradition” may be too restrictive, proposing instead that Irish Gothic be approached as a mode characterised by the irregular development of Gothic forms across Irish writing (“Irish Gothic: A Rhetorical Hermeneutics Approach” 5). By contrast, Jarlath Killeen maintains that, despite its complexity, the body of work produced by writers such as Maturin, Le Fanu, Wilde, Stoker, and Yeats can still be understood as constituting a form of Gothic tradition (“Irish Gothic: A Theoretical Introduction” 30-31).

Rather than offering a definitive resolution to this debate, Morin and Killeen emphasise the complexity and instability of Irish Gothic as a phenomenon, posing a series of further questions about its status: “Is it a canon, a mode, a form, a tradition, a genre, a feeling or all of this at the same time?” (2). These questions also arise from the fact that the literary tradition of Irish Gothic fiction has received little attention until recently:

Long conceived of as a derivative literary production comprised of servile imitation of a more established English literary tradition [...] For much of the twentieth century, psychoanalytically informed readings of a handful of works, including *Carmilla*, *Dracula* and *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, dominated the field [...] (Morin and Killeen 3)

Morin suggests that “it helps to integrate Irish writers into a wider British and European gothic literary production from which they are all too often excluded by nature of the derivative, secondary, or minor character of their publications” (8). In Morin’s view, integration does not imply that Irish Gothic is entirely subsumed within the English tradition;

rather, both traditions should be understood as components of a broader and more complex Gothic framework:

This is not to suggest that the Irish literary gothic is indistinguishable from English or British gothic [...] Instead, it is to argue that, despite inevitable variations and permutations, Irish writers participated in a widespread and inclusive literary phenomenon unrestricted by national boundaries and shaped by historically and culturally specific constructions of and reflections on the Gothic past. (8-9)

Killeen and Morin agree that the literary tradition of Irish Gothic began in 1820 with the publication of *Melmoth the Wanderer* by Charles Maturin as: “The Irish Big House setting of that novel’s frame narrative, combined with its attention to questions of inheritance and dispossession, as well as its striking exploration of psychological terror, signalled a new Irish chapter in the history of Anglophone Gothic” (3). However, while *Melmoth the Wanderer* is often identified as a foundational text, there are earlier works that already engage with Gothic conventions within an Irish context, for example, *The Adventures of John of Gaunt* (1790) written by James White, *Corfe Castle* (1793) and *Eva: an Old Irish Story* by Anna Milliken. (Morin 32). These earlier works: “adopt English or Irish historical figures and settings in order to explore the politics of the past and their bearing on present-day England and Ireland” (Morin 32). While having a more ‘historical nature’, these novels serve to bridge an older gothic tradition with a newer, more popular one with the public and the press. Irish Gothic novels were usually published by Minerva Press, which helped to spread these works throughout the British Isles and subsequently across Europe, “act[ing] as a synecdoche for Gothic literary production across the British Isles in the Romantic period” (Morin 30).

As previously mentioned, the late eighteenth century was marked by increasing political unrest, culminating in the 1798 Great Irish Rebellion, guided by the United Irishmen, and the subsequent Act of Union (1801)¹, which formally integrated Ireland into the United Kingdom. The Act of Union was perceived as coercive and disruptive, and it greatly influenced later literature and poetry. Seamus Heaney, an influential contemporary poet, in his poem *Act of Union* (1975), talks about it in terms of a violent sexual act:

[...]

A gash breaking open the ferny bed.

[...]

Conquest is a lie. I grow older

Conceding your half-independent shore

Within whose borders now my legacy

Culminates inexorably.

And I am still imperially

Male, leaving you with pain,

The rending process in the colony,

The battering ram, the boom burst from within. (Heaney, lines 4-19)

¹ For a detailed account of the politics of the Act of Union, see *The Passing of the Irish Act of Union* (G.C. Bolton, Oxford 1966).

Heaney's metaphor of imperialist violence as a form of bodily violation has its roots in the colonial view of Ireland as female, 'Britain's savage sister' (Wright, Introduction to *The Missionary* 22).

Killeen and Morin further wonder if the constitution of the Irish Gothic is a literary representation of the Anglo-Irish population's concerns, anxieties, and wants, as well as a distinctively national type of divided subjectivity (2). Vital to the understanding of this context is the dominance of the Protestant Ascendancy, a ruling class composed primarily of Anglo-Irish landowners who exercised political, religious and economic control over a predominantly 'unruly' Catholic native population: "Irish Gothic" thus speaks of fiction that explores the mixed fears and desires of a minority Anglo-Irish population threatened. – imaginatively if not actually – by the unsettled native Catholics over whom they maintained precarious control" (Morin 1-2).

Because the island is considered to be the first English colony, it is easier to perceive why the relationship between the Gaelic-Irish and the English planters has always been complex and conflictual. According to John Morissery in "Contours of colonialism: Gaelic Ireland and the early colonial subject", since the very beginning, English planters implemented a series of measures designed to exclude the indigenous people:

[...] a continuum of exclusivist ideological thought can be traced back to the twelfth century, when the works of Giraldus Cambrensis² comprehensively established the notion of 'Anglo' civility/superiority and 'Gaelic' barbarity/inferiority [...] The exclusivist rhetoric intensified in Government circles in the late-sixteenth century.

² Giraldus Cambrensis (c. 1146–c. 1223), archdeacon of Brecknock, was a historian whose accounts of late twelfth-century Ireland remain a valuable historical source (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*).

Political discourses advancing the idea that the ‘only true subjects of the Crown’ were those who were committed Protestants - the 'Self of colonial relations - and that all 'others' were 'a threat to the security of the English Crown and its position in Ireland' were being increasingly designed by 'English-born officials and soldiers in Ireland. (96-97)

Since Ireland, unlike many other British colonies, was geographically and culturally close to England, the colonisers had to perpetuate this exclusivist ideological framework through means other than race, as the native Irish population was also predominantly white and Christian. Whilst the process of division between the English planters and the Gaelic Irish had initially been relatively straightforward, over the centuries it became increasingly complex due to intermarriage and cultural exchange. As Jack Halberstam observes, during the nineteenth century Gothic discourse increasingly associated foreignness with forms of monstrosity, as “non-nationals, like Jews, for example, but also like the Irish or Gypsies, came to be increasingly identified by their alien natures” (16). Halberstam further argues that Gothic monstrosity participated in broader discourses of nationalism and racial superiority, becoming a means through which cultural anxieties surrounding identity, belonging, and exclusion could be expressed (16–17). Consequently, the Irish frequently occupied an ambiguous position within British colonial discourse, simultaneously proximate and foreign.

This tension would later become central to Irish Gothic literature, where supernatural figures, monsters, ghosts, and haunted spaces often function as symbolic manifestations of cultural displacement and contested identity. One of the means used to exclude the indigenous population from power was religion; Protestants were seen as superior and rational, whereas Catholics were considered a threat to the Crown. The opposition between Protestant

rationalism and Catholic belief systems was frequently framed in terms of reason versus superstition, with Catholic practices often associated with the supernatural. This was also possible because the native Irish, called Gaelic-Irish, identified themselves as descendants of the Celts and claimed a rich folkloric tradition that had become intertwined with Catholicism.

On the other hand, the Protestants, to maintain their strong hold over the land, had created an Anglo-Irish junta known as the Ascendancy (Eagleton 33-34). According to Eagleton, this term should be used as a synonym for domination/hegemony:

The term Ascendancy suggests less a single social class than a social bloc, spanning nobility, gentry and bourgeoisie, whose social differences are from this viewpoint less important than their shared political and religious ideology. [...] ‘Ascendancy’ means a state of dominance or authority [...] what this comes down to, in effect, is that the sway of the Protestant religion is to be defended as a way of safeguarding a political supremacy which is Protestant. [...] The meaning of the ascendancy of Protestantism resides wholly in Protestant political rule. (34)

This system of ideological and religious division, however, did not produce a stable ruling identity. On the contrary, the very structures that sustained Protestant Ascendancy dominance also generated deep internal tensions within the Anglo-Irish community itself. Positioned between English political authority and Irish geographical and cultural belonging, Anglo-Irish Protestants occupied an inherently unstable and often contradictory position. As a result, the assertion of Protestant superiority and cultural distinction coexisted with an underlying uncertainty regarding national identity and affiliation.

It is precisely this condition of ambiguity that characterises the Anglo-Irish population, which “constituted a community that was, to say the least, conflicted about its

own identity, and often split by very public disagreements” (Killeen 34). While some members remained firmly aligned with an English identity, others increasingly adopted Irish cultural markers, and many found themselves suspended between the two, “walking the existential high-wire along the hyphen” (Killeen 34).

Reiterating this condition of instability, Terry Eagleton maintains that “it is precisely because the condition of the Anglo-Irish is an aporetic one, caught between mutually interfering codes, that an unequivocal order must be upheld” (161). In this sense, the insistence on rigid ideological, religious, and cultural boundaries can be understood as a compensatory strategy, aimed at containing the anxieties produced by fear of marginalisation and at preserving a fragile sense of authority and coherence.

Colonial discourse also shaped cultural representations of Ireland. The island was frequently feminised, imagined as a wild, unstable woman to be dominated. Heaney’s poem reflects this tradition. This process of feminisation of the island mimicked women’s lives under patriarchal rule. Catherine Nash in “Remapping the Body/Land: New Cartographies of Identity, Gender, and Landscape”, states that:

The representation of Ireland as female has been used to define Ireland and Irishness in different ways, in different contexts and for different purposes. [...] In doing so, they have drawn on and reinforced ideas of masculinity and femininity and certain kinds of relationships between men and women. Thus the gendering of Ireland has been used to define the cultural identity and political status of the society and the identities and roles of men and women in Ireland. (111)

The colonial practice of seeing Ireland as a savage woman to be tamed served to justify England’s masculine intervention to restore order. The personification of Ireland as a woman

– be she a sister, a wife or a mother – is a recurring motif in Irish literature, ranging from pre-Christian, Gaelic figures such as the eponymous goddess Ériu right through to Joyce, who, in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), describes Ireland as: “the old sow that eats her farrow” (238).

In addition to portraying Ireland as a woman to be tamed, throughout the centuries of hegemony, the colonisers had also created the image of the Irish Gaels as a barbaric and primitive people incapable of governing themselves, according to Wright: “English Renaissance texts almost uniformly represent the Irish as primitive, violent, uncivilised and unassimilable” (22). This old tradition served to constantly assert English superiority over the Gaelic Irish, who became marginalised and forced to endure the Ascendancy rule, in Killeen’s words:

The Celtic peripheries have very often been defined in direct opposition to England, so that the highlands of Scotland, the hills and valleys of Wales, and the boglands of Ireland were configured as atavistic zones of the irrational populated by primitive monsters, against which England appeared normal, rational and progressive, a contrast heightened by the Enlightenment. (4)

To the English, Ireland was therefore an exotic, savage and uncivilised place; this view was also echoed in many texts produced during that period, such as *The Recess* written by Sophia Lee in 1783-5. In the novel, according to Killeen:

Ireland is to be interpreted here as if it has somehow been geographically displaced from its true location in the tropics; those visiting the island from the mother country can rightly view themselves as entering a state of nature and incivility, a ‘new world’ in need of taming, or one perhaps impossible to tame. (4)

Ireland is also briefly mentioned in *Frankenstein* (1818). In the novel, the island represents the place where Victor Frankenstein's best friend, Henry Clerval, is murdered. According to Killeen there is a connection between what happens in the novel and the current political situation:

Given the setting of this incident in 1797, it is likely that it should be read as an occluded representation of the 1798 rebellion, so that Shelley participates in a larger discourse about the rebellion which figured it as monstrous and atrocious, committed by the subhuman and bestial Irish Catholics. (5)

Shelley uses Ireland's coasts as a set to Clerval's death, describing them as 'wild' and 'rocky', creating a connection between what was considered to be the character of the people living on the island and the island itself.

Furthermore, the Irish landscape itself plays a crucial role in shaping the Gothic imagination. Wild Atlantic coasts, high cliffs, together with ruined castles, abandoned estates, cemeteries, and remote rural settings, function as symbolic representations of Ireland's tumultuous history. The "Big House", in particular, becomes a central motif within Irish Gothic fiction. As both a site of authority and a locus of anxiety, it embodies the contradictions of the Ascendancy that, although asserting violent power upon Gaelic Irish subjects, had a fascination for Celticism and antiquities.

At the same time, the Big House functions as the Irish equivalent of the Gothic castle: like its earlier architectural counterpart, it is a space of enclosure, control, and potential terror, but one that is firmly rooted in the Irish historical context. As the residence of Anglo-Irish planters, it stands as a constant reminder of English domination and colonial occupation. According to Genet: "Originally the Big House was an assertion of Norman dominance and it

was to become a landmark of English dominion and a protection of English identity. Its high walls were to separate for centuries the Gaelic population from the English invader” (*The Big House in Ireland: Reality and Representation*, ix). These spaces are often depicted as liminal, where the past lingers in physical and spectral forms.

The setting of the Big House led to the rise of a literary tradition centered on the house and its old and new inhabitants. The foundations of this literary tradition are to be found in the work of Maria Edgeworth, *Castle Rackrent* (1800), where the physical destruction of an Anglo-Irish property anticipated the downfall of the Ascendancy Society. Moreover, Anglo-Irish author Charlotte Riddell’s stories “Walnut-Tree House”, “The Open Door” and “The House in Vauxhall Walk” are examples of this tradition, according to Emma Liggings “Riddell’s haunted house narrative are particularly striking for the varied portrayal of female ghosts, or of strange and monstrous women” (v).

Considering these historical, political, and cultural tensions, the emergence of Irish Gothic fiction can be understood as a distinct and contextualised mode of expression that can be studied in the broader context of Gothic. Shaped by the anxieties of colonial domination, religious division, and unstable national identity, Irish Gothic articulates the fears and contradictions of a society marked by dispossession and fear of marginalization. (Killeen 31) Its recurring motifs, haunted landscapes, decaying Big Houses, and feminised representations of the nation, echo the never-ending violent conflicts between coloniser and colonised, past and present, self and other. It is precisely within this liminal imaginative space that Irish Gothic finds its peculiar resonance, offering a landscape through which issues of power, identity, and belonging can be explored.

It is also important to consider the gendered dimension of Irish Gothic. While political and cultural authority remained predominantly male and Protestant, women occupied a more ambiguous position, often excluded from institutional power yet deeply embedded in the transmission of cultural knowledge. This marginal status finds expression within Gothic literature, where female figures frequently appear as mediators between past and present, natural and supernatural. As the following sections will demonstrate, women writers play a crucial role in shaping the Irish Gothic tradition, particularly through their engagement with folklore and the supernatural.

1.3 Folklore as Cultural Memory and Narrative Tradition

Folklore occupies a central position in the cultural and literary history of Ireland, functioning as both a repository of collective memory and a dynamic narrative tradition. Generally defined, folklore encompasses the beliefs, customs, stories, and practices transmitted across generations, often through oral rather than written forms. Diarmud Ó Giolláin, in the introduction of his work *Locating Irish Folklore: Tradition, Modernity, Identity* states that:

‘Folklore’ is both subject matter and critical discourse, amateur enthusiasm and academic discipline, residual agrarian culture and the popular urban culture of the present; it is both conservative anti-modernist and radical counter-culture, the sphere of dilettantish provincial intellectuals and of committed nation builders, transmitted by word of mouth in intimate settings and negotiated electronically in the public domain.

(1)

This definition highlights the inherent plurality of folklore, which exists simultaneously as a cultural practice, scholarly field, and ideological tool.

Nevertheless, while this definition is foundational to understand the general context, it is important to assert that Irish folklore must be understood in relation to a broader process that includes identity loss, emigration, industrialization and nation-building, in which tradition struggles to find its space: “These developments had a profound impact on Gaelic traditions, leading to the beginning of the decay of all native learned traditions and of a slower decline of the Irish language and of popular Gaelic traditions” (Ó Giolláin 15).

In a country marked by colonial domination and political upheaval, folklore has long served as a means of preserving cultural identity. Oral tradition became one of the primary means through which indigenous knowledge was preserved: “The concept of folklore developed partly as a 'nationalist' reaction to a metropolitan culture with universal pretensions” (Ó Giolláin 4). In this sense, folklore becomes deeply intertwined with broader reflections on national identity, as Jarlath Killeen observes, “The inhabitants of Ireland are, of course, notorious and perennial navel gazers, perpetually asking what it means to be Irish” (35), pointing to a long-standing cultural preoccupation with defining Irishness.

This concern was intensified by the Great Famine of the 1840s and the consequent emigration of a large proportion of the Gaelic Irish; this mass migration led to a significant decline in the use of the Gaelic language:

The Great Famine of the 1840s, through death and emigration, dealt a near fatal blow to the still powerful Gaelic culture and particularly to that of the largest and most traditional social grouping, the rural proletariat, who disappeared almost completely from the face of the land within a couple of generations. (Ó Giolláin 16)

Within this context of loss and fragmentation, folklore emerges as a narrative field shaped by the remnants of Irish society.

It follows that folklore is not neutral, but it is inflected by questions of class, religion, and political allegiance. As a result, the same body of traditional narratives can be used in different ways depending on the cultural and political position of the writer. For Anglo-Irish authors, folklore often reflects an ambivalent engagement with Gaelic culture, simultaneously expressing fascination and anxiety. Whereas for Catholic writers, it functions as a means of cultural affirmation and historical recovery.

In this sense, folklore becomes a flexible narrative resource through which conflicting identities and ideological positions are negotiated. As Ó Giolláin further notes, for Anglo-Irish writers “the Gaelic theme could serve as a warning but also act as ‘the basis for creating new cultural foundations for an eroding social and political hegemony’” whereas for Catholic writers it becomes “a vehicle for their burgeoning self-confidence, but also a necessary sublimation of trauma and loss” (29). This ideological tension is further intensified by the precarious position of the Anglo-Irish Protestant community itself, which existed as a self-conscious enclave “surrounded and vastly outnumbered by Irish Catholics,” and therefore compelled to construct narratives capable of both reinforcing internal cohesion and defending against perceived external threat (Killeen 41). Therefore, the imagery of horror and terror becomes a particularly effective cultural tool, simultaneously warning against the dangers of the Catholic “Other” and dramatizing the consequences of crossing established boundaries. Gothic and folkloric motifs converge as discursive forms, and any attempt to provide a historical overview of Irish folklore must first acknowledge the plurality of meanings associated with the term itself.

As Ó Giolláin observes, folklore has been variously understood as an exclusively oral, rural, and traditional form of expression, a definition that has often allowed it to be artificially

separated from modern social processes (94). At the same time, when approached as an ancient cultural residue, folklore has been treated as a form of historical evidence, comparable to archival documents or archaeological artefacts, and thus incorporated into broader antiquarian frameworks (Ó Giolláin 94). Furthermore, the emphasis on the specifically “native” dimension of folklore has historically aligned it with other marginalised cultural forms, most notably the Irish language, conferring upon it a shared subaltern status. In this context, oral traditions, folk songs, and Gaelic literary production from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were frequently grouped together as expressions of a common cultural heritage (Ó Giolláin 94).

The early development of folklore studies in Ireland reflects this complex conceptual landscape. The first systematic engagements with Irish folklore can be traced to figures such as General Charles Vallancey, often described as an early practitioner of ethnology in Ireland; Charlotte Brooke, whose work mediated between Gaelic and Anglo-Irish literary traditions through the publication and translation of Irish texts; Edward Bunting, a pioneering collector of Irish music; Robert Mac Adam, who compiled one of the first collections of Gaeltacht folklore; and Thomas Crofton Croker, whose collections of oral tales *Researches in the South of Ireland, Illustrative of the Scenery, Architectural Remains and the Manners and Superstitions of the Peasantry* (1824) represent some of the earliest published examples of Irish folklore (Ó Giolláin 94).

Other influential authors like Jane Francesca Agnes Elgee (Lady Wilde) contributed greatly to the recollection of Ireland’s Gaelic past. Her collection, *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887) adopts a more explicitly nationalist perspective. In the preface to this work, Lady Wilde emphasises the centrality of oral tradition within Irish

culture, noting that “the Irish race were never much indebted to the written word” (1), as knowledge was historically preserved by a learned class set apart from the general population. As a result, “the people therefore lived entirely upon the traditions of their forefathers, blended with the new doctrines taught by Christianity,” producing a popular belief system that became “an amalgam of the pagan myths and the Christian legend,” elements which remain “indissolubly united” (Wilde 1).

Wilde asserts that: “the tales and legends told by the peasants in the Irish vernacular are much more weird and strange and have much more of the old-world colouring than the ordinary fairy tales narrated in English by the people” (Wilde 12). By highlighting this fusion of pagan and Christian elements, Wilde positions folklore as a key site in which national identity is both preserved and constructed, reinforcing its role as a medium through which the past is transmitted into the present.

A further development can be traced in the work of William Butler Yeats, whose collections *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888) and *The Celtic Twilight* (1893) integrate folkloric material into a broader literary and cultural project associated with the Irish Literary Revival. Yeats writes about folklore: “[It] is at once the Bible, the Thirty-nine Articles, and the Book of Common Prayer, and well-nigh all the great poets have lived by its light. Homer, Aeschylus, Sophocles, Shakespeare, and even Dante, Goethe, and Keats, were little more than folk-lorists with musical tongues” (*Uncollected Prose I* 284). As Ó Giolláin observes, *The Celtic Twilight* is characterised by a distinctive blending of oral testimony, inherited tradition, personal spiritual experience, and authorial reflection, marking a shift away from purely antiquarian approaches to folklore toward a more interpretative and imaginative engagement (106). Unlike earlier collections, much of Yeats’s material was

gathered directly from informants and interwoven with his own visionary experiences, thereby collapsing the boundary between collector and participant. This approach not only enhanced the immediacy of the material but also contributed to its lasting influence, notably on later works such as Lady Gregory's *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920).

Moreover, Yeats increasingly reframed folklore within a broader cultural and historical vision. By the early twentieth century, he emphasised the continuity between ancient Gaelic heroism and contemporary rural life, suggesting that Irish peasants remained connected to a mythic past that persisted beneath the surface of modernity. At the same time, he expressed concern over the decline of this tradition, noting the growing tension between an oral culture "that sang and listened" and a modern, literate society increasingly shaped by external influences (Ó Giolláin 106).

In this sense, Yeats's work not only preserves folklore but also reflects on its transformation and potential disappearance, positioning it at the centre of debates surrounding cultural identity, modernity, and literary expression in Ireland. According to Killeen and Morin: "[Yeats] Believed that the sectarian divisions of the country could be bridged by accessing this pagan wisdom which was still to be found in Ireland in an isolated and remote folkloric bastion" (9). Yeats's work, therefore, marks a crucial moment in which folklore is no longer merely preserved but actively reinterpreted as a foundation for modern Irish literary identity.

Supernatural motifs occupy a central place within Irish folklore, and according to Melissa Edmunson, "Women have long been associated with the supernatural, and this connection is especially true in Ireland. Ideas of 'Mother Ireland' and 'Dark Rosaleen'³

³ 'Dark Rosaleen' or *Róisín Dubh* is the personification of Ireland as a woman

permeate Irish identity and culture” (213). The association between women and the supernatural is therefore central to the functioning of both folklore and Irish Gothic as modes concerned with marginality and the articulation of suppressed voices. Edmundson maintains that mythical figures such as Kathleen Ní Houlihan⁴, The Hag of Beara⁵, The Morrígan⁶, The Red Lady of Leap⁷, and the banshees⁸ have long existed in the Irish cultural imagination (213). She further suggests that: “The use of the supernatural in Irish women’s writing provides an important reimagining on how women have historically been a ‘vessel through which the dead may speak’” (226). Edmundson adds that, especially in fiction written by women such as Rosa Mulholland, Charlotte Riddell, and Katharine Tynan, these figures have often been associated with “a form of folk magic and ancestral knowledge that provides a source of power for an otherwise powerless community” (218).

Women, as supernatural beings, have been put at the margins of society. Their own existence is constantly questioned to the point that writing ghost stories was “a way to be seen. [Ghost stories] constituted both expression and exploration of their own spirituality and their ambiguous status as “the other” living in a state of in-betweenness: between the walls of the house, between animal and man, between angel and demon” (Vanessa Dickerson qtd. in Edmundson 226). Such observations suggest that the association between women and the

⁴ Kathleen Ní Houlihan is a mythic figure of an Old Woman that represents Irish Nationalism. W. B. Yeats and A. Gregory wrote a play *Cathleen Ní Houlihan* (1901), in one act, portraying the revolutionary figure.

⁵ The Hag of Beara, also known as Cailleach Bheara or Hag of Winter is a “divine hag” who embodies the land itself and represents the natural cycles of time. She was later predated by Catholic imagination and associated with a nun (Eleanor Hull *Legends and Traditions of the Cailleach Bheara or Old Woman (Hag) of Beare* 226-227).

⁶ The Morrígan goddess of war also known as the ‘Phantom Queen’ (Edmundson 213)

⁷ The Red Lady of Leap Castle is a female spirit who is believed to haunt with a dagger those who wronged her in life.

⁸ The banshees, traditionally written as ‘ban sí’ are the supernatural death messengers represented by a wailing woman who roams the countryside foretelling doom and death to anyone who hears her cries (Edmundson 213).

supernatural in the Irish Gothic tradition is embedded within broader cultural logics of exclusion and marginalisation.

Women, like the supernatural beings they depict, occupy liminal positions, functioning simultaneously as mediators of cultural memory and as figures positioned at the margins of social and symbolic order. This convergence can be further explained through one of Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's theses on monster culture. In his fourth thesis, Cohen suggests that monsters are figures of embodied difference:

The monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell among us. In its function as dialectical Other or third-time supplement, the monster is an incorporation of the Outside, the Beyond [...] Any kind of alterity can be inscribed across [...] the monstrous body, but for the most part monstrous difference tends to be cultural, political, racial, economic, sexual. (7)

Read in this light, female supernatural figures in Irish Gothic narratives can be understood as sites onto which anxieties surrounding gender, power, and cultural identity are projected and negotiated. Banshees, fairies, and divine hags should therefore be understood as vestiges of an ancestral belief system and as dynamic sites in which competing cultural meanings are explored. Positioned at the intersection of oral tradition, religious syncretism, and national identity, these figures embody forms of knowledge that operate outside institutional authority while remaining deeply embedded within collective experience. Moreover, their liminal status situated between life and death, past and present, and the natural and supernatural, aligns them closely with the broader dynamics of the Gothic mode.

The development of Irish Gothic literature, particularly the work of women writers, transforms folklore into a space of discursive intervention, where questions of voice,

authority, and belonging can be renegotiated. The following chapters will examine this process in detail, analysing how specific texts use folklore and supernatural tropes to construct distinctly gendered and culturally situated Gothic narratives.

Chapter Two: Women Writers and the Irish Gothic Tradition

2.1 Attitudes towards Irish Female authors in 19th-century Ireland

This chapter examines the contribution of a selected group of women writers to the development of the Irish Gothic tradition, focusing on how gender, religious position, and engagement with folklore shaped their use of Gothic tropes. While the Gothic has often been associated with canonical male authors like Maturin, Le Fanu and Stoker, in Ireland women writers played an important role in redefining its thematic concerns and narrative strategies.

In the Irish context, their work intersects with questions of colonial identity, marginality and ancestral knowledge. As Kathryn Kirkpatrick asserts, “to tell the story of women’s writing in Ireland is to be caught up in the same conflicts that Irish women themselves have faced in getting their stories told” (*Border Crossings: Irish Women Writers and National Identities*, 1). This remark underscores the struggles that Irish women writers had to endure in their literary production, as their position as writers had always been questioned. Ann Owens observes in *Irish Female Writers: An Uncharted Tradition* that the marginalisation of women’s writing is not due to a lack of production, but rather to critical neglect:

From the mundane to the esoteric, Irish literature would seem to have been separated, classified, and analyzed in every meaningful division. And yet the student who searches the shelves for works on Irish women’s fiction—surely, one thinks, an obvious

subdivision—feels very much as Virginia Woolf did when she searched the British Museum for work on women by women⁹. (2)

Owens thus highlights the systematic absence of women writers from established literary categories, suggesting that their exclusion is the result of institutional and critical default marginalization, as she further argues:

Despite centuries of oppressive conditions, Irish women have written, initially in Gaelic and English and latterly chiefly in English, and judging by what survives of their writing, they have written well. The problem lies not in their work but in the single lens with which critics have traditionally viewed most fiction, Irish included. (3)

This observation is particularly relevant to the study of the Irish Gothic. This field has historically privileged male-authored texts like *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), “Carmilla” (1872), and *Dracula* (1897), while overlooking the ways in which women writers engage with and transform Gothic conventions.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the representation of Ireland as a female was already embedded within both colonial and nationalist discourses. While these gendered representations played a valuable role in articulating political struggle and cultural identity, they also contributed to obscuring the actual position of women within literary and intellectual traditions. English colonial narratives frequently constructed Ireland as a wild, unruly woman in need of control and civilising intervention, a metaphor that served to legitimise imperial domination. As Mullin observes:

⁹ Owens quotes Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own”, where the author famously claims that: “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (Woolf 2).

English colonial discourses on Ireland tend to turn to representations of savage, female natives, incorporating gender differences into their analyses of barbarism. This gender focus may have been a necessary addition to the rhetoric because of the racial similarity between the English colonizer and the Irish colonized. (7–8)

This formulation highlights how gender becomes a tool within colonial discourse, allowing difference to be constructed and maintained even in the absence of clear racial distinctions.

At the same time, this feminisation was appropriated within Irish nationalist ideology, where the nation came to be imagined as a suffering, violated, and silenced woman, emblematic of dispossession and displacement. The urgency of political conflict and the ongoing negotiation of national identity often overshadowed the question of establishing and recognising a distinct tradition of female writing in Ireland. As Ann Owens claims, “In such a climate, a woman must act like the Girl at the Gaol Gate¹⁰; that is, she must bring food to, or serve, the men actively engaged in the fight” (3). Owens’s observation underscores the extent to which women were symbolically central yet confined to domestic and passive roles within nationalist narratives that nevertheless depended on their representation. Moreover, as Ingman and Ó Gallchoir note:

Demands for women’s rights have often been seen as either in competition with, or even incompatible with, the imperative of national self-determination that dominated Irish political and intellectual life from the late 1800s, and the privileging of the national was reflected in the construction of a ‘literary tradition’ that could not

¹⁰*The Gaol Gate* is both the gate located outside Galway jail and the title of a play written by Lady Augusta Gregory in 1906. The play tells the story of two women, Mary Cahel and Mary Cushin, who travel to the Galway jail to plead for mercy for Denis Cahel, who is respectively their son and husband.

encompass voices that either challenged the national narrative, or whose primary focus simply lay elsewhere. (qtd. in Edmundson 214)

This perspective further demonstrates how the construction of a literary canon was shaped by political priorities, in which the urgency of national independence took precedence over gendered concerns, effectively silencing women's contributions.

The dismissal of women's writing had its roots not only in prevailing political priorities but also in the perception that it was frivolous and lacking in substance, being primarily associated with romance and emotional expression. In this regard, Edmundson maintains that "Irish women have much in common with their American and British compatriots in that their writing has been dismissed as too 'domestic' and relying too much on romance and sensation" (215). In Edmundson's view, Irish women writers of Gothic and supernatural literature have been 'triply damned': Gothic literature was already regarded as a form of popular, and therefore negligible, reading; Irish writing itself was frequently overlooked within the broader literary canon; and, in addition, women writers were subject to further neglect (215).

Consequently, this body of work has long remained critically undervalued. However, scholars such as Siobh  n Kilfeather, Kathryn Kirkpatrick, Anne Owens and Christina Morin have sought to recover and reassess this neglected tradition, drawing attention to the cultural and literary significance of authors such as Charlotte Riddell, Rosa Mulholland, and Katharine Tynan, as well as to the importance of folklore and the supernatural in shaping their narratives.

It is noteworthy to distinguish between Anglo-Irish and Gaelic/Catholic women writers, as they emerge from different socio-cultural backgrounds and consequently develop

distinct approaches to the supernatural. While Anglo-Irish authors tend to frame the Gothic within concerns of class, property, and colonial authority, Catholic writers draw more directly on folklore, the consequences of the famine that happened in the 1840s and communal belief systems. Nevertheless, as will be demonstrated through the selected tales, significant points of convergence also exist between these groups, particularly in their shared attention to gendered experience and the symbolic potential of the supernatural. As Ann Owens notes:

Despite the vast economic, political, religious, cultural, and linguistic divide that separated the Irish peoples, women's experience in both cultures differed, in important ways, more in degree than in kind. Gaelic-Irish women had some economic independence before the famine, but they had little independence of any kind after this event. Now although the circumstances varied cruelly, women's lives in both cultures centered chiefly on their families and their homes. Indeed, the family no longer consisted of a woman's husband and children but often also included her husband's parents, brothers, and sisters. (Owens 12–13)

Such observations complicate any rigid division between these groups, suggesting that, despite differing ideological and cultural frameworks, women writers across these traditions engage with comparable structures of domesticity, constraint, and social expectation, which are frequently mediated through the supernatural in their fiction.

As Edmunson maintains, many of these women writers “used gender concerns drawn from earlier Gothic texts to incorporate social themes in their short fiction” (219), responding to the rapid social and political transformations of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among the most recurrent of these themes are illness and material insecurity: “sickness and disease become catalysts for supernatural events and provide women important

opportunities to critique social inequalities in Ireland during the nineteenth century” (Edmunson 219), while “concerns with lost property, wealth and inheritance are recurring themes in Irish women’s supernatural literature and represent anxieties over ownership and autonomy that were a direct result of Anglo-Irish relations” (Edmunson 219).

At the same time, these narratives frequently foreground relationships between women, often structured through both solidarity and tension. As Edmunson further notes:

communities of women feature in several stories, although the descriptions of domesticity that readers find in these narratives differ widely between stories. Often, the supernatural is used to show how women support other women in times of trial, but there are also portrayals of jealousy and mistrust between women, often of the same class but between women of different class as well. (221)

In this context, the supernatural becomes a powerful expressive tool, as these writers “created literary ghosts that reflected contemporary concerns about female autonomy, marriage, domestic abuse, haunted houses, money and property, colonialism, poverty, and war” (Edmunson 215–216).

By focusing on these female authors, this chapter aims to examine their biographies, which are often intertwined with those of more famous male authors such as Sheridan Le Fanu, Dickens, William Butler Yeats and Oscar Wilde. As Ann Owens observes, “more important, perhaps, are the forgotten writers of the nineteenth century, the women whose valuable work may remain hidden beneath the surface of acknowledged literature,” and while differences between male and female perspectives are often taken for granted, what is crucial are “the implications of these differences in positing a tradition of Irish women’s literature” (Owens 4). The themes explored in their supernatural tales not only align with the Gothic

canon but also reinterpret it in light of their experiences as female writers in the nineteenth century.

2.2 Anglo-Irish Women Writers

Anglo-Irish women writers make a significant contribution to the development of the Irish Gothic by adapting and transforming its key motifs. Rather than simply reproducing conventions established in earlier Gothic fiction, they relocate these elements into recognisably Irish settings, charging them with specific cultural and political depth. Recovering and reassessing these writers is therefore essential to a fuller understanding of Irish literary history. Such a perspective underscores the need to situate Anglo-Irish women writers not only within the broader Gothic tradition but also within a specifically gendered and historically contingent literary framework.

Anglo-Irish women writers did not constitute a unified ideological group, and their attitudes towards Irish Catholic culture could vary significantly. Notably, Jane Wilde, despite maintaining a Protestant identity, demonstrated a strong investment in Irish folklore and expressed support for aspects of the Catholic and nationalist cause, thereby complicating any straightforward alignment between religious affiliation and cultural perspective.

As previously noted, a substantial proportion of nineteenth-century supernatural fiction is closely connected to the Big House tradition, in which the decline, instability, or haunting of abandoned estates symbolically registers broader anxieties surrounding Anglo-Irish authority. Writers such as Charlotte Riddell played a crucial role in consolidating this association, embedding supernatural phenomena within narratives of property, inheritance, and social change.

2.2.1 Charlotte Riddell – “The Banshee’s warning”

Belfast-born Charlotte Riddell (1832-1906) occupies a central position in the development of nineteenth-century Anglo-Irish Gothic, particularly through her innovative use of the haunted-house narrative. She was known as “The novelist of the City”, and according to Janis Dawson, “If Riddell is remembered at all, it is for her significant legacy of supernatural fiction widely believed to include some of the best examples of the genre” (26).

Charlotte Riddell was the daughter of the sheriff of County Antrim. Following her father’s death, she and her mother were forced to relocate to the village of Dundonald, where they lived under financially strained circumstances. Riddell subsequently moved to London with her mother in search of professional opportunities. Elements of these early hardships are reflected in her works *A Struggle for Fame* (1883) and *The Haunted River* (1887), both of which incorporate autobiographical details. Throughout her career, she published under several pseudonyms, including “R. V. M. Sparling,” “Rainey Hawthorne,” and “F. G. Trafford.”

In 1857, she married the civil engineer Joseph Hadley Riddell; however, his lack of professional success meant that Riddell became the primary financial provider for the household. This experience contributed to her awareness of economic realities, while her husband’s profession exposed her to aspects of finance and business typically inaccessible to women of the period. As a result, she was able to engage with subjects not commonly addressed by women writers, as evidenced in several works, including *George Geith of Fen Court* (1864). As Dawson highlights, her “interest in business and finance was not limited to her city novels, but carried into her supernatural fiction, where plots frequently turn on legal

and financial issues, contested wills, debt, and insolvency, and characters include struggling clerks” (28–29).

Thanks to her practical understanding of financial and professional matters, Charlotte Riddell began publishing in periodicals and soon established herself within the Victorian literary marketplace. She later became editor and part proprietor of *St. James's Magazine* and founded her own periodical, *Home*. As John Wilson Foster further observes in *The Cambridge History of Irish Literature*, “there is only apparent discrepancy between her realistic and supernatural fiction, for her ghost stories are businesslike, operating narratively as far from the supernatural as possible, to render its possibility more convincing” (Foster 127). This observation underscores the extent to which Riddell’s Gothic writing is grounded in realism, using economic and domestic detail to enhance the plausibility of supernatural events.

This tendency to realism is further developed in Riddell’s collection, *Weird Stories* (1868). This work is considered to be a reference point for Gothic connoisseurs who regard stories such as “Walnut-Tree House”, “The Open Door”, “Nut Bush Farm”, “The Old House in Vauxhall Walk” and “Old Mrs. Jones” as the best ghost stories ever written (Dawson 31). All these stories engage with the haunted house narratives as: “Riddell’s specialty was haunted houses; many of her finest stories feature formerly desirable houses neglected and untenanted because they harbour the spirits of wronged victims seeking justice” (Dawson 30). Emma Liggins further deepens the argument by asserting that:

Such stories conventionally open with the narrator buying or renting a suspiciously cheap house and living there despite mysterious warnings of the locals, and usually conclude with revelations of unavenged murders and acts of violence, lost or stolen

wills, or buried family traumas. [...] They allowed authors to explore issues around the acquisition and loss of property, inheritance and material possessions, as well as women's financial dependency, their positions as wives, mothers and daughters, a matter of great personal interest to popular women writers such as Riddell. (Liggins iii)

Although her supernatural fiction has sometimes been criticised for its relative restraint, this very moderation is central to its literary effect, as it reflects Riddell's broader strategy of grounding the supernatural in everyday realistic life situations. Sarah Bissell observes that "Riddell's mild spectres often seem too mundane to be truly distressing insofar as they resemble the living, reiterate everyday actions, and occupy a comprehensible place in the material world; they frequently return to correct past wrongs but remain polite and innocuous in doing so" (Bissell 76). However, rather than diminishing their significance, this familiarity renders the supernatural more psychologically unsettling, as it blurs the boundary between the ordinary and the uncanny. The result is a Gothic mode in which spectral figures are disturbingly insistent with the social world they inhabit. Her descriptive abilities are particularly notable in this regard, especially in her depictions of the English countryside and the stormy coasts of Northern Ireland, which further anchor supernatural events within a vividly material and recognisable landscape (Dawson 30).

In "The Banshee's Warning," Charlotte Riddell draws explicitly on Irish folklore through the figure of the banshee, traditionally understood as a supernatural harbinger of death. As Dawson notes, Riddell's earliest identified supernatural story, originally published as "Hertford O'Donnell's Warning" in the 1867 Christmas number of *London Society* and later republished under the title "The Banshee's Warning," is structured around a moment of supernatural disruption on Christmas Eve. Dawson emphasises that the narrative is

“reminiscent of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843),” particularly in its use of a supernatural encounter to trigger in the protagonist a moral and emotional transformation (Dawson 30).

The story centres on Hertford O’Donnell, an Irish-born surgeon living in London, who is portrayed as a lonely man focused only on his work. On Christmas Eve, he sits alone reflecting on “his mortality and his useless, vulgar debts” (Riddell 7), a moment that emphasises moral dissatisfaction. This introspective scene is abruptly disrupted when he hears the eerie wail of a banshee, whose cry signals the impending death of a family member. The combination of psychological reflection and supernatural intervention establishes a tense and foreboding atmosphere early in the narrative. This apparition compels him to return to Guy’s hospital, where he discovers his son, previously unknown to him, lying critically injured and in need of an amputation. Although the child ultimately dies, the experience leads to “unexpected reunions with his lost love and his family” (Dawson 30).

The narrative’s structure creates a movement between realism and supernatural intervention, in which the banshee serves as a catalyst for moral reorientation. This ambiguity is central to Charlotte Riddell’s Gothic method as the text does not resolve whether the banshee should be understood as an external folkloric entity or as a projection of psychological and emotional crisis, but sustains both possibilities simultaneously.

Significantly, this supernatural intervention is closely tied to the protagonist’s difficulties in dealing with his national identity. Hertford O’Donnell is repeatedly marked as irreducibly Irish, not only “by the accident of birth,” but “in speech, appearance, manner, taste, modes of expression, [and] habits of life” (Riddell 6), so that among the English he moves “to all intents and purposes a foreigner” (6). Even his attempts at assimilation are

undermined by this persistent otherness, as his Irishness is constructed as something fundamentally incompatible with the “orthodox and respectable” English world. In this sense, the banshee’s appearance may be read not only as a harbinger of death but as a symbolic reminder that identity and family cannot be escaped. No matter his efforts to distance himself from Ireland, O’Donnell remains bound to it: “To the core of his heart he loved the island which he declared he never meant to re-visit” (Riddell 6). The supernatural thus operates as a mechanism through which repressed cultural identity returns.

2.2.2 Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde - “The Child’s Dream”

A similarly complex negotiation of identity and folklore can be observed in the work of Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde, whose writing engages more directly and sympathetically with Irish cultural traditions. Unlike Riddell’s ambivalent and tamed use of the supernatural, Wilde’s tales tend to integrate folklore as a living and meaningful component of Irish communal and spiritual life. In “The Child’s Dream,” the supernatural is presented through a dreamlike setting. The narrative blurs the boundaries between reality and dream, life and death, creating a space in which spiritual and folkloric elements coexist. The child figure becomes a mediator between different realms, reflecting a broader concern with liminality and perception.

Jane Wilde was born in Dublin in either 1821 or 1826, although “information about the date and place of her birth remains dubious” (Parr 319). As her family lacked the means to provide a formal classical education, her mother arranged for her to be taught by “governesses from France and Germany,” an experience that enabled her to become fluent in several languages and to begin her literary career as a translator at an early age (Parr 319). Alongside these intellectual pursuits, she developed an early interest in Ireland’s political

situation, which would profoundly shape her later writing. Her engagement with nationalist politics intensified in the 1840s. As Parr notes, “in 1846, Jane witnessed the funeral of Young Ireland’s Thomas Davis¹¹ and was moved by the spirit of nationalism,” an event that prompted her to begin writing for *The Nation*, the magazine that was founded by Davis (319). She initially contributed letters signed “John Fanshaw Ellis” before adopting the pseudonym “Speranza,” a name that marked a decisive shift towards a more explicitly political and poetic identity.

However, this political engagement was not without tension as her family “disapproved of her association with Young Irelanders,” and although she produced “fiery poems against British rule in Ireland,” she also continued to participate in social events linked to the British administration at Dublin Castle (Parr 319). This tension between nationalist commitment and social expectation would remain a defining feature of her early writings. Elgee later married William Wilde, an oto-ophthalmologic surgeon who made significant contributions to this specific medical field. The couple had three children: William Robert Kingsbury, Oscar Fingal O’Flahertie Wills, and Isola Francesca Emily. Although she ceased contributing poetry to *The Nation* after 1848, she remained actively engaged in literary production, continuing to translate foreign texts and publishing essays in the *Dublin University Magazine*. At the same time, she cultivated a prominent social role, hosting salons that “won her fame” within Dublin’s intellectual circles (Parr 319). While she regarded both herself and her husband as intellectually exceptional, she also found “her maternal duties limiting,” even though her children benefited from exposure to a vibrant cultural milieu that would later shape their careers (Parr 319).

¹¹ Thomas Osborne Davis (1814-1845) was an Irish poet who founded the nationalist movement Young Irelanders

Her reputation as both a writer and a hostess secured her position within elite society, yet this visibility also brought controversy. In 1864, her husband's infidelity led to legal scandals. Moreover, the death of her daughter Isola in 1867 and the subsequent death of her husband in 1874 further marked her life, leaving her in financial difficulty (Parr 319). She relocated to London, where she continued to host salons and remained socially active, entertaining figures such as George Bernard Shaw and William Butler Yeats.

Both Jane Wilde and her husband were particularly interested in Irish folklore, and they contributed to the collection of stories and legends about what was called "the old race" through works such as *Irish Popular Superstitions* (1852) and *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887), published in two volumes. "The Child's Dream" is included in *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms and Superstitions of Ireland*. The tale is set on a small, uninhabited island off the coast of Galway, known in Gaelic as Inis Aire or Innis-Sark (Shark Island). The wildness of the setting contributes to the tale's aura of mystery, as "The island of Innis-Sark (Shark Island) was a holy and peaceful place in old times; and so quiet that the pigeons used to come and build in a great cave by the sea, and no one disturbed them" (Wilde 15).

According to Maria Giakaniki and Brian J. Showers, the tale "stands as a lyrical narrative that brings to mind the melancholy fairy tales written by her son, Oscar, such as 'The Selfish Giant' and 'The Happy Prince', in which poetic fantasy mingles with Christianity" (xi). However, Lady Wilde's writing is much drier than her son's, as it "is heavily indebted to the oral folk tradition" and, as such, "rejects the baroque literariness and textual intricacies employed by her son" (xi). In this way, through the tale, Lady Wilde expresses a "love for the beautiful island" (xi) in a manner that remains closely tied to its

setting, where the tragedy of a child's death is intertwined with the wildness of nature and the eeriness of supernatural dreams:

“I dreamed,” said the boy, “that I stood upon a high rock, and at the bottom flowed the sea, but the waves made no noise [...] then I heard a voice, saying, ‘Blessed are the souls that come here, for this is heaven.’ “And in an instant I thought I was in the midst of the meadow amongst the birds and the flowers; and a lovely lady, bright as an angel, came up to me, and said, ‘What brings you here, dear child; for none but the dead come here. (Wilde 16)

2.2.3 Isabella Augusta Persse – “The Unquiet Dead”

Lady Augusta Gregory, born Isabella Augusta Persse (1852–1932), shares with Jane Wilde an Anglo-Irish Protestant background. Raised in a Unionist and evangelical Protestant household, Gregory was nonetheless exposed from an early age to Catholic beliefs and Irish folklore through her childhood nurse. This immersion contributed to her transformation into a prominent advocate for Irish national identity and independence. According to Martin F. Kearney, Gregory is perhaps best known for her collaboration with W. B. Yeats and her central role in the foundation of the Abbey Theatre in 1904, an institution that became a cornerstone of the Irish Literary Revival (134). Robert Welch suggests that “she, like Yeats, turned to the theater because she saw in it a means of projecting peaceful images of cultural unity and integrity” (134).

Beyond her theatrical work, Gregory devoted much of her literary career to the collection, translation, and reinterpretation of Irish myths and folklore. Her major prose works, including *Cuchulain of Muirthemne* (1902) and *Gods and Fighting Men* (1904), sought to recover Celtic mythology, presenting “to the world Celtic myths integral to Irish

Literary Revivalist literature” (Kearney 135). These texts, alongside *Kiltartan History Book* (1909) and *Kiltartan Wonder Book* (1910), bring together diverse strands of Irish legend, history, and oral tradition, while *A Book of Saints and Wonders* (1906) similarly focuses on significant, although often forgotten, religious figures such as St Brigit and St Colum Cille. As Robert Welch notes, such projects aimed to “re-animate the legendary stories of Ireland” and ensure that figures such as Cuchulain would “live again in the minds of Irish people” (Welch 127). Among her most famous plays are *The Rising of the Moon* and *The Gaol Gate*, the latter being a one-act tragedy is tragedy that is “most touching in its consummate revelation of the disparity between English law and Irish identity” (Kearney 136). Other significant works include *Cathleen Ni Houlihan* (1902), written in collaboration with W. B. Yeats, as well as *The White Cockade*, *The Canavans* (1906), and *Dervorgilla* (1908).

Gregory’s work, however, extends beyond cultural nationalism, as she also demonstrates a sustained interest in the complexities of human experience. As Kearney observes, “the greatness of Gregory’s dramatic art rests precisely in its ability to deal simultaneously with the human experience and with the Irish experience” (135). Her prose works, including *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920), reveal a long-lasting interest in folklore. Often described as the “mother” of Irish folklore within the Irish Literary Revival, Gregory “did more to popularize these Irish subjects than did any of her contemporaries” (Kearney 137), consolidating her position as a key figure in the cultural and literary reimagining of Ireland in the early twentieth century.

Among the works selected, “The Unquiet Dead”, which is taken from *Visions and Beliefs in the West of Ireland* (1920) is the only one that is not structured as a conventional tale, but rather composed of twenty-one short testimonies from individuals who allegedly

“glimpsed the world unseen” (Giakaniki and Showers xii). These testimonies are presented in the first person and are recollected by a wide range of speakers, including an Aran woman, a chimney sweep, a tinker’s daughter, an islander, a Kildare woman, and an old man in a Galway workhouse... all of whom contribute “first person reports concerning ghostly appearances and spectral encounters, giving each narration a sense of immediacy” (Giakaniki and Showers xii). The introduction to these recollected accounts emphasises the nature of Irish belief in the invisible world, suggesting that:

For them the veil between things seen and unseen has hardly thickened since those early days of the world [...] Ireland has through the centuries kept continuity of vision, the vision it is likely all nations possessed in the early days of faith. [...] the spirit wanders for a while in that intermediate region to which mystics and theologians have given various names, and should it return and become visible those who loved it will not be afraid, but will, as I have already told, put a light in the window to guide the mother home to her child, or go out into the barley gardens in the hope of meeting a son. (Gregory 19)

Many of these reports may be interpreted as cautionary narratives that warn against leaving debts unsettled before death, as such obligations compel the dead to linger: “The shadow wanders for a while and it pays the debts it had to pay, and when it is free it puts out wing and flies to Heaven” (Gregory 20); “there was another soul came back that was in trouble because of a ha’portion of salt it owed” (Gregory 24) and “When some one goes that owes money, the weight of the soul is more than the weight of the body, and it can’t get away and keeps wandering till someone has courage to question it” (29).

Other accounts describe the activities of the dead within graveyards, often in terms of ritualised practices: “The last person to be buried in a graveyard has the care of all the other souls until another is to be buried, and then the soul can go and shift for itself. It may be a week or a month or a year, but watch the place it must till another soul comes” (Gregory 26), and again, “The shadows of the dead gather round at Samhain¹² time to see is there any one among their friends saying a few masses for them” (Gregory 27).

In the following section, the focus shifts to women writers of Catholic background. As previously discussed, many thematic concerns, particularly those related to exclusion and gendered marginalisation, remain consistent across these groups. However, important differences also emerge, as the authors’ Catholic faith shapes their engagement with the supernatural, as well as their representation of community, belief, and moral frameworks.

2.3 Catholic Irish Women Writers

Catholic Irish women writers operated within a socio-political context marked by colonial domination and dogmatic division. Positioned outside the structures of power associated with the Protestant Ascendancy, they were subject to political and economic marginalization. As Gretchen Mullin observes, English colonial discourse frequently constructed the Irish through gendered and racialised imagery, “turn[ing] to representations of savage, female natives” and incorporating “gender differences into their analyses of barbarism” (7–8). Within such frameworks, Irish Catholic women were doubly othered: both

¹² Samhain is a Celtic festival that marks the transition from the abundant season of summer to the darker half of the year. According to Celtic tradition, it is the time when the “veil” between the living and the dead becomes particularly thin. In contemporary culture, this festival has evolved into Halloween.

as colonial subjects and as women, their identities mediated through a rhetoric that depicted them as “savage,” “bestial,” or even monstrous.

Moreover, these representations extended beyond reductive stereotypes, generating a complex and often contradictory set of figurations. As Mullin further notes, the conventional allegory of Ireland as a passive and “helpless, virginal maiden” was supplemented and at times displaced by more ambivalent images of the nation as “virgin, Mother, rebel, prostitute, wife, rape-victim, seductress, and prophet” (Mullin 9). Such multiplicity reveals the extent to which the female body became a contested symbolic site.

Building on the feminisation of Ireland discussed in the first chapter, it is also important to consider how the Great Famine further intensified the association between femininity, the supernatural, and national identity. Significantly, many of the women writers examined in this chapter were writing in the decades following the famine of the 1840s. As Margaret Kelleher argues, famine discourse is gendered, particularly in its focus on the maternal figure. A psychoanalytical reading of famine imagery, she suggests, foregrounds its relation to what Kristeva terms the “primal shelter” that “ensured the survival of the newborn” (qtd. in Kelleher 7); however, famine narratives frequently depict “the failure or collapse of this primal shelter,” exposing “the mother’s inability to nourish or protect her child” (Kelleher 7). In such representations, the maternal body becomes a site of profound anxiety, acquiring “a much more unsettling and threatening quality” (Kelleher 7).

This ambivalence is central to the gendered symbolism of the famine, as “the depictions of maternity, to be found in famine texts, reproduce an ambivalence at the very heart of the maternal figure” (Kelleher 8), which may function allegorically as “mother earth, the mother/land, even nation” (Kelleher 8), while at the same time being rendered through

“the individual spectacle of a hungry body” (Kelleher 8) a spectacle that occurs “predominantly, through images of women” (Kelleher 8). Such imagery reinforces the feminised construction of Ireland itself, figured, in this context, as a mother unable to sustain her children, thereby transforming national catastrophe into a gendered experience.

The suffering female body becomes, therefore, both a literal and symbolic site of famine trauma. Literary representations appeared in women’s personal writings, as Kelleher observes that “interesting discourses on famine appear in women’s private writings, for example, the correspondence of novelist Maria Edgeworth and the diaries of Elizabeth Smith” (Kelleher 64), but also in fiction with the works of Mary Anne Hoare, like *Shamrock Leaves* (1851), Mary Anne Sadlier’s *New Lights* (1853), and Margaret Brew’s *The Chronicles of Castle Cloyne* (1884). These works demonstrate the extent to which women writers engaged with the famine both as a tragic historical event and as a gendered symbolic crisis.

This process of dehumanisation of native Irish bodies is further illuminated by Jarlath Killeen, who notes that Anglo-Irish Protestant perceptions of the Catholic population were surrounded by a sense of fear, such that many believed themselves to be living “in a country mostly populated by diabolical monsters” (145). The term “monster” itself, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, derived from the Latin *monēre* (to warn) and *monstrare* (to show), is helpful in this context, as it denotes something that exists outside normative categories and functions as a sign, a warning, or a visible manifestation of perceived disorder.

Within post-Reformation discourse, Catholics were persistently constructed through precisely such a logic of monstrosity. As Killeen further explains, seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Catholics were mostly regarded as “biologically impure and interstitial” (150), as well as “sociological pollutants” (Killeen 150), and were therefore considered

“monstrous regardless of the theory used to examine them” (Killeen 150). This perception extended to the belief that Catholics could be “biologically anomalous” (Killeen 150), even “in league with Satan” (Killeen 150), possessing bodies that were not fully human but hybrid, unstable, and contaminating.

Such representations reveal an existential anxiety surrounding categorisation and identity, as Catholics were imagined as occupying multiple, contradictory states simultaneously, “loyal” and “disloyal,” “living and dead,” “singular and multiple,” “human and animal/bestial” (Killeen 150). Even when acknowledged as nominally human, they remained conceptually aligned with monstrosity, embodying a form of alterity that resisted assimilation into dominant Protestant frameworks.

Within this ideologically layered framework, Catholic Irish women occupied a precarious position. Consequently, their engagement with the Gothic and the supernatural acquires peculiar historical importance, as Jerome Cohen explains in his fourth monster theory: “History Itself becomes a monster: defeaturing, self-deconstructive, always in danger of exposing the sutures that bind its disparate elements into a single, unnatural body” (9).

2.3.1 Rosa Mulholland – “Not to Be Taken at Bed-Time”

Belfast-born author Rosa Mulholland perfectly embodies the historical sense acquired by the monstrous correlation between famine and the supernatural. In Mulholland’s fiction, the female body is frequently positioned at the intersection of care, failure, and horror. In “The Hungry Death,” described by Richard Dalby as “a graphic macabre tale set on a remote Irish island during the 1840s famine” (21), starvation is not merely a social condition but a Gothic force that distorts both the physical and moral order.

Mulholland, who acquired the nickname “Mistress of the Macabre,” occupies a significant position for her nuanced engagement with Irish folklore and the supernatural. Writing from within a Catholic cultural framework, Mulholland draws extensively on religious belief systems, integrating them into narratives that explore questions of rural life, religion and female identity. She contributed greatly to Irish literature by writing poems, novels, tales, and a two-volume biography of her husband, John T. Gilbert, a famous historian. Mullholland, according to George O’Neill:

was a writer who mingled the ideal and the real in no commonplace degree, and in no ordinary manner. She had a grasp of the old plain earth and a grasp of fairyland or of heaven, each, within a certain range, unusually complete. And this completeness, this dual power, was at the same time distinctively Irish and Catholic--was, in fact, the justification of the parallel just sketched out between her work and the wide, well-beloved Irish landscape. (398)

The duality of her character, both Irish and Catholic, is reflected in her writing, works such as *The Wicked Woods of Tobereevil* (1872), *Banshee Castle* (1895) are set in isolated parts of Ireland like Connemara. This peculiar way of incorporating folklore and catholic tropes might be because Mulholland’s “character and temperament were of the North, but of the Catholic Celtic North. And a touch of Western softness had come in to temper northern asperities (O’Neill 398).

Mulholland’s talent was noted by Charles Dickens; he selected her to contribute her stories to his popular magazine *All the Year Round*. Among her works, it is also worth mentioning her poetry volumes *Vagrant Verses* (1886 and 1899), *Spirit and Dust* (1908), and *Dreams and Realities* (1916), some of her supernatural tales collected in *The Haunted*

Organist of Hurley Burley (1891) and her novels *Cousin Sara* (1909); *The O'Shaughnessy Girls* (1911); *Twin Sisters* (1911); *Fair Noreen* (1912); *The Daughter in Possession* (1915) and *Hester's History*, which was serialized in *All the Year Round* in 1869 (Dalby 22). All these works have in common strong female protagonists who subvert patriarchal order.

“Not to Be Taken at Bed-Time”, which appeared in the 1865 Christmas Number of *Doctor Marigold's Prescriptions*, (Dalby 19), is one of Mulholland's most famous supernatural tales. “Not to Be Taken at Bed-Time”, according to Giakaniki and Showers:

features a rural Irish setting and incorporates elements of folklore with flourishes of the supernatural. The story's archetypal witch is a “yellow-faced hag” named Pexie na Pishrogie – *pishogue* being Irish for superstition and charm. With her “elf-lock of coarse black hair” and smattering of Gaelic phraseology, Mulholland simultaneously evokes, albeit in caricature, the world of faerie and that of the Irish-speaking peasantry.

(xx)

The old hag in the tale uses Gaelic words and phrases like “Och, Och! It's not fit for comin' over to young ears, but cuggir (whisper), acushla!” demonstrating Mulholland's knowledge of the Gaelic language and its popular legends.

Moreover, in the tale, the Irish-speaking peasantry world is sharply divided from the one embodied by Colonel Blake and his daughter Evleen, who live in luxury; even their way of speaking is markedly different. Furthermore, according to Edmunson, “the tragic ending to the story reinforces its emphasis on hatred, vengeance, isolation and fate” (217).

2.3.2 Katharine Tynan – “The First Wife”

While Mulholland’s supernatural enforces tragic moral consequence to the use of magic, Katharine Tynan relocates this dynamic within domestic and emotional tensions between women, shifting the Gothic from external threat to internalised conflict. “The First Wife”, while using a similar Irish rural setting, involves themes of jealousy and blurred boundaries between life and death.

Many of Tynan’s works involve Ireland’s ancestral beliefs as the writer: “utilise Irish traditions through the lens of folk horror and pagan ritual practices that are at odds with Catholic doctrine” (Edmunson 218). Tynan, like Mulholland, often references the famine in her works, describing it as a “stalking ghost-like” presence closely tied to the desolate landscape of Ireland’s coastal areas. Tynan was born in 1861 into a middle-class Catholic family; her father, Andrew Cullen Tynan, was a farmer who supported his daughter’s career as a writer. Tynan was immersed in political discourse from a young age since her father was a Parnellite¹³. She later developed a fruitful friendship and collaboration with W.B Yeats, with whom she published many works inclined to a political subtext, including *Poems and Ballads of Young Ireland*. According to Colette Epplè, “They were mutually supportive of each other's poetry: Yeats encouraged her to write about what she knew, which added a new dimension to her work; Tynan provided useful contacts for Yeats in the literary and publishing worlds” (314).

¹³ A Parnellite is a supporter or follower of Charles Stewart Parnell, the nineteenth-century Irish nationalist politician who led the Irish Parliamentary Party and campaigned for Home Rule.

Tynan's literary career was remarkably prolific and ideologically wide-ranging, reflecting both her deep engagement with Irish cultural identity and her investment in broader social and religious concerns. As Epplè notes:

producing more than 100 books of fiction, poetry, history, and autobiography, as well as editing some anthologies, she advanced the characteristic Revival concern with Irish cultural identity among a very large audience in Ireland and Britain; in addition, her works include her interests in Catholicism, feminism, and the situation of the poor.

(314)

Her later poetry, moreover, reflects an increasingly explicit religious orientation, as “influenced by her strong belief in Catholicism, [it consists of] works of religious devotion, often earning comparisons to Christina Rossetti” (Epplè 314). Taken together, these elements highlight the complexity of Tynan's position as a writer who navigates nationalism, Catholicism, and gendered perspectives, all of which inform her distinctive use of the supernatural. These concerns are brought into particular focus in “The First Wife,” where the intrusion of the supernatural into a rural domestic setting exposes tensions surrounding marriage, memory, and female identity. The narrative centres on the lingering presence of the first wife, whose spectral return disrupts the apparent serenity of the second marriage, blurring the boundary between the living and the dead: “The dead woman had lain six years in the grave, and the new wife had reigned five of them in her stead” (Tynan 86). In this sense, the female ghost functions merely as a manifestation of unresolved emotional and social conflicts as “there had been ill blood over the man between the two women” (Tynan 87).

The tale fits into the Gothic tradition not only for the presence of a ghost but also because it is set on a wild island where the description of the weather fits with the canon of Burkean sublime: “the roar of the wind and the roar of the waves made a perpetual tumult in the air, and creaking and lashing of the forest trees aided to the wild confusion” (Tynan 89). In addition, the grave of the first wife is neglected, and everything that had belonged to her is destroyed as the second wife wants to get rid of her memory. The figure of the first wife, suspended between presence and absence, can be read as embodying what Edmundson identifies as “the Gothic potential of female experience” (216), in which the supernatural articulates forms of jealousy, rivalry, and emotional unrest within communities of women. Nevertheless, although the narrative engages with themes of envy, Tynan’s indoctrination in Catholicism is evident in the story’s moral, which suggests that the memory of the dead must be respected, as attempts to erase it result in an unresolved presence.

2.3.3 Anna Maria Hall – “The Dark Lady”

A very different dynamic is explored in “The Dark Lady” by Anna Maria Hall (1800-1881), as the tale “contains a distinctly feminist subtext throughout” (Giakaniki and Showers x). In the tale, the supernatural female presence is not threatening but benevolent and “a forceful opposition to decidedly masculine expression of egocentricity, cruelty and emotional detachment” (x) through which the protagonist, Amelie de Rohan, defies her guardian’s patriarchal rule. The Dark Lady, also addressed in the tale as ‘La Femme Noir’, seems to function as a confidant to Amelie: “there could be no doubt that the ‘Femme Noir’ had initiated her into certain mysteries; for they heard at times voices in a low, whispering converse, and saw the shadows of two persons cross the old roofless chapel, when ‘Mamselle’ had passed the foot-bridge alone” (Hall 7).

Nonetheless, Hall's work shares with Tynan a moral and religious framework shaped by Catholic-inflected values, in which the supernatural operates as a guiding device that educates and participates in human situations. This moral dimension reflects Hall's own ideological commitments. As James Doig notes, throughout her life she "was a committed Christian and philanthropist" (23), actively supporting charitable institutions such as the Hospital for Consumption at Brompton, the Governesses' Institute, and the Nightingale Fund, while also being "a fervent supporter of women's rights" and maintaining "a strong interest in spiritualism" (Doig 23).

Many of Hall's supernatural narratives are collected in *Ireland: Its Scenery, Character, etc.* (1841–3), a three-volume work co-written with her husband, Samuel Carter Hall, which includes tales drawing on "legends of fairies, banshees, and witches" (Doig 24), some later republished independently (Doig 24). This engagement with Irish folklore also informs her later fantasy novel *Midsummer Eve: A Fairy Tale of Love* (1848), based on the belief that a child born on Midsummer Eve after the father's death becomes the property of the fairies (Doig 25).

Within this broader folkloric and spiritual framework, the themes developed in "The Dark Lady" become particularly significant. First published in *The Drawing-Room Table-Book* (1847) and later collected in *The Playfellow and Other Stories* (1866), the tale stands as Hall's most fully realised supernatural work (Doig 26). Among the texts examined in this thesis, "The Dark Lady" is the only one not set in Ireland but in the Swiss Alps, even though Hall's writing is generally rooted in rural Irish settings, reflecting her upbringing in Bannow, County Wexford. According to Giakaniki and Showers, this foreign setting, together with motifs such as "the isolated castle, the motherless maiden, the young friend, and the ruined

family chapel in which an ancestral apparition dwells,” anticipates Le Fanu’s vampire novella “Carmilla” (x). As in “Carmilla”, the tale repeatedly evokes the sublime landscape of the Alps: “The mountains, she would say, in her country, went high, high up, until they could look into the Heavens, and hear God in the storm” (Hall 4). This description details a moment where fear and awe collide, creating a sublime Burkean moment.

Moreover, throughout the narrative, and again recalling “Carmilla”, albeit more subtly, an undertext of homoeroticism can be detected. The protagonist Amelie is described by her friend, who later recounts the story, in terms of intense admiration and emotional attachment: “the loveliest of all creatures,” “my own dear Amelie,” “the sunbeam of the house”; “I was nothing where Amelie was—nothing but her shadow! The bravest and best in the country would have rejoiced to be to her what I was—her chosen friend” (Hall 6).

These similarities, however noteworthy, remain just an inspiration for “Carmilla”, as the supernatural ghost, unlike the vampire Carmilla, ultimately proves benevolent and never harms any of the characters. “The Dark Lady” thus “deftly combines the gothic romances of the late eighteenth century with Victorian supernaturalism” (Giakaniki and Showers x) in a narrative that, although not set in Ireland, retains a distinctive quality associated with Irish women writers, particularly in its use of the supernatural as a means of moral intervention and female empowerment.

2.3.4 Ethna Carbery – “The Wee Gray Woman”

A comparable, yet subtler, engagement with the supernatural can be found in Ethna Carbery’s tale “The Wee Gary Woman”. Ethna Carbery (1866–1902), born Anna Johnston, was from a Catholic family in Belfast, and, like Katharine Tynan, she was a Parnellite. Carbery is mostly known for her poetry rather than her fiction, particularly for her

contributions to magazines such as *United Ireland*, *Donahoe's Magazine*, *Young Ireland*, *The Nation*, and *The Catholic Fireside*. From an early age, she displayed a strong political consciousness and, together with her friend and fellow writer Alice Milligan¹⁴, founded the nationalist periodical *Northern Patriot*, which Frances Clarke described as “a radical monthly journal that openly advocated Irish separatism” (88). Moreover, she was also one of the founders of the nationalist organisation *The Daughters of Ireland*.

Taking all of this into consideration, it is possible to note how Carbery is not primarily known for writing supernatural or uncanny literature. However, Giakaniki and Showers note that “like most authors, her writing makes the occasional foray into the Land Beyond” (xiv). This inclination may in part be connected to her husband, Séumas MacManus, a fellow poet and folklorist who, following her premature death, published three posthumous collections of her works: *The Four Winds of Éirinn* (1902), *The Passionate Hearts* (1904), and *In the Celtic Past* (1904). Remembering his wife, MacManus wrote that “the unseen world was always close to her, and its gates for her were always ajar, giving her frequent glimpses of beauty and wonder” (qtd. in Giakaniki and Showers xiv).

This sensitivity to the “unseen world” is strongly present in “The Wee Gray Woman,” as is the emphasis on the sublime qualities of the Irish rural landscape, which in the story functions almost as a character: “It was a tranquil, lonely spot; eerie too, in the autumn twilight, when the slow-creeping mists rose up from the bog for miles around, and many were the tales told of an evening, by the folk living on the high land [..]” (Carbery 53). As Giakaniki and Showers observe, “having spent her childhood in Ballymena, Carbery was

¹⁴ Alice Milligan (1865-1953) was another Irish female writer who, like Ethna Carbery, contributed to the Celtic Revival with her poetry.

familiar with the slow-creeping mists that could rise from bogs surrounding the nearby parish of Glenwherry where the tale is set” (xiv). Within this eerie setting, “the supernatural element is peripheral and ambiguous, and the mysterious hearth-side visitor of the story’s title would seem to serve as a haunting reminder of some past tragedy that played out in the bog many years ago” (Giakniki and Showers xiv).

The tale ultimately centres on themes of isolation and the human need for companionship “whether he fancied her a friendly denizen of fairyland, or a poor wandering ghost dreeing her purgatory for her own sake [...] yet night after night the hearth was swept, and the stool placed that she might have her rest until dawn broke in flame of gold and pale chilly green over the hill-tops” (Carbery 54), with the Wee Gray Woman operating as a quiet, lingering presence tied to memory and loss.

In returning to the theoretical concerns outlined at the beginning of the chapter, and in particular to the provocation posed by Ann Owens, “the student who searches the shelves for works on Irish women’s fiction feels very much as Virginia Woolf did when she searched the British Museum for work on women by women” (2), it becomes evident that Irish women writers, both Protestant and Catholic, have produced a substantial body of literature in the form of tales, novels, poetry and plays. Critics such as Owens and Kirkpatrick have demonstrated that the historical neglect of these writers reflects broader critical frameworks that prioritised national narratives and privileged certain forms of literary production while dismissing others as ‘too domestic’. This othering is further intensified when read through Mullin’s and Killeen’s account of colonial discourse, in which Ireland and Irishness itself are feminised and constructed through tropes of religious and gendered monstrosity. However, it is this marginalised position that enables a distinctive reinterpretation of Gothic conventions.

Across both Anglo-Irish and Catholic contexts, writers such as Charlotte Riddell, Jane Wilde, and Augusta Gregory, alongside Rosa Mulholland, Katharine Tynan, Anna Maria Hall, and Ethna Carbery, appropriate the formal structures of the Gothic to register forms of unease that are less concerned with external terror than with social, cultural, and psychological instability. In Riddell's fiction, the supernatural is embedded within economic and material realities, rendering the haunting presence of the banshee inseparable from questions of debts and national identity; Wilde, by contrast, integrates folklore and spiritual vision into a much dreamlike atmosphere that affirms communal continuity.

A comparable yet distinct dynamic functions within the work of Catholic writers, whose engagement with folklore, religion, and rural life produces a Gothic mode grounded in ancestral Irish Gaelic elements, such as the characterisation of the wild coasts of Ireland and morals dictated by Catholicism. In Mulholland and Tynan, the supernatural frequently appears in relation to gender and domestic relations, while in Hall and Carbery, it assumes more explicitly mediatory or ethical roles. Across these texts, supernatural figures are rarely constructed to be wholly antagonistic or violent; instead, they function as liminal presences that reflect and negotiate the marginal status of those who encounter them.

Ultimately, in these narratives, the supernatural operates not merely as a source of Gothic atmosphere but as a narrative strategy through which Irish women writers articulate forms of cultural, social, and gendered marginality that would otherwise be excluded from dominant literary discourse.

Chapter Three: Close Reading of Selected Tales

3.1 Gothic and Uncanny Dimensions of the Selected Tales

In this chapter, the seven selected tales will first be examined through the critical frameworks of the Gothic and the Uncanny. The analysis will then develop through broader thematic categories, progressing from individual supernatural figures to wider spatial and natural dimensions. The chapter will initially focus on supernatural female figures, beginning with the Banshee and the motif of the Old Hag, before moving to female ghosts and shadowy presences, and finally briefly addressing Irish fairies and the Celtic Otherworld. The analysis will subsequently shift toward larger Gothic settings, such as haunted houses and graveyards. Finally, the close reading will explore the Irish landscape and its intrinsic sublime qualities.

Before proceeding with the analysis, it is necessary to examine the Gothic qualities of the selected tales. The Gothic, traditionally associated with texts such as *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), *Frankenstein* (1818-1831), and *Melmoth the Wanderer* (1820), is characterised by its emphasis on a sublime atmosphere and the disruption of rational order through the intrusion of the irrational or the past into the present. Davide Punter, mentioned in chapter one, identified some common characteristics of the Gothic that appear in the selected tales: “an emphasis on portraying the terrifying, a common insistence on archaic settings, a prominent use of the supernatural, the presence of highly stereotyped characters and the attempt to deploy and perfect techniques of literary suspense are the most significant” (1). Furthermore, as Jarlath Killen observes:

Irish Anglicans were living through a liminal period as the old homogenised enclave was broken and a new grouping (a patriotic one) was being formed, for which liminality, liminal forms are required [...] Gothic literature is a literature of the liminal

that obsesses over moments of fracture and dissolution and re-enacts such moments repeatedly in an attempt to come to grips with them. (70)

These Gothic conventions are central to tales like “The First Wife” and “The Dark Lady”; however, to deepen understanding of the specific emotional effect these narratives produce, it is useful to explore the concept of the Uncanny.

As theorized by Sigmund Freud in his essay “The Uncanny” (1919), the uncanny belongs to a particular area of aesthetics that “belongs to the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread. It is equally beyond doubt that the word is not always used in a clearly definable sense, and so it commonly merges with what arouses fear in general” (Freud 123). Freud suggests that the uncanny possesses “a specific affective nucleus, which justifies the use of a special conceptual term. One would like to know the nature of this common nucleus, which allows us to distinguish the ‘uncanny’ within the field of the frightening” (123). This distinction allows readers to understand the uncanny as a psychological experience that occurs when something once considered familiar becomes, for some reason, unfamiliar.

Freud ultimately argues that “the uncanny is that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar” (Freud 124). In other words, the uncanny emerges from the unsettling transformation of something once intimate and recognizable. As he clarifies:

not everything new and unfamiliar is frightening. All one can say is that what is novel may well prove frightening and uncanny; some things that are novel are indeed frightening, but by no means all. Something must be added to the novel and the unfamiliar if it is to become uncanny. (Freud 125)

This dynamic is particularly relevant in the context of folklore, as supernatural elements in Irish tales are not wholly alien intrusions, but rather part of a shared ancestral memory. Figures such as banshees, deformed hags, fairies and fairy children belong to a collective imaginative tradition and are therefore both familiar and unsettling at once. Their appearances, voices, and movements reactivate latent beliefs and anxieties embedded in the community memory. In these narratives, the uncanny is “actually nothing new or strange, but something that was long familiar to the psyche and was estranged from it only through being repressed” (Freud 148).

Freud also emphasizes the importance of uncertainty in the production of the uncanny, particularly within literary texts. As he observes: “an uncanny effect often arises when the boundary between fantasy and reality is blurred, when we are faced with the reality of something that we have until now considered imaginary, when a symbol takes on the full function and significance of what it symbolizes, and so forth” (150-151). This ambiguity creates a condition of instability. Gothic narratives are especially effective in this regard, as they populate familiar settings with seemingly impossible occurrences. The resulting tension between belief and disbelief intensifies the uncanny effect.

This instability can also be understood through Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection developed in *Powers of Horror* (1980). For Kristeva, the abject emerges when boundaries that structure identity and meaning begin to collapse. Abjection is therefore closely connected to ambiguity and categorical uncertainty. As she explains:

We may call it a border; abjection is above all ambiguity. Because, while releasing a hold, it does not radically cut off the subject from what threatens it—on the contrary, abjection acknowledges it to be in perpetual danger. But also because abjection itself is

a composite of judgment and affect, of condemnation and yearning, of signs and drives.

(10)

Kristeva further argues that abjection preserves traces of “the immemorial violence with which a body becomes separated from another body in order to be” (10), suggesting that the abject confronts the subject with a primal instability that precedes rational order itself (10). In Gothic and supernatural narratives, this instability frequently manifests through figures and spaces that resist fixed categorization. Kristeva explains the concept of abjection as: “A massive and sudden emergence of uncanniness, which, familiar as it might have been in an opaque and forgotten life, now harries me as radically separate, loathsome” (2).

Female supernatural figures become abject because they occupy ambiguous positions between human and non-human, protective and threatening. Similarly, haunted houses, neglected graves, and spectral landscapes disturb conventional boundaries between past and present. The uncanny effect produced by these tales therefore derives not only from fear of the supernatural, but from a deeper confrontation with the fragility of identity, order, and meaning itself.

Building on Freud's understanding of the uncanny as an experience grounded in uncertainty, Tzvetan Todorov, in *The Fantastic* (1970), defines the fantastic as a state of hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations: “The fantastic occupies the duration of uncertainty. Once we choose one answer or the other, we leave the fantastic for a neighbouring genre, the uncanny or the marvellous” (25). As previously mentioned, the supernatural elements in Irish folklore resist clear distinctions between reality and otherworldly experience; Irish tales often treat these phenomena as an accepted dimension of existence. The element of uncertainty can be experienced not only through popular tales but

also through Celtic festivals, for example, Samhain, when the boundary between the dead and the living is supposed to be thinner. Killen, building on Todorov's theory, maintains that the fantastic element in Irish Gothic literature is also produced through to the instability of Irish history, as:

The fantastic text begins in a recognizable reality then brings the characters through a period of radical uncertainty and out the other side to a different but still secure reality. It is a form that must be extraordinarily attractive to those undergoing such transitions in history, and this partially explains why it emerges at moments of extreme hesitation and in historical communities stuck in liminal spaces and liminal times. The Gothic is a means not so much to escape from everyday realities as to transmogrify them and confront them in different guises. (70)

Killeen suggests that Irish Gothic literature emerges from a historical condition marked by political and religious instability. The tensions produced by colonialism, sectarian conflict, and the search for a coherent national identity contribute to a cultural atmosphere in which the boundaries between past and present, self and other, become increasingly unstable. Religion and the never-ending conflict between Protestants and Catholics, in particular, occupies a central role within this framework. As Killeen maintains:

For this, Catholicism, and Catholics as embodiments of Catholicism, are extremely problematic, because Catholicism is an entire system of old ideas that have been supposedly 'overcome' and now constitute ancient history, and an individual Catholic is a personification of this dead system, he is the past come back to life. (150-151)

In this sense, Catholicism itself becomes uncanny within the Irish Gothic imagination, as it embodies the return of a past that the Ascendancy attempts to repress. The Catholic subject is

therefore constructed as a figure suspended between past and present, tradition and modernity, much like the supernatural figures that populate Irish Gothic narratives. The uncanny quality of Irish Gothic fiction thus derives both from ghosts and haunted spaces, and from the unresolved historical and religious tensions embedded within Irish cultural identity.

Furthermore, the recurrence of specific thematic motifs suggests that the uncanny is produced by a broader symbolic system that finds its roots in folklore. Female figures, in particular, frequently embody this ambiguity, appearing as warners, helpers or threats, while spaces such as ruined houses and neglected graves act as sites where the past persists within the present. Similarly, the Irish landscape, its wild cliffs and coast, bogs, and pastoral features, contributes to an atmosphere that is at once sublime and unsettling.

This chapter proposes a close reading of seven selected tales to examine how these narrative and symbolic elements produce a distinctly Irish articulation of the uncanny. By focusing on supernatural female figures, haunted spaces, and the evocative power of the landscape, the analysis will demonstrate that the uncanny arises both from the presence of the supernatural and its involvement with the domestic world.

3.2 Supernatural Female Figures

A defining feature of the selected tales is the prominence of supernatural female figures, whose presence consistently destabilizes the boundary between the familiar and the unknown. Their significance lies mostly in the ways in which they embody cultural anxieties surrounding the female body. As Jack Halberstam explains in *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters* (1995), “monsters have to be everything the human is not and, in producing the negative of human, these novels make way for the invention of human as

white, male, middle class, and heterosexual” (22). Halberstam, while making this remark, is referring to *Frankenstein* and *Dracula*; however, as they further explain:

the monster's body, indeed, is a machine that, in its Gothic mode, produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative. The monster functions as monster, in other words, when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits as possible into one body. (21)

In the selected tales, supernatural female figures similarly become sites onto which cultural fears and anxieties are projected as their monstrosity derives from their resistance to stable categorization. Existing at the margins, these figures fully belong to the realm of the uncanny. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen argues, “The monster is born [...] as an embodiment of a certain cultural moment – of a time, a feeling, and a place. The monster’s body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy [...], giving them life and an uncanny independence” (4). These supernatural female figures, therefore, function as cultural manifestations of collective anxieties and unresolved tensions. Their bodies become symbolic spaces where fears surrounding death, hunger, repression, and otherness converge, allowing them to exceed fixed definitions.

This connection between femininity and monstrosity is further explored by Barbara Creed in *The Monstrous-Feminine* (1993). Drawing on psychoanalytic theory, Creed argues that the idea of women as monsters is often linked to processes such as reproduction, bodily transformation, and the breakdown of boundaries, all of which challenge stable notions of identity (1). In the context of the selected tales, supernatural female figures frequently embody these characteristics, appearing as figures that exceed or transgress the limits of the human. Creed builds on Kristeva’s theory of abjection and asserts that:

Kristeva is attempting to explore the different ways in which abjection works within human societies[...] Ritual becomes a means by which societies both renew their initial contact with the abject element and then exclude that element. Through ritual, the demarcation lines between the human and nonhuman are drawn up anew and presumably made all the stronger for that process. (1)

The ritual dimension is particularly significant in the tales under consideration, as their roots reside within ancestral Celtic culture and oral tradition. Celtic culture has often been symbolically associated with femininity, spirituality, and ancestral memory, particularly when contrasted with colonial constructions of Anglo-Saxon rationality and masculine authority (Renan and Arnold qtd. in Ó Giolláin 26). Within this framework, female figures become closely associated with ritual practices traditionally linked to magic, prophecy, and contact with the supernatural world. Folkloric motifs such as witches' sabbaths, fairy rings, and the banshee's ritual lamentation reinforce the association between femininity and forms of knowledge that exist outside institutional structures of power. As a result, supernatural female figures emerge as embodiments of both fascination and anxiety, simultaneously preserving ancestral traditions and threatening patriarchal traditional power structures.

In this regard, Creed observes that the concept of abjection is to be seen and explored with specific reference to one of the most male-dominated social hierarchies: religion. As she explains:

This area cannot be ignored, for what becomes apparent in reading [Kristeva's] work is that definitions of the monstrous as constructed in the modern horror text are grounded in ancient religious and historical notions of abjection – particularly in relation to the following religious 'abominations': sexual immorality and perversion; corporeal

alteration, decay and death; human sacrifice; murder; the corpse; bodily wastes; the feminine body and incest. (2)

Creed's observations are particularly relevant to the close reading of "The Banshee's Warning" and "Not to Be Taken at Bed-Time", as in the tales the female supernatural body frequently becomes a site through which anxieties surrounding death, sexuality, maternity, and corporeal decay are negotiated.

3.2.1 "The Banshee's Warning": The Banshee's cry as a revelation

According to Elliott O'Donnell in his work *The Banshee* (1920), the presence of the banshee in Ireland, a country characterized by a wild, untamed landscape, is almost natural as "it is not at all surprising to find something in the nature of a ghost harmonising with the general atmosphere and surroundings" (O' Donnell 9). O'Donnell argues that the term Banshee derives from the Irish *Bean Sidhe* meaning "A Woman of the Faerie Race" "The Lady of Death," "The Woman of Sorrow," "The Spirit of the Air," and "The Woman of the Barrow" (O' Donnell 9). Patricia Lysaght, one of the pioneers in the study of the Banshees, adds that:

Names for the supernatural death-messenger in Irish tradition may conveniently be divided into three groups: 1) *bean si/ banshee*, 2) *bean chaointe* (and similar forms) and 3) what we may refer to as *badhbh*-appellations. (*The Banshee: The Irish Supernatural Death Messenger* 1986, 27-29)

Moreover, Lysaght observes that "All the names are in Irish, and there can be no doubt the beliefs, whatever their ultimate origin, were fully developed in Gaelic Ireland" (38). The author adds that the use of different names depends on the area where it is used, moreover, even if the Irish term and etymology might change or be uncertain, there is never a doubt that it refers to a woman: "Etymologically, there is no problem. *Bean chaointe/bean a'*

chaointe/bean chaoint' means simply 'a keening woman' [...] *Bean chaointe* — like *bean si* — tells us that the being is female" (Lysaght 33), and again, "all the names state or imply the being in question is feminine" (Lysaght 40).

Lysaght and O'Donnell both agree that Banshees are associated only with ancient Irish families as

a family ghost, and most authorities agree that it only haunts families of very ancient Irish lineage. Lady Wilde goes to the other extreme and allows considerable latitude. She affirms that the Banshee attaches itself not only to certain families of historic lineage, but also to persons gifted with song and music. To be haunted by the Banshee one must belong to an Irish family that is, at least, a thousand years old (O'Donnell 9-12).

By "historic lineage", the scholars mean families that are supposed to descend directly from *Mil Espáine* (hero of Spain), the ancestor of the original inhabitants of Ireland, who call themselves Milesians (Anthony Marmion, *The Ancient and Modern History of the Maritime Ports of Ireland* 86).

Patricia Lysaght further observes that "the death-messenger seems to bestow a certain amount of status on the family for which she cries. Status factors reflecting the outlook of the tradition-bearers are also distinguishable in the frequency with which the death-messenger appears at the deaths of different categories of members of the families she follows" (63), suggesting that the banshee functions also as a marker of prestige and ancestral legitimacy. This association between the banshee and ancient Gaelic lineage is particularly significant in relation to the tale "The Banshee's Warning," as the protagonist himself is called Hertford O'Donnell, a surname traditionally connected to one of the old aristocratic Irish families.

Significantly, Hertford himself appears fully aware of this association between banshees and aristocratic Irish lineage. Upon hearing the supernatural lament, he remarks: “‘If my visitor would tell me,’ he proceeded, ‘for whom this lamentation is being made, whether for myself, or for some member of my illustrious family, I should feel immensely obliged. It seems too much honour for a poor surgeon to have such attention paid him’” (Riddell 23). Hertford’s comment reveals his consciousness of the prestige traditionally associated with banshee folklore. At the same time, the ironic tone of the remark introduces an uncanny tension between skepticism and belief, since the protagonist initially treats the banshee as part of an inherited cultural narrative before being forced to confront its terrifying reality.

Furthermore, banshees are generally understood to be tied exclusively to Ireland and to the ancestral lands of the families they haunt. In Riddell’s narrative, however, the banshee follows Hertford O’Donnell in his relocation to England. This displacement intensifies the uncanny dimension of the tale, as the supernatural figure transcends geographical boundaries and demonstrates that Hertford’s connection to his ancestral lineage cannot be severed through physical distance. As O’Donnell maintains, “[The Banshee] travels when, and only when, it accompanies abroad one of the most ancient of the Irish families; otherwise it stays in Ireland [...]” (12). Patricia Lysaght similarly observes that “such a family-connected guardian spirit could be said to ‘follow’ a family in the sense of ‘accompanying’ and ‘attending’ to it” (54).

The banshee of the tale, therefore, functions also as a supernatural companion. Significantly, Hertford’s father is named Miles O’Donnell, a detail that strongly recalls

Milesian ancestry. Just like his son, Miles experiences the banshee's cry that warns him about his brother's death:

And Hertford O'Donnell thought again about his own father riding full-chase across country, and hearing, as he galloped by a clump of plantation, something like a sobbing and wailing. [...] Then, for the first time in his life, Miles O'Donnell turned his horse's head from the hunt, and, within a mile of Calgillan¹⁵, met a man running to tell him his brother's gun had burst, and injured him mortally. (Riddell 29)

The choice of name further reinforces both the protagonist's genealogical connection to the old Irish lineages and Riddell's familiarity with Irish folklore and genealogical traditions. O'Donnell also emphasizes that banshees are hereditary supernatural presences attached to specific Irish clans, explaining that "there is not one Banshee only [...] but many; each clan possessing a Banshee of its own" (13).

Within Riddell's tale, the banshee's apparition assumes an ambiguously protective function; although uncanny and terrifying, she follows and warns Hertford, acting as a preserver of his connection with Ireland. In fact, "the choice of 'supernatural death-messenger' as a generic term [...] must not be taken to mean that the being is always connected with death, only that this is her most prominent trait" (Lysaght 64).

As discussed in Chapter Two, Riddell's supernatural fiction is frequently intertwined with economic realities and social anxieties. In this sense, the association between the banshee and aristocratic Irish families like the O'Donnells and the O'Neils reflects an

¹⁵ Calgillan in Irish *Cill Ghallagáin*, now called Kilgalligan, is a small coastal town in county Mayo

awareness of questions of prestige and class identity in nineteenth-century society. As Lysaght further explains:

While social and cultural pressures may have produced a death- messenger relatively democratic in her activities, behind — and to a certain extent beside — this being an older ‘aristocratic’ being is vaguely discernible, a being attached primarily to important and illustrious families and in particular to their most prominent members — their chieftains or heads. (63)

By linking supernatural manifestations to lineage and social status, Riddell demonstrates how folklore transforms symbolic language into an expression of broader economic and cultural tensions. The banshee in this tale, thus, operates as a signifier of social distinction, revealing the extent to which Gothic and folkloric narratives remain deeply embedded within the material and historical realities of their time.

According to Lysaght, the banshees are particularly hard to assess, as they seem to escape any classification, even in the categories of the supernatural. However, due to their way of acting, these beings might belong to the category of the ‘spirits of the dead’:

if the term ‘spirit’ is taken to include any manifestation from the most immaterial souls to the most substantial ‘walking corpses’[...]The reasons for the reappearance of such ghosts are very varied but many of them are connected with obligations to them which have not been fulfilled, or obligations they themselves have not fulfilled in life.

(Lysaght 42)

Unlike other supernatural entities, the banshee does not enact violence or directly intervene in human affairs. Her power resides in her voice, the characteristic wail or *caoineadh*, which is traditionally understood as a form of keening, a lament for the dead: “As

a rule, however, the Banshee is not seen, it is only heard, and it announces its advent in a variety of ways; sometimes by groaning, sometime by wailing, and sometimes by uttering the most blood-curdling of screams” (O’Donnell 17). This vocal manifestation is peculiar as it introduces the supernatural through sound rather than sight, thereby intensifying its unsettling effect. The disembodied nature of the wail contributes to a sense of uncertainty and disorientation.

Lysaght further explains that sorrow and grief constitute central elements in the terminology associated with banshee folklore across Ireland. Terms such as “wail,” “lament,” *caoineadh*, and “keen” are directly connected to ritual mourning practices and to the vocal expressions traditionally performed by keening women during wakes and funerals (Lysaght 69). Lysaght argues that “the banshee and her ilk should, to some extent, be considered the supernatural counterparts of such professional mourners” (Lysaght 69). In this sense, the banshee’s cry participates in communal expressions of grief and mourning. Her lament reveals an unexpectedly human and sympathetic dimension, as she appears to share the sorrow of the family she follows.

However, Lysaght also identifies a second category of terms associated with the banshee, including “roar,” “scream,” “shriek,” and “screech,” which emphasize more violent and monstrous auditory qualities (69). Her voice oscillates between ritual lamentation and supernatural horror, transforming sound into a liminal space where the human and the otherworldly intersect.

In the Banshee’s Warning, Hertford hears the banshee’s cry as he is at home, rethinking his life choices and reflecting on how he should move to secure his future:

and then, with a start and a shiver, and a blanched face, he turned sharply round, whilst a low, sobbing, wailing cry echoed mournfully through the room. No form of words could give an idea of the sound. The plaintiveness of the Holian harp—that plaintiveness which so soon affects and lowers the highest spirits—would have seemed wildly gay in comparison with the sadness of the cry which seemed floating in the air. As the Summer wind comes and goes amongst the trees, so that mournful wail came and went—came and went. It came in a rush of sound, like a gradual crescendo managed by a skilful musician, and died away in a lingering note, so gently that the listener could scarcely tell the exact moment when it faded into utter silence. (Riddell 21-22)

The cry enters Hertford's domestic sphere, transforming the familiar space of the home into a boundary-crossing environment.

Although Hertford initially attempts to rationalize the experience, the banshee's voice gradually overwhelms him psychologically. Riddell emphasizes that his fear does not derive from death itself, but merely from the banshee's presence: "He was not afraid of death, he was not afraid of trouble, he was not afraid of danger; but he was afraid of the Banshee; [...]" He had not thought about her for years and years. Never before had he heard her voice himself" (Riddell 26). The banshee's cry functions as the return of a repressed ancestral memory, forcing Hertford to confront a dimension of his identity that he had long attempted to distance himself from.

This psychological tension continues even during sleep, through dreams connected to genealogy and family lineage: "He dreamt of his mother's family—the Hertfords of Artingbury, Yorkshire, far-off relatives of Lord Hertford" (32). The dream then shifts to a

much more agitate action where Hertford tries to save a boy who is drowning but fails, probably foreshadowing the loss of his unknown son: “They were swept under the waves, and came up again, only to see larger waves rushing towards them; but through all, the surgeon never loosened his hold, until a tremendous billow, engulfing them both, tore the boy from his grasp” (Riddell 33). The disquiet provoked by the banshee’s cry thus becomes increasingly urgent, until it culminates in a direct revelatory command: “With the horror of his dream upon him he awoke, to hear a voice saying quite distinctly: ‘Go to the hospital—go at once!’” (Riddell 32).

The imperative nature of the voice transforms the banshee into an active supernatural guide compelling Hertford toward a revelation. Even after arriving at the hospital, the uncanny lament continues to accompany him until he finally encounters the banshee herself: “On the lower step of this staircase, partially in shadow, Hertford O’Donnell beheld, as he came forward, an old woman seated” (Riddell 37). The apparition is described through traditionally Gothic imagery: “An old woman with streaming grey hair, with attenuated arms, with head bowed forward, with scanty clothing, with bare feet; who never looked up at their approach, but sat unnoticed, shaking her head and wringing her hands in an extremity of despair” (Riddell 37).

Significantly, nobody else sees the figure apart from the dying child, who is later revealed to be Hertford’s estranged son. The banshee complies with her role of accompanying and attending the ancient family to which she is bound; she faithfully follows the O’Donnell’s genealogy through generations. Her apparition is almost bound to happen in Hertford’s life.

In this tale, the banshee’s voice can be interpreted almost as a form of epiphany in the Joycean sense of the term. In *Stephen Hero* (1944), James Joyce defines the epiphany as “a

sudden spiritual manifestation” (16). Similarly, the banshee’s lament and her later imperative to go to the hospital interrupt the ordinary flow of reality and produce a moment of revelation through which hidden truths become suddenly impossible to ignore. The banshee’s keening announces Hertford’s son’s death, and at the same time, it forces him towards self-confrontation. Melissa Edmusnson further argues that “The presence of the banshee thus represents the consequences of intolerance and cultural displacement as her cry speaks to the suffering of the living woman who has lost her home and her son” (217). In the context of this tale, the banshee’s warning functions both as an uncanny manifestation and a revelatory experience that exposes the inevitability of ancestry, memory, and familial obligation within the protagonist’s life.

3.2.2 The Old Hag in “Not to Be Taken at Bed-Time”

The figure of the Old Hag is less prominent in Irish folklore than the banshee, yet it similarly functions as a vessel of uncanniness that resists patriarchal control and social assimilation. In Irish mythology and folklore, the hag frequently occupies an ambiguous position between monstrosity and sacred knowledge, as she is often associated with the preservation of the “old beliefs.” Her body is commonly depicted as grotesque, aged, and abject, challenging cultural ideals of beauty, youth, and fertility. As Jarlath Killeen explains, “In the ‘loathly lady’¹⁶ tradition, a wizened hag would meet a group of young men and demand that one of them make love to her; this deed accomplished, the hag would transform into a beautiful young woman” (92). Killeen further recalls another ancient myth: “In another tradition, a hag called Becuma¹⁷ marries the king, causing the land to become infertile and the

¹⁶ The ‘loathly lady’ is a medieval archetypal female figure. A famous example of a loathly lady is Geoffrey Chaucer’s Wife of Bath.

¹⁷ Becuma in Irish *Bé Chuille* is a mythological Irish figure that inspired many legends, such as “Becuma of the White Skin”.

crops to fail, a situation which could only be altered by the blood sacrifice of a young man whose life force would mingle with the soil and make it fertile once more” (92). These examples reveal that the hag in Irish folklore embodies fertility, transformation, and supernatural power.

Perhaps the most significant hag figure within Irish folkloric tradition is the Hag of Beara¹⁸, who may be considered an archetypal model for many of the hag figures recurring throughout Irish myths and legends. As Eleanor Hull explains, the Hag of Beara is represented as “an ancient Hag or Cailleach, of great but unknown age whose traditions originate in the western landscape of Ireland, particularly around Dingle and County Kerry” (226). Hull further observes that the term *Cailleach* may refer both to “an ‘Auld Wife’ or ‘Hag,’ and to a nun who has taken the veil,” revealing how pagan and Christian identities frequently overlap within Irish folklore (Hull 226). She also emphasizes that the Hag of Beara appears both as an ancient goddess and as a Christian nun who “laments in her decay the pleasures of her youth” (Hull 226). The figure of the hag therefore demonstrates the extent to which ancestral beliefs become intertwined with religious structures rather than disappearing entirely under Christianity.

The ambiguity underlined by these folkloric examples closely connects the Old Hag to the concept of the monstrous-feminine outlined by Barbara Creed. Creed argues that female monstrosity emerges from patriarchal fears surrounding the female body and its association with irrationality, transformation, and uncontrollable power (100–101). Building on Julia Kristeva’s theory of abjection, Creed recalls Kristeva’s observation that “One of

¹⁸ Beara is also the name of a peninsula located on the South-West coast of Ireland where the hag is supposed to have lived.

them, the masculine, apparently victorious, confesses through its very relentlessness against the other, the feminine, that it is threatened by an asymmetrical, irrational, wily, uncontrollable power” (Kristeva 72). The Old Hag embodies this threatening alterity precisely as she is a feminine presence that seems to escape containment and is positioned between apparent beauty and decay, ancient beliefs and witchcraft.

As Creed further explains, “Historically and mythologically, the witch has inspired both awe and dread. In ancient societies all magical powers, whether used for good or evil purposes, inspired the deepest dread amongst the members of the community. One of the most interesting aspects of the witch in earlier centuries was her role as healer” (100). Precisely because of this connection to forms of power existing outside patriarchal and institutional control, the hag becomes threatening to the structures of the societies she lives in. Creed therefore argues that such fears derive from “the classic and phallogocentric definition of woman as the ‘other’, the weaker but dangerous complement of man” (101). Similarly, Killeen observes that “The witch, while often an isolated individual who behaved strangely, could be your wife, sister or mother whose evil only became apparent at certain points of the day or night. Monstrosity could hide, as well as reveal” (149). The uncanny quality of the Old Hag therefore derives from her ability to transform the familiar female body into something monstrous, excessive, and ultimately unknowable.

In Rosa Mulholland’s tale “Not to Be Taken at Bed-Time”, the old hag Pexie na Pishrogie is described as a “yellow-faced hag, dressed in a dark-red blanket, with elf-locks of coarse black hair protruding from under an orange kerchief swathed round her wrinkled jaw” (Mulholland 118). The grotesque physicality of Pexie’s body immediately places her within the realm of the abject and the monstrous feminine. Pexie’s description sharply contrasts with

that of the tale's other central female figure, Evleen Blake, the Anglo-Irish daughter of a landlord and the love interest of the protagonist, a Gaelic hermit called Coll Dhu. Evleen is described as:

A stately girl, clad in white satin [...] her face was pale as her gown, her eyes were swimming in tears, but a firm smile sat on her lips as she held out both hands to her father. The light behind her touched the glistening folds of her dress—the lustrous pearls around her throat—the coronet of blood red roses which encircles the knotted braids at the back of her head. (Mulholland 112)

The contrast between the two women reflects broader social and cultural tensions within the tale. Evleen embodies Anglo-Irish alleged refinement, beauty, and aristocratic femininity, while Pexie represents the irrational, folkloric, and abject dimensions associated with Gaelic culture and supernatural belief. This opposition is further reinforced through the characterization of Coll Dhu himself.

As discussed in Chapter One, Gaelic populations were frequently represented by Anglo-Irish landowners as irrational, wild, and primitive; consequently, it is significant that Coll Dhu seeks a supernatural remedy to obtain Evleen's love. Although he attempts to move within the Anglo-Irish world represented by the Blakes, he remains persistently otherized through his appearance, speech, and isolation. He inhabits the "Devil's Inn," described as "standing in the heater on top of the Connemara mountains, in a shallow valley hollowed between five peaks [...] they called the Devil's Inn, because no tired traveller had ever been asked to rest under its roof, nor friend known to cross its threshold" (Mulholland 109). Coll Dhu himself is similarly described as "a scion of the old family whose hands the surround lands had passed; and embittered by poverty and pride, he had come to bury himself in

solitude, and brood over his misfortunes” (Mulholland 109-110). These descriptions place Coll Dhu symbolically closer to Pexie and the supernatural world than to the Anglo-Irish Blakes. Like the hag, he exists at the margins of society, isolated and otherized: “here he was, under a roof which ought to have been his own, a stranger, known only by a nickname, shunned and solitary” (Mulholland 114).

The title itself, as Richard Dalby observes, carries an ambiguous and ironic meaning. Referring to Dickens’s “To be Taken With a Pinch of Salt,” Dalby argues that the title “may be a sarcastic acknowledgement that the intention of the piece was not to scare or give the reader a bad night’s sleep at all” (87). Simultaneously, the title may function as “a medical directive, commenting on the efficacy of the homespun remedies passed off, in the story, as possible cure-alls” (Dalby 87). This medical and ritual dimension is particularly significant because witches and wise women have historically occupied the role of healers and preparers of folk remedies. Significantly, the first time Pexie is introduced, “She was bending over a pot upon her fire, where herbs were simmering” (Mulholland 118). The image strongly recalls traditional representations of the folkloric wise woman whose knowledge of herbs, potions, and ritual practices exists outside institutional medicine and patriarchal authority.

In the tale, Pexie prepares a *burragh-bos* for Coll Dhu, an amulet which, according to the Gaelic peasantry inhabiting the Connemara region where the story is set, supposedly possesses the power to make Evleen fall in love with him. According to the tale, the *burragh-bos* is:

A sthrip o’ the skin o’ a corpse, peeled from the crown o’ the head to the heel, without crack or split, ot the charm’s brok; an’ that, rowled up, and put on a sthring roun’ the

neck o' the wan that's cowl'd by the wan that wants to be loved. An' sure enough it puts the fire in their hearts, hot an' strong, afore twinty-four hour is gone. (Mulholland 117)

Dalby argues that within Mulholland's supernatural fiction "nothing will turn destiny from its intended course" (88) and that beliefs in ghosts, reincarnation, or magical objects such as the *burragh-bos* function as speculative explanations through which supernatural destiny manifests itself (88).

The uncanny quality of the amulet derives from this ambiguity between magical belief and psychological projection. In this regard, the *burragh-bos* may also be interpreted through Freud's discussion of fetishistic and animistic thinking. In *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud argues that uncanny experiences originate from residual traces of "the old animistic view of the universe," characterized by "the omnipotence of thoughts and the technique of magic that relied on it" (147). The fetish object becomes uncanny because it revives primitive beliefs in magical causality and supernatural agency that modern rationality supposedly represses. The *burragh-bos* embodies this animistic logic. It is an object charged with supernatural energy capable of altering desire, destiny, and human relationships through ritual means.

At the same time, Coll Dhu's reaction to the ritual reveals a contradictory attitude toward the supernatural feminine. Although he desperately desires the *burragh-bos* and the power it promises, he refuses to confront the disturbing reality of the means through which it is obtained: "'Silence!' cried Coll Dhu; 'not a word more. I will have your hideous charm, but what it is, or where you get it, I will not know'" (Mulholland 119). His response underlines his hypocrisy and recalls what Barbara Creed defines as the phallocentric construction of woman as dangerous "other" (101). Coll Dhu seeks access to supernatural power through the witch because he wishes to possess Evleen's love, yet he refuses any knowledge of the ritual

process itself, distancing himself morally from the feminine occult practices upon which he nevertheless depends. Pexie becomes a figure onto whom male anxieties surrounding forbidden sexual desire and loss of control are projected.

Significantly, Pexie repeatedly emphasizes the economic value and difficulty involved in obtaining the object: “‘The burragh-bos is it her honour wants?’ she asked, when he made known his errand. ‘Ay ay; but the arrighad, the arrighad (money) for Pexie. The burragh-bos is ill to get’” (Mulholland 118).

Ultimately, however, the supernatural intervention fails to alter the natural course of events. The tale concludes tragically with the deaths of both Evleen and Coll Dhu:

But in a fatal moment Evleen turned her head and saw him. One wild ringing cry of hate and horror [...] A step backward brought her within a foot of death [...] and then the rock was standing naked against the sky, no one was there, and Coll Dhu and Evleen Blake lay shattered far below. (Mulholland 125)

The ending reinforces Dalby’s idea that supernatural objects and occult practices cannot ultimately overcome destiny or create human emotion.

3.2.3 Female Ghosts as ambiguous presences in “The First Wife”, “The Dark Lady” and “The Wee Gray Woman”

While figures such as the banshee and the hag embody Gothic forms of monstrous femininity, female ghosts in the selected tales operate through more ambiguous and eerie forms of haunting. Their presence is frequently subtle, lingering within domestic spaces, memories, and landscapes rather than manifesting through direct violence or grotesque corporeality. These spectral women destabilize the boundary between absence and presence,

transforming apparent familiar environments into uncanny spaces haunted by emotional and historical residues. In tales such as “The First Wife,” “The Dark Lady,” and “The Wee Gray Woman,” the supernatural feminine appears as persistently unresolved, occupying a liminal position between memory, jealousy, regrets, protection, and repression.

Unlike the overtly monstrous bodies associated with canonical Gothic texts such as *Frankenstein* or *Dracula*, these spectral women represent a quieter and less corporeal form of monstrosity. Their unsettling quality derives not from physical excess or bodily horror, but from the persistence of their presence within everyday life. As Jack Halberstam argues in *Skin Shows*, Gothic monstrosity historically functions as a way of marking social and cultural difference upon the body: “Within the traits that make a body monstrous—that is, frightening or ugly, abnormal or disgusting—we may read the difference between an other and a self, a pervert and a normal person, a foreigner and a native” (8). In the selected tales, however, female ghosts escape this model because their monstrosity is not visibly inscribed upon the body.

The “Gothic locus” of these tales therefore shifts away from the monstrous body itself and toward supernatural visitation. The supernatural becomes embedded within domestic interiors and familiar environments, transforming ordinary houses and landscapes into uncanny spaces saturated with repression and unresolved tensions. Significantly, all these ghosts are closely tied to domestic spaces; they belong to houses, castles, attics, and family histories. This aspect is particularly meaningful considering that the tales themselves were written by women authors, whose social roles in the nineteenth century were often confined to the domestic sphere. According to Melissa Edmunson, “In women’s ghost stories, the domestic roles forced upon many women are frequently challenged. These stories provide

women a way to voice the instabilities that existed behind the doors of the private home” (221).

In Kathrine Tynan’s “The First Wife,” the spectral presence of the dead wife can be interpreted through Freud’s theory of repression and return. Although physically absent, the first wife continues to dominate the domestic environment through memory and emotional attachment. Her presence suggests the return of what the husband and his new wife unsuccessfully attempt to repress, transforming the household into an uncanny space where, despite the second wife’s efforts, the past continually intrudes upon the present. Significantly, the new wife actively attempts to erase every trace of her predecessor: “Everything that had been Alison’s was destroyed or hidden away; her rooms were changed out of all memory of her. There was nothing, nothing in the house to recall to her widower [...] so she was forgotten, and the man was happy with his children and his beautiful passionate wife” (Tynan 87). The destruction of Alison’s belongings reveals an obsessive attempt to rewrite memory and restore domestic order through erasure.

The recurring association between the ghost and the dog further intensifies this atmosphere of emotional fidelity and attachment. The second wife unsuccessfully attempts to dominate the household and win over affection, but the dog remains skeptical:

little by little she had won over all who had cause to love the dead woman, all human creatures, that is to say: a dog was more faithful and had resisted her[...]The new mistress had put out all her fascinations to win the dog too, for it seemed that while any living creature clung to the dead woman’s memory her triumph was not complete. But the dog, amenable to everyone else, was savage to her. (Tynan 88)

The dog preserves a strong attachment to the dead woman that the second wife cannot eliminate.

This atmosphere of uncanny return culminates in the nightly reappearance of Alison's ghostly presence:

But every night as twelve o'clock struck the dog came down the attic stairs. He was suddenly alert and cheerful, and trotted by in an invisible gown. Some said you could hear the faint rustle of silk lapping from stair to stair, and the dog would sometimes bark sharply as in the days of puppyhood, and leap up to lick a hand of air [...] the servants would shut their doors as they heard the patter of the dog's feet coming, and his sudden bark. They were thrilled with a superstitious awe, but they were not afraid the ghost would harm them. They remembered how just, how gentle, how pure the dead woman had been. (Tynan 90–91)

Unlike the grotesque monsters of canonical Gothic fiction, Alison's ghost does not terrify through corporeal excess or violence. The ghost is never fully seen, only indirectly perceived through sounds, movements, and the dog's reactions. This ambiguity intensifies the uncanny quality of the tale. At the same time, the servants' reaction demonstrates that Alison's ghost retains moral authority within the domestic space.

This dynamic recalls Jack Halberstam's discussion of Freud's theory of repression in *Skin Shows*. Referring to Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* (1895), Halberstam explains that the repressed functions as "a foreign body" which, although hidden, continues to remain active within both body and mind. As Halberstam observes, "history, personal and social, haunts hysterics and the repressed always takes on an uncanny life of its own" (15). The ghostly first wife similarly functions as a repressed "foreign body" within the domestic sphere: although

physically removed, her emotional and symbolic presence continues to haunt the house and destabilize the apparent serenity of the second marriage. Halberstam further argues that Gothic narratives frequently transform repressed anxieties into forms of haunting through which “texts, like bodies, store up memories of past fears, of distant traumas” (15).

Similarly, in Anna Maria Hall’s “The Dark Lady,” the female ghost occupies an ambiguous position that recalls other Gothic spectral women and female vampires, particularly Sheridan Le Fanu’s “Carmilla” (1820). Unlike the openly predatory female monster of vampire fiction, however, the Dark Lady is not malevolent; rather, she acts as a supernatural protector of the protagonist, Amelie de Rohean. The ghost positions herself between Amelie and the oppressive patriarchal authority represented by her uncle, Monsieur de Rohean. The narrator explicitly describes the uncle as tyrannical: “All men are wilful [...] but Monsieur was the most wilful: all men are selfish; but he was the most selfish: all men are tyrant--” (Hall 5).

Monsieur opposes Amelie’s desire to marry Charles, the son of his alleged enemy, and it is precisely at this point that the Dark Lady intervenes in Amelie’s favour. The supernatural apparition occurs in a moment where the Gothic atmosphere of the tale intensifies:

a form passed through the solid oak from her chamber without the bolts being withdrawn [...] a shadowy form, dark and vapoury, but perfectly distinct. I knew it was ‘La Femme Noir’, and I trembled, for she never came from caprice, but always for a purpose[...] she entered Monsieur’s chamber by the door [...] she stood for some time perfectly motionless, though in a loud tone the master demanded whence she came, and what she wanted. At last, during a pause in the storm, she told him that all the power he possessed could not prevent the union of Amelie and Charles. I heard the voice myself;

it sounded like the night wind among fir-trees—cold and shrill, chilling both ear and heart. I turned my eyes away while she spoke, and when I looked again, she was gone! (Hall 10)

Much like the female ghosts in “The First Wife”, her power does not derive from corporeal monstrosity but from her supernatural authority. Importantly, the Dark Lady uses her power not to act violently against the tyrannical uncle, but to challenge his patriarchal power and defend Amelie’s emotional autonomy.

As Giakaniki and Showers observe, “The Dark Lady” “contains a distinctly feminist subtext throughout: the benevolent female spirit, a forceful opposition to decidedly masculine expressions of egocentricity, cruelty, and emotional detachment are among the story’s most important themes” (x). Indeed, Amelie and the Dark Lady share a bond that symbolically excludes the tyrannical uncle. Their relationship is described in almost mystical terms: “there could be little doubt that the ‘Femme Noir’ had initiated her into certain mysteries; for they heard at times voices in a low, whispering converse and saw the shadows of two persons cross the old roofless chapel” (Hall 7). The supernatural connection between the two women suggests a form of feminine solidarity that transcends both death and patriarchal control. According to Melissa Edmundson, “Often, the supernatural is used to show how women support other women in times of trial” (221). The Dark Lady’s intervention on behalf of Amelie reflects precisely this dynamic of supernatural female solidarity.

Even when frightening Monsieur to force him to accept Amelie’s marriage, the ghost never physically harms him. On the contrary, the Dark Lady ultimately accompanies the patriarch peacefully toward death: “the ‘Femme Noir’ appeared again to him—once. She did so with a placid air, on a summer night, with her arm extended towards the heavens. The next

day the muffled bell told the valley that the stormy, proud old master of Rohean had ceased to live” (Hall 14). Unlike traditional Gothic monsters driven by violence, vengeance, or destruction, the Dark Lady functions almost as a spiritual guide. Her existence does not destabilize the domestic world through brutality, but through the persistent assertion of female agency within patriarchal space.

In Ethna Carbery’s “The Wee Gray Woman”, the supernatural dynamic differs significantly from that of “The First Wife” and “The Dark Lady” because the ghostly apparition does not appear to possess a clearly defined purpose. As Giakaniki and Showers observe, “The Wee Gray Woman” is a decidedly gentler if not sadder tale, and the ghost is not malignant nor vengeful” (xiv). The atmosphere of the story is deeply melancholic from the beginning, as the protagonist Jamie Boyson is marked by loneliness and repeated experiences of loss, including the death of Rosie, the orphan child whom he and his family had taken in. Unlike the more confrontational apparitions of previous tales, the Wee Gray Woman assumes an almost domestic and companionable role within Jamie’s isolated existence. Much like the Dark Lady, she appears to watch over and accompany the protagonist, to the point that Jamie “set his candle in his cottage window to guide the Wee Gray Woman up the rugged loaning to her seat in the chimney corner” (Carbery 53).

The tale revolves around solitude and the different ways individuals attempt to cope with grief and emotional absence. Jamie’s extreme isolation is emphasized through his attachment to small domestic rituals and substitute forms of companionship. Significantly, he even keeps a pet cricket, having “trained it with the utmost patience and skill until the diminutive dusty-looking object learned to jump out from behind the big pot in the chimney-corner at his call” (Carbery 55). These details reinforce the impression of a man attempting to

fill emotional emptiness through repetitive habits and imagined presences. Because Carbery is not generally associated with Gothic ghost stories or overt supernatural fiction, the reader is almost encouraged to question whether the Wee Gray Woman objectively exists at all or whether she instead represents a projection of Jamie's loneliness and unresolved grief.

This ambiguity is intensified by the fact that Jamie never fully sees or directly speaks to the apparition, who always disappears before dawn:

That was why he could never get a right look at her, he lamented. Sometimes he opened his eyes in time to see the flutter of her grey cloak as she passed out of his door, and once he caught a gleam of red. It was a red hood she wore, not like anything that mortal ever saw before, but just as if a big scarlet tulip had been crushed down over her head with all the leaves sticking out round her face. And his blood always curdled when she gave a cry going over the threshold, as if she was being dragged away into some dreaded torment from which she had a respite. (Carbery 54)

The partial visibility of the apparition contributes strongly to the uncanny quality of the tale.

Particularly significant is the cry she emits while leaving the cottage, which recalls the lamenting voice traditionally associated with the banshee. The sound may symbolically suggest that Jamie himself is haunted by unresolved mourning and emotional trauma that continually resurface in spectral form.

From this perspective, the Wee Gray Woman can be interpreted through Freud's theory of repression and the return of the repressed. Freud argues that repression does not destroy painful emotions or memories, but merely removes them from conscious awareness, since "the essence of repression lies simply in turning something away, and keeping it at a distance, from the conscious" (Freud 146). However, what is repressed continues to remain

active within the unconscious. Freud explains that repression “does not hinder the instinctual representative from continuing to exist in the unconscious, from organizing itself further, putting out derivatives and establishing connections” (Freud 148). Jamie’s repeated encounters with the Wee Gray Woman may therefore be understood as manifestations of grief that has never been fully processed or consciously articulated.

The misty bog landscape surrounding Jamie’s cottage further intensifies this atmosphere of uncertainty and emotional suspension, blurring the distinction between supernatural visitation and psychological projection. Unlike traditional Gothic apparitions driven by revenge or violence, the Wee Gray Woman embodies a quieter and profoundly melancholic form of haunting, rooted in loneliness, memory, and the impossibility of truly overcoming loss.

3.2.4 Fairies and Celtic Otherworld traditions in “The Child’s Dream”

Lady Wilde’s tale “The Child’s Dream” is part of her collection *Ancient Legends, Mystic Charms, and Superstitions of Ireland* (1887). Like the previous tales, it does not contain an overtly Gothic or abject presence; rather, its uncanniness emerges from a dreamlike atmosphere and from the subtle intrusion of the supernatural into ordinary life. The isolated setting of Innis-Sark (Shark Island) greatly contributes to this eerie atmosphere, surrounding the narrative with solitude, silence, and mystery.

In the preface to her collection, Wilde explains that Irish superstition derives from a rooted belief in supernatural forces that invisibly shape human existence:

The superstition, then, of the Irish peasant is the instinctive belief in the existence of certain unseen agencies that influence all human life; and with the highly sensitive organization of their race, it is not wonderful that the people live habitually under the

shadow and dread of invisible powers which, whether working for good or evil, are awful and mysterious to the uncultured mind. (ii)

This description is particularly relevant to “The Child’s Dream” because the tale never fully clarifies the nature of the supernatural event being narrated. The uncertainty surrounding the child’s dream and the events that follow produces an uncanny effect precisely because the supernatural remains partially hidden and resistant to rational explanation.

Wilde further elaborates on the role of Irish fairies, or *Sidhe*, presenting them as beings deeply embedded within Irish folklore and imagination:

The fairies loved music and dancing and frolic; and, above all things, to be let alone, and not to be interfered with as regarded their peculiar fairy habits, customs, and pastimes [...] there was something irresistibly fascinating in the belief that gentle spirits were around, filled with sympathy for the mortal who suffered wrong or needed help. But the fairies were sometimes wilful and capricious as children [...] Death was the penalty to all who approached too near, or pried too curiously into the mysteries of nature. (Wilde 8)

The passage highlights the ambivalent nature of the *Sidhe*, who are simultaneously benevolent and threatening. Much like the female ghosts analyzed previously, the fairies occupy a liminal position that destabilizes distinctions between protection, comfort and danger.

Within the tale itself, the prince’s young son falls asleep while accompanying his father on a fishing boat, and his sleep becomes disturbed by vivid dreams and visions. During the dream, the child hears a mysterious voice proclaiming: “Blessed are the souls that come here, for this is heaven” (Wilde 16). The voice belongs to a “lovely lady, bright as an angel,”

who acts as a supernatural guide and offers the child flowers that allegedly come from heaven. The scene creates an uncertain atmosphere, as the woman may be interpreted as a fairy figure, an angelic apparition, or a manifestation of the Celtic Otherworld itself.

Wilde emphasizes that the Irish imagination perceived the natural landscape as inhabited by supernatural presences: “To the Irish peasant earth and air were filled with these mysterious beings, half-loved, half-feared by them” (Wilde ii). The supernatural in “The Child’s Dream” therefore emerges through an atmosphere in which the boundaries between reality and the otherworld become unstable and permeable. The tale produces its uncanny effect because the supernatural remains elusive, while the events themselves resist definitive explanation or rational interpretation.

Although “The Child’s Dream” is not explicitly a changeling¹⁹ or “fairy-abduction” tale, it nevertheless engages with folkloric anxieties surrounding fairy children and the permeability between the human and supernatural worlds. Following his death, the prince’s son appears to become associated with the fairy realm itself, returning as “a bright fairy child” connected both to the spirit-land and to the supernatural flowers of heaven:

Only some fisherman told they had seen a bright fairy child seated on the rocks singing; and he had a red sash tied round his waist, and a golden circlet binding his long yellow hair... and the people believed that he had brought the flowers from the spirit-land to the woman, and given them to her as a death sign, and a blessed token from God that her soul would be taken to heaven. (Wilde 18)

¹⁹ According to Audrey Robitaille changelings, in Irish *iarlaisí* are children taken away from the human world and brought to the otherworld, “fairies would take humans away to the Otherworld, while leaving a substitute in place of the stolen person” (1).

The ending embodies Wilde's idea of "unseen agencies that influence all human life" (ii). More importantly, it preserves a profound indeterminacy surrounding the child's fate. It remains impossible to determine whether the boy has been spiritually saved and brought to a Christian heaven, transformed into a fairy child, or whether the apparition witnessed by the fishermen is merely the product of peasant imagination and grief. The tale, therefore, operates within what Todorov defines as the fantastic hesitation between rational and supernatural explanations (25).

Significantly, the island itself is also associated with sacredness and spiritual liminality. Wilde describes the monastery located on Innis-Sark as a place "to which many people resorted from the mainland, for the prayers of the monks were powerful against sickness or evil, or the malice of an enemy" (Wilde 15). As previously seen, Christianity, folklore, and supernatural belief are intertwined within Irish narratives. As Wilde herself explains in the preface, "Christianity was readily accepted by the Irish [...] The legends of ancient times were not overthrown by it, however, but taken up and incorporated with the new Christian faith" (9).

Rather than functioning solely as a fairy tale centered on the *Sidhe*, "The Child's Dream" engages more broadly with Celtic conceptions of the Otherworld and with folkloric beliefs surrounding death, spiritual transition, and supernatural voyage. The entire narrative revolves around the child unconsciously dreaming about his own death before subsequently drowning at sea the following day. After recounting the dream to his father, the child states: "I would like to have my flowers again, for the lady told me they had the secret that would bring me to heaven" (Wilde 16). His desire to recover the flowers foreshadows his impending death and suggests an attraction toward the supernatural realm glimpsed within the dream.

The child's death by drowning is particularly significant when considered in relation to Celtic Otherworld traditions, which frequently associate the passage to the supernatural realm with journeys across or beneath water. In discussing early Irish literature, Jonathan Wooding in *The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature* (2000) explains that the *immrama* ("rowings about") were structured around sea voyages that brought travellers into contact with supernatural islands and otherworldly realms. As Wooding observes, the sea voyage functions as the central framework through which encounters with the Otherworld become possible (xi–xii). Similarly, the sea in "The Child's Dream" becomes a threshold between life and death.

The figure of the "lovely lady" may also be connected to older Celtic traditions surrounding Otherworld women. James Carney notes that Otherworld women frequently inhabit spaces beneath water or across the sea and often become partially integrated into later Christian frameworks (*The Otherworld Voyage in Early Irish Literature* 86). The beautiful woman who appears to the child evokes both the fairy woman of Celtic folklore, the Christian angelic guide, and the supernatural female guardian associated with the Otherworld tradition. The tale's uncanniness ultimately derives from this very in-betweenness, as pagan mythology, Christian spirituality, and dream vision remain impossible to separate.

3.3 Haunted Spaces: Ruined Houses, Domestic Interiors, and Graveyards

Haunted spaces occupy a central role within the Gothic tradition because they transform physical environments into repositories of memory and, in many examples, unresolved trauma. Castles, ruined houses, abbeys, attics, graveyards/churchyards, and isolated landscapes actively shape the psychological atmosphere of Gothic narratives. As David Punter observes, Gothic fiction is deeply concerned with "archaic settings" and with

the persistence of the past within the present (1). In Irish Gothic literature, however, haunted spaces acquire an additional cultural and historical significance, as ruined domestic interiors and burial sites often evoke the instability of Irish history itself, haunted by colonial conflict, famine, and loss of culture.

Jack Halberstam in *Skin Shows*, notes this Gothic preoccupation with space also evolves historically. Gothic horror gradually shifted “from the fear of corrupted aristocracy or clergy, represented by the haunted castle or abbey, to the fear embodied by monstrous bodies” (Halberstam 16). Nevertheless, in Irish Gothic literature, the haunted house and ruined domestic space remain central. The decaying “Big House” tradition, so prominent within Anglo-Irish writing, especially in Charlotte Riddle’s narrative, transforms domestic architecture into a symbol of the fragility of colonial authority itself.

Within the selected tales, supernatural presences are rarely detached from specific locations. Ghosts, banshees, and supernatural women remain connected to family houses, attics, graveyards, and abbeys, transforming these environments into spectral zones where it becomes impossible to distinguish life and death. Much like the uncanny itself, these locations appear simultaneously familiar and estranged.

In Irish Gothic literature, this spatial uncanniness is intensified by the historical reality of abandoned estates, ruined castles, famine graveyards, and isolated rural landscapes. Such spaces embody what Jarlath Killeen defines as “the liminal condition of Irish Gothic culture”, suspended between competing identities, histories, and belief systems (28). Ruined domestic spaces become sites where colonial and familial tensions intersect, while graveyards and burial sites reinforce the Gothic obsession with the persistence of the dead. The dead in these

tales rarely remain fully absent; instead, they linger within physical environments that extend their influence over the living.

Lady Gregory's "The Unquiet Dead" particularly exemplifies this obsession with haunted burial spaces and restless spirits. The text presents a collection of uncanny encounters with dead people belonging to different social classes. Many of these apparitions are associated directly with graveyards, while others wander through the landscape unable to find peace. In one recollection, *Mrs. Casey* explains that "at the graveyard of Drumacoo often spirits do be seen. Old George Fitzgerald is seen by many. And when they go up to the stone he's sitting on, he'll be sitting somewhere else" (Gregory 26). The restless movement of Fitzgerald's apparition produces an uncanny effect because the ghost appears unable to leave the graveyard, and his behavior seems to be designed to attract the attention of the living.

As the title itself suggests, the dead are "unquiet" because something prevents them from fully entering the afterlife. Their return is often connected to unfinished obligations, such as debts or unresolved trivial concerns. In one account recalled again by *Mrs. Casey*, a dead man remains restless because he had not been shaved before dying (Gregory 22). In this tale the supernatural emerges through human anxieties surrounding rituals and improper burial practices.

In another testimony, *John Cloran* explains that: "The last person buried in a graveyard has the care of all the other souls until another is to be buried, and then the soul can go and shift for itself. It may be a week or a month or a year, but watch the place it must till another soul comes" (Gregory 26). This belief transforms the graveyard into an unexpected communal space, where the dead continue to care for one another even after burial, as the cemetery becomes an active social space. Considering the historical context in which Lady

Gregory was writing, this familiarity with death may also reflect the cultural aftermath of famine, poverty, and widespread mortality, circumstances in which death itself became inevitably integrated into everyday life.

Similarly, another recollection narrated by *Mrs. Casey* describes a female apparition haunting the churchyard of Rathkeale: “My grandmother told my mother that in her time at Cloughballymore there was a woman used to appear in the churchyard of Rathkeale, and that many boys and girls and children died with the fright they got when they saw her” (Gregory 29). Once again, death becomes inseparable from ordinary communal experience. The churchyard, theoretically a sacred space, instead becomes deadly.

The connection between haunting and burial spaces also appears prominently in Katharine Tynan’s “The First Wife.” Alison’s grave is repeatedly associated with neglect and emotional disregard:

Under a high, stately window of the ruined abbey was the dead wife’s grave. In the year of his bereavement [...] the widower had spent days and nights of stony despair standing by her grave [...] now for years he had not visited the place: the last wreaths of his mourning for her had been washed into earth and dust long ago, and the grave was neglected. (Tynan 87)

The neglected grave symbolically reflects Alison’s gradual erasure from domestic memory. Initially mourned intensely, she is progressively forgotten and displaced by the new wife. Her return to the house and her settlement into the attic may therefore be interpreted as a consequence of this repression, excluded from memory and abandoned in death, Alison re-enters the domestic sphere as a ghostly presence:

The old house had attics in the gable, seldom visited [...] there were creaking footsteps on the floors at night, and sometimes the slamming of a door or the stealthy opening of a window. In storm the wind keened like a banshee, and one bright snowy morning a housemaid, who had business there, found a slender wet footprint on the floor as of someone who had come barefoot through the snow[...] a gamekeeper being in full view of the attic window one night declared that from the window came a faint moving glow, a that a wavering shadow moved in the room. (Tynan 89-90)

The grave itself becomes a metaphor for the attempt to erase the past, an attempt that ultimately fails because the repressed memory, according to Freud, continually resurfaces (146).

Another significant site of Gothic anxiety appears in “The Dark Lady”, where the ghost is closely associated with ruined religious architecture. The ‘Femme Noir’ inhabits “the ruined chapel of the castle” (Hall 7), a spectral, isolated space connected with grievance and aristocratic memory. The narrator explains that “This place was dedicated to the family ghost—the spirit, which for many years had it entirely at its own disposal. It was much attached to its quarters, seldom leaving them, except for the purpose of interfering when anything decidedly wrong was going forward in the castle” (Hall 7).

The ruined chapel is both a sacred and Gothicized environment, blending Christian imagery with supernatural folklore.

Importantly, Amelie alone feels comfortable within this space: “she had not the least dread of wandering about the ruined chapel of the castle, where he himself dared not go after dusk” (Hall 7). For this reason, the chapel becomes a specifically feminine Gothic space, inaccessible to male authority yet welcoming to female supernatural solidarity. Local

villagers interpret Amelie's connection with the Dark Lady through folkloric and occult imagery, claiming she "must have walked over crossed bones, or drunk water out of a raven's skull, or passed nine times round the spectre's glass on Midsummer Eve" (Hall 7). These abject images evoke Gothic imagination and folk superstition, reinforcing the uncanny atmosphere surrounding the ruined chapel. Significantly, the chapel also contains the remains of the family dead, transforming it into a space where Christianity and Gothic folklore, once again, intersect.

In Rosa Mulholland's "Not to Be Taken at Bed-Time", however, the graveyard becomes a profaned site of occult ritual and abjection. The old hag Pexie na Pishrogie needs the skin of a dead man to make the *burragh-bos*. Pexie complains that "'The lonely graveyard is far away, an' the dead man is hard to raise'" (Mulholland 119). In the meantime, the local community discovers that "there had been another unholy raid upon their graveyard, and were banding themselves to hunt the criminal down" (Mulholland 120). Unlike the relatively benign spirits of "The Unquiet Dead", Mulholland's tale presents the graveyard as a space contaminated by necromantic practices that are meant to disturb the dead. Through Pexie's actions, the burial ground becomes an abject location where the integrity of the corpse is violated and where supernatural desire is pursued through contact with death itself.

3.4 The Irish Landscape as a Sublime Inspiration

The Irish landscape plays a fundamental role in some of the selected tales; in "The Wee Gray Woman", "The First Wife" and "Not to be Taken at Bet-Time", it functions almost as a presence that helps shape the supernatural atmosphere of the narratives. The Atlantic Ocean, Connemara mountains, bogs, and, in general, isolated rural settings contribute directly to the production of the uncanny by transforming natural environments into liminal spaces.

Within the Gothic tradition, landscape is frequently associated with the sublime, a concept closely linked to feelings of awe, terror, vastness, and human insignificance before the power of nature. As mentioned in the first chapter, Edmund Burke argues in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) that obscurity, silence, darkness, solitude, and infinity possess the ability to generate sublime terror (36). The Irish landscapes represented in the selected tales repeatedly evoke these qualities, appearing simultaneously beautiful and wild.

In Irish literature, landscape is rarely neutral. It preserves traces of history, folklore, and collective memory, becoming deeply intertwined with beliefs surrounding the Otherworld and supernatural presences. This idea recalls Seamus Heaney's treatment of the bog as a repository of memory and historical consciousness. As Ian Hickey observes in "*Bogland*" (2003), Heaney presents the bog as a place that "hoard[s] objects and history itself," functioning as "a receptacle of the past" that preserves what has disappeared from the surface ("The Haunted Bog and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney", 36–37). The bog becomes a powerful metaphor for memory itself, storing traces of lives and histories that continue to exert an influence upon the present.

Such reading, according to Alice Jones, can also be connected to Freud's use of topographical metaphors to explain the relationship between consciousness and repression ("Topographies: Psychic Landscapes in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney and Tomas Tranströmer" 385). As Jones further notes, Freud frequently described the unconscious through spatial imagery, conceiving it as a place where hidden memories remain active despite their apparent disappearance (385).

This symbolic relationship between the bog and memory is particularly evident in Ethna Carbery's "The Wee Gray Woman." Jamie Boyson inhabits a world defined by solitude and melancholy: "It was a tranquil, lonely spot; eerie too, in the autumn twilight, when the slow-creeping mists rose up from the bog for miles around" (Carbery 53). In this context, the bog mirrors Jamie's emotional condition, surrounding him with an atmosphere of spectral immobility and grief. It is also within this landscape that memories of loss continually resurface. As Jamie crosses the bog, "guided only by his intimate knowledge of the treacherous path that wound like a serpent across the marshy windswept surface," he recalls the tragic death of little Rosie, whose body was later discovered among the stones by the bog (Carbery 60–61). The bog in the tale functions as an archive of personal suffering, preserving emotional traces just as it preserves physical remains.

Similarly, coastal landscapes frequently contribute to the Gothic atmosphere of the selected tales through their association with uncertainty, isolation, and the sublime. In Katharine Tynan's "The First Wife," nature itself appears to participate in the haunting: "the roar of the wind and the roar of the waves made a perpetual tumult in the air, and the creaking and lashing of the forest trees aided to the wild confusion [...] In the storm the wind keened like a banshee" (Tynan 89). The comparison between the wind and the banshee is particularly significant because it relies on the reader's familiarity with Irish folklore. Without this cultural knowledge, much of the horror effect is lost.

A similar fusion between landscape and the uncanny appears in Rosa Mulholland's "Not to Be Taken at Bed-Time". The Connemara mountains are represented as both sublime and threatening. Coll Dhu's intimate familiarity with this environment allows him to move through it with ease: "so well had he searched these mountains, and inured himself to their

climate, that neither snow, nor fog, had the power to disturb him” (Mulholland 109). Yet even he remains subject to the mysteries concealed within the landscape. The Devil’s Inn itself appears as a Gothic structure embedded within nature, a “crazy weather-stained apparition, with the sun glaring at it angrily between the hills” (Mulholland 109).

Later, when Coll Dhu visits Colonel Blake’s house as he is looking out from the window, he sees the Atlantic ocean as an intermediate space, “The sashes were open, and nothing was visible but water; the night Atlantic, with the full moon riding high above a bank of clouds, making silvery tracks outward towards the distance of infinite mystery dividing two worlds” (Mulholland 114). The sea becomes a threshold between known and unknown realities, and the “two worlds” may be interpreted on a social and historical level. For Coll Dhu, a marginal Gaelic figure living in isolation, the distant horizon may symbolically separate his world from that of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy represented by Colonel Blake and his family.

Throughout these narratives, the Irish untamed landscape demonstrates that the uncanny does not emerge solely from ghosts, banshees, or fairies, but also from a natural environment embedded in ancestral folklore. In this sense, the landscape itself emerges as one of the most persistent supernatural presences within the tales. Ultimately, these representations reveal how Irish women writers employed the Gothic not only to evoke fear and wonder but also to explore the complex relationship between inherited folklore, historical memory, and national identity, contributing to the development of a distinctly Irish female Gothic tradition.

Conclusion

This thesis has tried to examine the relationship between Catholic and Anglo-Irish women writers, folklore, and the Gothic tradition through the analysis of a selected corpus of supernatural tales written during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. By combining historical, cultural, and literary approaches, it has sought to demonstrate that these writers made a significant contribution to the development of Irish Gothic literature through their engagement with folkloric traditions, supernatural beliefs, and specifically Irish cultural concerns.

Chapter One established the theoretical and historical framework necessary for understanding the emergence of the Irish Gothic either as a genre or a mode. Drawing on the work of Jarlath Killeen, Christina Morin, and David Punter, it has sought to demonstrate that, while sharing many characteristics with the broader British Gothic tradition, including an emphasis on terror, the sublime, haunted spaces, and the return of the past, Irish Gothic literature developed within a distinct historical context marked by colonialism, political instability, religious division, and questions of national identity.

Chapter Two, beginning with Ann Owens Weekes's observation that "the student who searches the shelves for works on Irish women's fiction [...] feels very much as Virginia Woolf did when she searched the British Museum for work on women by women" (2), focused on recovering the lives and works of a selected group of Anglo-Irish and Catholic Irish women writers, including Charlotte Riddell, Jane Francesca Elgee Wilde, Isabella Augusta Gregory, Rosa Mulholland, Katharine Tynan, Anna Maria Hall, and Ethna Carbery. Despite differences in religion, class, and political outlook, these authors shared a specific and sustained interest in supernatural folklore and frequently incorporated traditional beliefs

into their fiction. The chapter demonstrated that, although often marginalized within both Irish literary history and Gothic studies, these writers contributed to the development of a distinctly Irish Gothic mode.

Chapter Three explored how folklore operates within the selected tales through the critical frameworks of the Gothic, the uncanny, the abject, and the fantastic. The close reading revealed that supernatural female figures occupy a central position within these narratives. Banshees, hags, ghosts, and fairy women repeatedly appear as liminal figures who blur distinctions between familiarity and estrangement.

One of the central findings of this thesis is that the supernatural in these tales rarely appears as a wholly external or disruptive force. Rather, it emerges from within familiar environments, ancestral traditions, and collective memories. The uncanny quality of the narratives derives precisely from this intimate coexistence of the ordinary and the extraordinary. Banshees follow ancient Irish families across national boundaries, ghosts remain attached to domestic spaces, fairies inhabit familiar landscapes, and supernatural encounters arise from locations almost always embedded within local memory and folklore.

Furthermore, this study has tried to demonstrate that Irish women writers employed folklore not simply as a sophisticated literary resource through which broader social, cultural, and historical concerns could be articulated. Their supernatural tales engage with issues of gender, class, religion, colonialism, memory, and national identity while preserving elements of Ireland's oral tradition.

Ultimately, the selected tales reveal the existence of a specifically female contribution to the Irish Gothic tradition, one rooted in folklore, attentive to domestic and communal experience and deeply concerned with liminality in its many forms. Through supernatural

female figures, haunted spaces, and evocative landscapes, these writers constructed narratives that negotiate the tensions between colonialism, religion and the experience of being women. The purpose of this was to argue that their work deserves greater recognition not only within Irish literary studies but also within the broader history of Gothic literature, where it offers a distinctive perspective on the relationship between folklore, gender, and the supernatural.

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