

Visitors from beyond the Grave

Ghosts in World Literature

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THE GHOSTLY, THE UNCANNY AND THE ABJECT IN JEAN RHY'S *AFTER LEAVING MR MACKENZIE*

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ABSTRACT: My aim in this chapter is to analyse the Gothic elements in Jean Rhys's *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), an important dimension of the novel that has suffered from critical neglect. In particular, I would like to call attention to Rhys's use of the figure of ghost to underline her characters' alienated and marginal condition. Their liminality between life and death must be seen as related to the blurring of other conceptual categories pervading the novel – familiar and unfamiliar, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, self and other, human and animal, animate and inanimate –, with the subsequent emergence of the Freudian uncanny and the abject as discussed by Julia Kristeva.

KEYWORDS: Jean Rhys, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, ghost, uncanny, abject.

In her short story, "I Used to Live Here Once" (*Sleep It Off Lady*, 1976), Jean Rhys uses the figure of the ghost in what we could call a literal sense. In this story, we encounter a female narrator that describes different aspects of a landscape – it progressively emerges that we are in a Caribbean context – comparing its present state to a time in the past when it looked different: "She was standing by the river looking at the stepping stones and remembering each one. ... The road was much wider than it used to be ... The only thing was that the sky had a glassy look that she didn't remember"¹. Towards the end of the story, after obtaining no response from some children, who feel sudden cold as she approaches them, the female narrator realises that she is dead. In other words, she is a ghost.

Jean Rhys's fiction is actually pervaded by a rhetorics of ghostliness. Plenty of critics have pointed to the importance of the figure of the ghost in Rhys's best-known novel, *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966)² – her famous rewriting of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) – which has become a classic reference in what has come to be known as postcolonial Gothic³. However, not enough attention has been paid to Gothic elements in Rhys's pre-war novels, *Quartet* (1928), *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie* (1930), *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Good Morning, Midnight*

¹ Rhys 1987: 387.

² See, for instance, Choudhury 1996 and Fayad 1988.

³ Go to Paravisini-Gebert for an overview of colonial and postcolonial Gothic coming from the Caribbean. This critic analyses *Wide Sargasso Sea*, arguing that "[n]owhere has the Gothic mode crossed oceans more powerfully or in more of a sharp dialogue between the postcolonial and the English Gothic" (2002: 252).

(1939), which in general have tended to suffer from critical neglect. Focusing on *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, my argument in this essay is that Gothic elements – in particular, the use of the figure of the ghost, together with the Freudian uncanny and the notion of the abject, as discussed by Julia Kristeva – are in fact essential for Rhys's construction of her characters' sense of identity.

As pointed out above, in "I Used to Live Here Once", we find a 'literal' ghost: a dead being comes back to the world of the living. In Rhys's early novels, on the other hand, we generally have a metaphorical or figurative use of the ghost⁴: the ghostly quality of Rhys's female protagonists derives from their alienated and marginal status, which condemns them to a liminal position between life and death. They are alive from a physiological point of view, but dead from a psychological, emotional and social one. My focus, then, is on what Peeren has called "the spectral metaphor". Peeren situates her analysis within the so-called spectral turn, which, as defined by this critic, "from the early 1990s, has marked the transformation of the ghost and its capacity to haunt from a genre convention or plot device in ghost stories, Gothic fiction and horror into a theoretical 'idiom'⁵. I adopt Peeren's broad notion of spectrality, which encompasses not only the ghosts of the past (history haunting the present or childhood haunting the subject), but also those living ghosts produced in and by the present⁶. Peeren's concern, in fact, is with living ghosts: subjects, such as migrants, servants, mediums and missing persons, who, as shown by contemporary British and American cultural imagination, "already in their lifetime, resemble dispossessed ghosts in that they are ignored and considered expendable"⁷.

I also approach Rhys's female characters as 'living ghosts' subjected to dispossession. They generally are isolated women, continually drifting from one place to another, addicted to alcohol, financially unstable, dependent on the money given to them by the different men they encounter along their life. In particular, I would like to argue that one of the main factors contributing to their ghostly existence is the fact that they have undergone some sort of traumatic event in the past that keeps haunting them. In the case of Julia Martin, the protagonist of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, she had a child who died and later separated from her husband. Critics and theorists have pointed to the relation between trauma and the ghostly. As put by Whitehead, "[i]n its disturbed and disrupted temporality, trauma, for Freud, is inextricable from the ghostly or the spectral: it represents the haunting of the individual by an image or event and testifies to the profoundly unresolved nature of the past"⁸. Whitehead is

⁴ Peeren (2014: 4-5) also draws on this distinction between literal and figurative ghosts.

⁵ Peeren 2014: 9.

⁶ Peeren 2014: 9.

⁷ Peeren 2014: 14.

⁸ Whitehead 2004: 13.

implicitly alluding to Freud's concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, translated as 'deferred action' or 'afterwardness,' and which, as this critic explains, "refers to the ways in which certain experiences, impressions and memory traces are revised at a later date in order to correspond with fresh experiences or with the attainment of a new stage of development"⁹.

In her significant contribution to the field of Trauma Studies, Cathy Caruth has also drawn on Freud's ideas, providing the well-known definition of trauma as an event "not assimilated or experienced fully at the time, but only belatedly, in its repeated *possession* of the one who experiences it"¹⁰. Caruth insists on the unrepresentable excess, resistance to conceptualization and incomprehensibility of the traumatic event. The literary manifestation of trauma, then, as put by Whitehead, "requires a literary form which departs from conventional linear sequence"¹¹. Certainly, the past events haunting Rhys's female protagonists are never told in a straightforward fashion, but as fragmented memories, dreams or hallucinations that disrupt the linear progress of the narrative. As Moran has argued in her analysis of the aesthetics of trauma in Rhys and Virginia Woolf, "highly visual, intrusive fragments of 'past time' frequently rupture the narrative 'present'"¹².

This interruption of the past into the present places Rhys's characters in a double temporality that prevents them from fully inhabiting the present and from fully abandoning the past. "I Used to Live Here Once" is traversed by this temporal duality –highlighted by the very title – as we see how the protagonist can only perceive the present through the optic of the past. Munroe has pointed to liminality – 'living on the edges' – as the defining characteristic of Rhys's fiction: "Her characters inhabit the narrow and precarious space circumscribed by the phrase 'neither/nor': neither 'truly' British nor Caribbean, neither respectable women nor prostitutes, neither domesticated nor liberated"¹³. To this list, I would like to add temporal liminality: Rhys's characters are neither here nor there in temporal terms, which undermines any sense of full presence or stable identity. According to Whitehead, "[t]he ghost represents an appropriate embodiment of the disjunction of temporality, the surfacing of the past in the present"¹⁴. It is in this sense that we can speak of Rhys's characters as ghosts.

However, the ghostly in Rhys's fiction does not remain at a temporal level, but acquires an existential dimension according to which characters feel neither alive nor dead. As I will show, the figure of the ghost often works as the characters' double, which endows Rhys's novels with a strongly uncanny

⁹ Whitehead 2004: 6.

¹⁰ Caruth 1995: 4.

¹¹ Whitehead 2004: 6.

¹² Moran 2007: 5.

¹³ Munroe 2015: 108.

¹⁴ Whitehead 2004: 6.

dimension. The blurring of the opposition between life and death is connected with the continuous destabilization of other conceptual boundaries –animate and inanimate, self and other, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, human and animal–, which accounts for the emergence of the abject as defined by Kristeva. These elements, together with the gloomy and phantasmagoric description of the places inhabited by Rhys's characters, definitely endows her early urban novels with a Gothic dimension that has generally escaped critical attention.

Turning now to the novel that constitutes the focus of my analysis, the importance of temporality is underlined by its very title, *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, which highlights the protagonist's subjection to a temporal process of post-ness after the traumatic event of finishing her relationship with Mr Mackenzie. However, in her first conversation with her new lover, Mr Horsfield, we learn that Julia's emotional instability is not only due to her failed relationship with Horsfield, but also due to some traumatic events from her past¹⁵. Julia is telling Mr Horsfield about the time when she left England and came to Paris:

I pulled out all the photographs I had, and letters and things. And my marriage-book and my passport. And the papers about my baby who died and was buried in Hamburg.

But it had all gone, as if it had never been. And I was there, like a ghost. And then I was frightened, and yet I knew that if I could get to the end of what I was feeling it would be the truth about myself and about the world ...¹⁶

Julia perceives her existence as a ghost due to the traumatic experience of loss she has undergone in the past. The 'truth' about herself lies precisely in the spectral limbo she occupies, which is "a beastly feeling, a foul feeling, like looking over the edge of the world"¹⁷. Her identity as a ghost is stated on other occasions along the novel¹⁸. The most significant moment, however, comes later in the novel, in the second part, focused on her return to London after an absence of almost ten years. There she meets her own ghost:

She walked on through the fog into Tottenham Court Road. The houses and the people passing were withdrawn, nebulous; there was only a grey fog shot with yellow lights and its cold breath on her face, and the ghost of herself coming out of the fog to meet her.

¹⁵ This information had already been vaguely anticipated by Mr Mackenzie himself, in a passage in which the narrative is told from his point of view (Rhys 1971: 19-20).

¹⁶ Rhys 1971: 41.

¹⁷ Rhys 1971: 41.

¹⁸ As when she enters the restaurant to meet Mr Mackenzie and we read that "[s]he walked in - pale as a ghost" (Rhys 1971: 22). A few paragraphs later, her ghostly quality is again emphasised: "she had walked in silent and ghost-like" (Rhys 1971: 22).

The ghost was thin and eager. It wore a long, tight check shirt, a short dark-blue coat, and a bunch of violets bought from the old man in Woburn Square. It drifted up to her and passed her in the fog. And she had the feeling that, like the old man, it looked at her coldly, without recognizing her¹⁹.

Munroe, one of the few critics that has pointed to the Gothic dimension of Rhys's early fiction, argues that the ghosts that Julia meets in London are those of her "past selves". Her lack of self-recognition, according to this critic, reveals her failure to realise what she has become or how she has been transformed²⁰. Munroe's interpretation of this passage is related to her more general argument about Rhys's Gothic depiction of London, which this critic describes as "labyrinthine", "oneiric"²¹ and "impenetrable"²². Munroe also argues that as opposed to what we find in the work of other women writers, the city in Rhys does not offer the possibility of a community or any interpersonal relationships: her characters are "solitary figures" that "negotiate the city in a detached, semiconscious trance (as if sleepwalking)"²³.

While I agree with Munroe's analysis, her emphasis is more on the ghostly context inhabited by Rhys's characters rather than on the ghostly identity they themselves have, which constitutes the focus of my analysis. Thus, going back to the passage above, Julia emerges as entrapped in a temporal disjunction between past and present directly related to her condition as ghost²⁴. She simultaneously inhabits a double temporality that turns her into a ghost or spectre as defined by Smith: "an absent presence, a liminal being"²⁵. This double temporality, as in the short story "I Used to Live Here Once", is highlighted by how Julia perceives every element of the present in London through the lens of the past: her Bloomsbury bedroom is exactly like the Bloomsbury bedroom she had left nearly one decade before, the clock strikes each quarter like the clock she used to hear, she meets the same old man selling violets at the corner of Woburn Square or sees a cinema she

¹⁹ Rhys 1971: 49.

²⁰ Munroe 2015: 119.

²¹ Munroe 2015: 110.

²² Munroe 2015: 114.

²³ Munroe 2015: 114.

²⁴ Among the most relevant recent discussions of spectrality, we find Jacques Derrida and his *Specters of Marx* (1993). Basing his analysis on the famous sentence from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, 'the time is out of joint', Derrida also discusses the figure of the ghost in terms of a disjunction of temporality: the ghost must be thought in the "non-contemporaneity of present time with itself ... at the articulation of between what absents itself and what presents itself" (2006: 29). Derrida, however, relates this "disjointure" of the present not only to the past, but also to the future (2006: 33), an optimistic note absent from Rhys's depiction of the ghostly interval in *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*.

²⁵ Smith 2007: 147.

remembers going in with a Belgian during the war²⁶. The result is a dissolution of conventional temporal markers so that the boundary between present and past is blurred: "Perhaps the last ten years had been a dream; perhaps life, moving on for the rest of the world, had miraculously stood still for her"²⁷.

This sense of temporal stagnancy is also conveyed by the circular temporality that structures the narrative. The novel is divided into three parts: the first one takes place in Paris, the second in London, and the third in Paris again. This circularity also defines the protagonist's actions along the novel, as the novel begins with Julia's swearing to herself that she will never ask Mr Mackenzie for money again, and finishes with her going back to him to demand some money²⁸. Temporality, however, does not only work in the novel as palimpsestic continuum, but also as fragmentation: "The visit to London had lasted ten days, and already it was a little blurred in Julia's memory. It had become a disconnected episode to be placed with all the other disconnected episodes which made up her life"²⁹. According to this passage, Julia inhabits a fragmented temporality that cannot become a coherent whole. Whether as blurring continuum or as fragmented discontinuity, Julia is subjected to a temporality that rules out any sense of real progress or resolution. It is also in this sense that she is dead in life.

In the passage in which Julia confronts her own ghost in Tottenham Court Road, ghostliness is objectified and externalised into a detached being that works as Julia's double. Sigmund Freud famously analysed meeting one's double as an adult as one of the experiences of the uncanny. Freud's general thesis is that the uncanny is the mark of the return of the repressed; it is anything that reminds us of elements of our unconscious life, earlier psychological stages or the primitive experiences of the human species. Thus, the experience of the uncanny is intimately related to repetition, which allows the recurrence of something long forgotten and repressed, with the familiar turning into the unfamiliar. This is what happens when the subject meets the double: "the subject identifies himself with someone else, so that he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is a doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self"³⁰. Read against Freud's ideas on the double, Julia's sense of self is radically destabilized as she faces an 'extraneous self' that, furthermore, does not recognize her. The Julia that returns to London is, in a way, the same

²⁶ Rhys 1971: 48-49.

²⁷ Rhys 1971: 48.

²⁸ Critics have pointed to this temporal circularity. Munroe 2015: 118 has analysed how the circular movement determines both spatial and temporal patterns in the novel, and according to Mossin 1981: 145, the cycle is the central image of the novel.

²⁹ Rhys 1971: 129.

³⁰ Freud 1919: 234.

person, but at the same time, she is a totally different one. The familiar is inhabited by the unfamiliar.

Julia's visit to London is actually traversed by the experience of the uncanny from beginning to end. From the moment of her arrival, as pointed out above, her encounter with the different people and places is marked by both familiarity and unfamiliarity. In this sense, her experience very much resembles the dialectic between *heimlich* and *unheimlich* as analysed by Freud. According to Freud, the 'uncanny' is something fearful and frightening, while at the same time it is related to the known and the familiar. The point of departure of his analysis is the meaning of the German word *heimlich* as "belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, tame, intimate, friendly"³¹. However, Freud explains that *heimlich* can also mean "concealed, kept from sight, so that others do not get to know of or about it, withheld from others"³². What is *heimlich*, then, comes to be *unheimlich*.

Julia's return to her homeland, England, and her family house, where she meets her sister Norah and her moribund mother, can be seen as an attempt to return to the *heimlich* or homely. However, as the ghost she meets in Tottenham Court Road reveals, that process is going to be disrupted by the encounter with alterity, and in particular, with what constitutes the most radical form of otherness, death itself. According to Freud, the double is "the uncanny harbinger of death"³³. Certainly, as we have seen, death –mainly materialized in her child's– haunts Julia from the beginning of the novel. It becomes, however, a much more powerful presence after her arrival in England. Thus, in her first visit to a restaurant, there is a fairly enigmatic moment in which an unknown man sits opposite her, to tell her about a "most extraordinary thing" that has happened to him: "I've just seen a man I thought was dead. ... A man I thought was killed in the Japanese earthquake"³⁴. The lack of connection between this moment and the rest of the plot, together with the previous references to the war³⁵, underlines Rhys's desire to introduce death as an inescapable force determining characters' ghostly existence.

Death becomes especially important in what constitutes the central event during Julia's stay in London: her mother's passing away. The encounter with deadly materiality is anticipated by Julia's confrontation with her mother's sick body:

Julia stared at the bed and saw her mother's body – a huge, shapeless mass under the sheets and blankets ...

³¹ Freud 1919: 222.

³² Freud 1919: 223.

³³ Freud 1919: 235.

³⁴ Rhys 1971: 50.

³⁵ Rhys 1971: 49.

And yet the strangest thing was that she was still beautiful, as an animal would be in old age. ...

The sick woman looked steadily at her daughter. Then it was like seeing a spark go out and her eyes were again bloodshot, animal eyes³⁶.

In his analysis of E.T.A. Hoffmann's short story "The Sandman" as an example of the uncanny, Freud draws on Ernst Jentsch's interpretation. Jentsch pays special attention to Olympia, "a doll which appears to be alive", pointing to the uncanniness derived from the "uncertainty whether an object is alive or not, and when an inanimate object becomes too much like an animate one"³⁷. In her description of Julia's sick mother as a 'mass,' Rhys emphasises this uncanny lack of sharp distinction between the living and the inanimate, later on underlined again as we read how Norah "hauled at the inert mass"³⁸. The passage also includes animal similes in order to describe Julia's mother's condition, with the subsequent blurring of the boundary between the human and the animal. As it emerges as a composite entity, in-between the living-inanimate and the human-animal opposition, Julia's mother's body signals the emergence of the abject, as defined by Julia Kristeva. The uncanny and the abject are, in fact, deeply inter-related categories, both of them resulting from the blurring or destabilization of conceptual boundaries. According to Kristeva, the abject is "what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite"³⁹. Being "neither subject nor object"⁴⁰, the abject undermines the distinction between self and other, just as we see in the description of Julia's mother's body.

In terms of individual psychosexual development, the abject, for Kristeva, marks a return to the moment in which we separate ourselves from our mother: "The abject confronts us ... within our personal archeology, with our earliest attempts to release the hold of maternal entity"⁴¹. Hence the feeling of abjection that emerges in Julia as she finds herself once again in a symbolic struggle with her mother. Abjection, however, understood in this sense, is even more important in the case of her sister, Norah, who has spent her life taking care of their mother. According to Kristeva, the subject must fully repel and reject – ab-ject – the mother in order to become "autonomous and authentic"⁴². Arguably this is a process that Norah has not undergone, due to her attachment to her mother, with the subsequent lack of an independent and stable sense of identity. Her feeling

³⁶ Rhys 1971: 71.

³⁷ Freud 1919: 234.

³⁸ Rhys 1971: 71.

³⁹ Kristeva 1982: 4.

⁴⁰ Kristeva 1982: 1.

⁴¹ Kristeva 1982: 13.

⁴² Kristeva 1982: 13.

of abjection comes to the foreground in a passage in which the narrative adopts her point of view:

Then she had got up and looked at herself in the glass. She had let her nightgown slip down off her shoulders, and had a look at herself. ... She had laughed at herself in the glass and her teeth were white and sound and even. Yes, she had laughed at herself in the glass. Like an idiot.

Then in the midst of her laughter she had noticed how pale her lips were; and she had thought: 'My life's like death. It's like being buried alive. ...'⁴³

This is a moment with strongly Gothic overtones in which the different concepts we have been analysing – the ghostly, the uncanny and the abject – come to converge. Norah's reflection in the glass, her nightgown, her pale lips, her lonely laughter: all these elements contribute to her depiction as a ghost, definitely implied by her conception of herself as dead in life, again a blurring of the boundary between death and life. In his discussion of the uncanny, Freud alludes to Otto Rank's analysis of the double as related to reflections in mirrors⁴⁴. As she confronts the doubleness of her projected image in the glass, Norah becomes painfully aware of the otherness and death inhabiting her. This moment connects with another one later on in the novel in which Julia also experiences death as she looks at herself in a mirror: she has just learnt that her mother has passed away, and as she makes herself up, "something in her brain was saying coldly and clearly: 'Hurry, monkey, hurry. This is death. Death doesn't wait'"⁴⁵.

According to Freud, "[m]any people experience the feeling [of the uncanny] in relation to death and dead bodies"⁴⁶. The uncanny permeates chapter 8 of *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, significantly entitled "Death" and centred on Julia's mother's death. And once again the sense of uncanniness merges with that of abjection. Kristeva makes an intimate connection between abjection and the dead body: "The corpse ... is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. Abject. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object"⁴⁷. Julia's reaction to her mother's corpse is depicted in terms of the feeling of abjection: "Julia thought that her mother's sunken face, bound with white linen, looked frightening – horribly frightening, like a mask. Always masks had frightened and fascinated her"⁴⁸. As she emphasises how 'frightening' she finds her mother's face, Julia experiences the horror that, according to Kristeva, abjection provokes in the subject. For Kristeva,

⁴³ Rhys 1971: 75.

⁴⁴ Freud 1919: 235.

⁴⁵ Rhys 1971: 86.

⁴⁶ Freud 1919: 241.

⁴⁷ Kristeva 1982: 4.

⁴⁸ Rhys 1971: 89-90.

in the confrontation with a deadly materiality, what the subject experiences is the horror of non-being:

For it is death that most violently represents the strange state in which a non-subject, a stray, having lost its non-objects, imagines nothingness through the ordeal of abjection. The death that 'I' am provokes horror, there is a choking sensation that does not separate inside from outside but draws them the one into the other, indefinitely⁴⁹.

Julia imagines this 'nothingness' during his mother's funeral, experienced as "a painful dream", while her brain makes "a huge effort to grapple with nothingness"⁵⁰. References to dreams abound in Rhys's novels, with two different but interrelated effects. On the one hand, as they inhabit their surrounding reality as if it was a dream, the identity of Rhys's heroines as 'non-subjects' is reinforced. Kristeva suggests that in dreams we may be deprived of "the assurance of being ourselves, that is, untouchable, unchangeable, immortal"⁵¹. Depicted as living in a dream, the ghostly, alienated and liminal existence of Rhys's characters is brought to the foreground. On the other hand, this blurring between reality and dreams is connected with the undecidability of the life-death and animate-inanimate opposition traversing Rhys's texts: "she was unable to resist the dream-like feeling that had fallen upon her which made what he was saying seem unreal"⁵².

Reality had already been radically questioned earlier in the novel, in the conversation analysed above between Julia and Mr Horsfield. Julia is telling Mr Horsfield about the time, after arriving in Paris, in which she used to sit for the sculptor Ruth and describes to him the picture of a naked woman by Modigliani she used to look at: "A sort of proud body, like an utterly lovely proud animal. And a face like a mask, a long, dark face, and very big eyes. The eyes were blank, like a mask, but when you had looked at it a bit it was as if you were looking at a real woman, a live woman"⁵³. The woman in the picture, posing for Modigliani just as Julia is posing for Ruth, functions as Julia's double, so that by looking at the painted woman, Julia is looking at her own self. The description of the painted woman –and hence of Julia herself– is based on a destabilization of the animate-inanimate opposition. On the one hand, Julia highlights that in spite of being a picture, the woman looks as if she was a 'real' and 'live' one. On the other, lack of life is suggested as Julia points out that both her eyes and her face look like a 'mask,' a simile that she uses later on in her description of her dead

⁴⁹ Kristeva 1982: 25.

⁵⁰ Rhys 1971: 94.

⁵¹ Kristeva 1982: 38.

⁵² Rhys 1971: 63.

⁵³ Rhys 1971: 40.

mother's face. The whole point of the passage on Modigliani's picture is actually to undermine Julia's sense of reality, as she tells Mr Horsfield that she "felt as if the woman in the picture were laughing at me and saying: 'I am more real than you'"⁵⁴. Julia, borrowing Kristeva's words, is "at the border of [her] condition as a living being"⁵⁵, "[o]n the edge of non-existence"⁵⁶.

The use of the mask simile is not without significance, working as an element that suggests death, paralysis or inertia in life, hence blurring the boundary between the living and the non-living. In his analysis of the uncanny lack of distinction between the animate and the inanimate, Jentsch gives as example "wax-work figures, ingeniously constructed dolls and automata"⁵⁷. Uncanniness, as understood by Jentsch, certainly finds its way into Rhys's text, in which Julia's very condition of being alive is constantly questioned, as she is often depicted as an inanimate object. Her behaviour is many times described as resembling that of a doll or of an automaton. She speaks "mechanically"⁵⁸, smoothes her hair "with a regular and mechanical gesture"⁵⁹, or is perceived by Mr Horsfield as "a clockwork toy that has nearly run down"⁶⁰. In this way, Julia's identity is depicted as inhabited by irreducible alienation, one that is also emphasised in the depiction of herself as an animal: "She felt as though her real self had taken cover, as though she had retired somewhere far off and was crouching warily, like an animal, watching her body in the armchair arguing with Uncle Griffiths about the man she had loved"⁶¹. This highly revealing passage once again points to the doubling and divisiveness characterising Julia's sense of self. Her identity "exists at the *limen* or threshold between two opposing conceptual categories"⁶², the human and the animal, which definitely endows her with an abject identity that corresponds to her place in society⁶³. Like all Rhys's protagonists, she is in a position of exclusion and marginality.

Hurley has analysed the blurring of boundaries characterising the abject and the grotesque as an important element of Gothic fiction⁶⁴. As we have seen, a pervasive Gothic atmosphere progressively emerges in this way throughout *After Leaving Mr Mackenzie*, one that probably reaches its peak in chapter 13, "The

⁵⁴ Rhys 1971: 41.

⁵⁵ Kristeva 1982: 3.

⁵⁶ Kristeva 1982: 2.

⁵⁷ Freud 1919: 226.

⁵⁸ Rhys 1971: 96.

⁵⁹ Rhys 1971: 103.

⁶⁰ Rhys 1971: 107.

⁶¹ Rhys 1971: 59.

⁶² Hurley 2007: 138.

⁶³ As put by Chrysochou 2011: 140, Julia is a "borderline" character: she is "positioned in between antitheses, neither material nor ephemeral, occupying the categorical position of neither human, beast or ghost".

⁶⁴ Hurley 2007.

Staircase". Julia is returning to her boarding-house with Mr Horsfield and as they go up the stairs, she is frightened as she feels that somebody has touched her: "Who touched me?" she screamed. 'Who's that? Who touched my hand? What's that?'"⁶⁵. Mr Horsfield tries to calm her down with no luck, as it emerges that she thinks she has been touched by a ghost: "I thought it was – someone dead," she muttered, 'catching hold of my hand'"⁶⁶. This episode definitely highlights Julia's alienation from a stable and comfortable sense of identity. As put by Thruston, "the appearance of the uncanny spectre has the effect of jeopardizing the ordinary onlooker's presence-to-self, separating him from his own familiar, plausible identity"⁶⁷. What Julia has experienced is an encounter with her own ghostly existence, with herself as a ghost, with her abject and borderline identity.

The very end of the novel, with Julia back in Paris and after having met Mr Mackenzie to ask him for money, confirms the argument I have been tracing: "The street was cool and full of grey shadows. Lights were beginning to come out in the cafés. It was the hour between dog and wolf, as they say"⁶⁸. The novel's final words create once again an effect of liminality, a blurring of boundaries between day and night, light and darkness⁶⁹. The novel finishes in the temporal interlude in which the dog –the tame– gives way of the wolf –the wild–, a limen or threshold into which all the other conceptual boundaries blurred throughout the novel come to converge –familiar and unfamiliar, *heimlich* and *unheimlich*, self and other–, provoking the emergence of the uncanny and the abject. The imminent arrival of the hour of the wolf suggests the Gothic atmosphere that, as we have seen, traverses all the novel. And it is this uncanny and abject liminality that defines Julia's ghostly identity, at the boundary between human and animal, life and death.

⁶⁵ Rhys 1971: 118.

⁶⁶ Rhys 1971: 120.

⁶⁷ Thruston 2012: 22.

⁶⁸ Rhys 1971: 138.

⁶⁹ See Chrysochou's analysis of Rhys's characters as inhabiting, both literally and metaphorically, the twilight zone, which denotes a transitional area, in temporal and spatial terms, where binary opposites such as life/death and light/dark blur their distinctive boundaries (2011: 139).