THE CONCEPT OF THE FANTASTIC IN SOMERSET MAUGHAM'S WORKS IN THE CONTEXT OF ENGLISH NOVEL THEORIES OF THE FIRST HALF OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

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Abstract. The present article examines the concept of the fantastic in the works of William Somerset Maugham within the broader framework of English novel theories of the first half of the twentieth century. Although Maugham is traditionally regarded as a realist writer, many of his narratives incorporate elements of the fantastic, supernatural, psychological ambiguity, and metaphysical uncertainty. These elements function not merely as literary devices but as instruments for exploring human consciousness, morality, and the limits of rational perception.

Keywords: Somerset Maugham, fantastic, English novel, modernism, realism, supernatural, psychological fiction, literary theory, twentieth-century English literature.

The first half of the twentieth century marked a period of profound transformation in English literature. Traditional Victorian realism gradually gave way to modernist experimentation, characterized by psychological introspection, fragmented narrative structures, and the exploration of subjective reality. Within this literary landscape, the concept of the fantastic assumed new significance. Rather than serving solely as a source of supernatural entertainment, the fantastic became a means of investigating unconscious desires, existential anxieties, and the instability of human perception.

William Somerset Maugham (1874–1965) occupies a unique position within twentieth-century English literature. Although critics have frequently classified him as a realist, his fiction often contains mysterious, supernatural, or psychologically inexplicable events. These episodes reveal that Maugham's realism extends beyond objective representation toward a subtle exploration of the unknown dimensions of human experience.

Theoretical Perspectives on the Fantastic. The fantastic has occupied an important place in literary theory. According to Tzvetan Todorov (1975), the fantastic emerges during the reader's hesitation between natural and supernatural explanations of events. The fantastic exists only while this uncertainty remains unresolved. Although Todorov formulated his theory later than Maugham's literary career, his concept provides an effective analytical framework for understanding Maugham's narratives.

Earlier literary criticism also contributed to understanding the fantastic. Henry James argued that fiction should represent "felt life," emphasizing psychological complexity rather than external realism. His famous essay The Art of Fiction (1884) encouraged writers to expand the possibilities of narrative representation. Unlike Virginia Woolf or James Joyce, Maugham never fully embraced literary modernism. His prose remained clear, objective, and accessible. Nevertheless, his fiction repeatedly questions the stability of rational reality.

Maugham's narratives typically begin within ordinary social environments before gradually introducing mysterious circumstances. Instead of offering definitive supernatural explanations, he frequently leaves events open to multiple interpretations. This ambiguity aligns his work with psychological rather than Gothic traditions. Critics have often underestimated Maugham's philosophical depth because of his stylistic simplicity. However, beneath his restrained prose lies an ongoing investigation of fate, coincidence, illusion, and irrational human behavior.

The Fantastic in The Magician. Published in 1908, The Magician represents Maugham's most explicit engagement with supernatural themes. Inspired partly by the occult practices of Aleister Crowley, the novel tells the story of Oliver Haddo, whose experiments combine medieval alchemy with modern psychology.

Oliver Haddo functions as a symbolic figure rather than merely a Gothic villain. He embodies humanity's desire to transcend natural limitations through forbidden knowledge. His magical experiments challenge scientific rationalism while simultaneously exposing the dangers of excessive intellectual ambition.

Importantly, Maugham does not fully confirm the objective reality of Haddo's supernatural powers. Many events may equally be interpreted as psychological manipulation, suggestion, or coincidence. This ambiguity corresponds closely to the structure of the fantastic described by Todorov.

Psychological Fantastic in the Short Stories. Maugham's shorter fiction frequently demonstrates a more subtle form of the fantastic.

In Lord Mountdrago, dreams appear to influence political reality. The protagonist experiences terrifying nightmares involving a political rival whose apparent psychological influence transcends ordinary explanation.

The story never resolves whether supernatural communication actually occurs or whether psychological guilt produces hallucinations. The fantastic therefore emerges through uncertainty rather than explicit miracle.

The Book-Bag presents mysterious events surrounding an apparently ordinary object. Maugham carefully balances rational and supernatural possibilities, compelling readers to question the reliability of perception. Unlike traditional ghost stories, the narrative emphasizes psychological suspense over external horror.

Although lacking overt supernatural events, The Alien Corn explores psychological obsession and artistic destiny. The protagonist's inability to fulfill his artistic aspirations creates an atmosphere resembling existential haunting. Here the fantastic operates metaphorically, illustrating the destructive power of internal psychological conflicts.

Conclusion. The analysis demonstrates that the concept of the fantastic occupies a significant, though frequently overlooked, position in Somerset Maugham's literary art. While maintaining the stylistic clarity associated with realism, Maugham consistently introduces elements of ambiguity, supernatural suggestion, psychological uncertainty, and metaphysical speculation. Within the theoretical context of the English novel during the first half of the twentieth century, Maugham represents an intermediate position between Victorian realism and literary modernism. His fiction neither rejects rational explanation nor fully embraces supernatural certainty. Instead, it preserves the tension between these opposing modes of interpretation. The fantastic in Maugham's works functions primarily as a psychological and philosophical instrument rather than as an end in itself. Through carefully controlled ambiguity, he investigates the complexities of human consciousness, moral responsibility, artistic aspiration, and the elusive nature of reality.

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