

Ethical Identities and Death Impulsion in *Green Tea*

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Abstract Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's novella *Green Tea* presents an ethical issue of Reverend Mr. Jennings who commits suicide because of a black monkey ghost. The death of Jennings is a tragedy caused by double predicaments in which a man strives for the meaning of human existence both in natural and social dimensions. Jennings' excessive intake of green tea indicates that his ethical identity required by the Victorian society is undermined; his interest in paganism and knowledge of the black monkey constitutes a doubt about his existence as a human in the context of Darwinian evolutionism. Jennings gradually loses the rational will and ethical consciousness in the chaos of ethical identities.

Dominated by the irrational will, he thus makes an ethical selection prone to the beast factor which is represented by the black monkey. Sheridan Le Fanu depicts a process towards an unbearable passion for death when the rational will vanishes in the face of challenges from the spiritual world. During this process, green tea, the exotic which enters the human body, becomes the embodiment of the conceptual evolutionism that intrudes into human mind, and hence the entity green tea involves ethical considerations.

Key words *Green Tea*; Sheridan Le Fanu; death; identity

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Introduction

Green Tea (1872) written by Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu (1814-1873), a famous Irish ghost story writer in the Victorian era, is one of the best-known works of supernatural terror and epitomizes the writer's career in ghost stories (Sullivan 12).

Le Fanu was fascinated by issues in about human mind under the influence of the Swedish philosopher and theologian Emanuel Swedenborg in his elderly years. *Green Tea* depicts a very simple story of the Reverend Mr. Robert Lynder Jennings who commits suicide and is finally exempted from torture by a hallucination in the form of a demonic black monkey. The little black monkey has attracted much attention in literary criticism. Peter Penzoldt holds that it is a production of schizophrenia (Sullivan 16). V.S. Pritchett considers it as a symbol of Jennings' original sin, and Michale Beganal, the punishment for Jennings' loss of faith as well as his ardour for intellect (Sullivan 17). However, the devil and imaginary black monkey involves social, scientific, tea, cultural contexts of the 19th Century Ireland. The death impulsion of Rev. Jennings is related to ethics, including the doubt and hesitation between faith and science; inconsistency of body and mind; the indigenous and the exotic.

Jennings indeed displays some schizophrenic traits but they are the representation of a wrestle between the good and evil characteristics of human rather than mere symptoms of a curable disease of the nervous system. According to the "three stages" of Jennings' disease in chapters seven, eight and nine, it can be found that there is a conscious connection between Jennings and the black monkey who gradually acquires the ability of action and speech, while Jennings, despite his appearance as a human being, step by step loses the ability to act and speak.

Scientific and Social Contexts

The short stories of Sheridan Le Fanu depict a series of characters who perish in despair as they are haunted and inflicted by supernatural spirits or demonic hallucinations. The characters' "phantoms represent aspects of the self displaced and imagined as things or people outside the self, often monstrous selves freed from most human constraints" (Gates 16). From this sense, ghost stories written by Le Fanu aim at not merely creating an atmosphere of horror, but also touching upon human's cognition of his essence. One typical feature of Victorian ghost stories is that ghosts appear in the form of animals which "in some cases [...] occur to be the embodiment of these supernatural powers" (Irina 99-100). Thus, what constitutes *Green Tea* as a ghost story is the image of the black monkey with reddish glowing eyes.

The ghost takes its form as a monkey rather than other shapes in *Green Tea*, for one thing following the tradition of using animal images in Victorian ghost stories, and for another reflecting the influence of evolution theory in the nineteenth-century Ireland. Some scholars proposed the possibility of species evolution since 1735. Moreover, Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859) exerted enormous impact on

science and religion of his time. Religious definition of human beings was directly challenged. Darwin's theory of evolution entered the Irish society first not featured by its scientific basics but by sparking off debates among theologians in journals (DeArce 49). *Dublin University Magazine* edited by Le Fanu was one among them. Thus, it becomes easier to understand why the ghost is an image of a monkey instead of other animals when we consider the creation time of *Green Tea* and Jennings' clergyman identity.

Despite the image of the black monkey being an essential element,, it can be seen from the title *Green Tea* that Le Fanu intended not to make this novella a mere story about ghosts. Just like the theory of evolution, green tea seriously affected the identity of English people in the nineteenth century. Botanists, physicians and horticulturists were ambivalent about tea in the eighteenth century when this type of exotic goods initiated its first journeys all along to Great Britain from China. Then in the 1880s when the knowledge and market of tea were both enlarged, people gradually cleared up misunderstandings of tea, seldom regarded it as fashion, medicine or poison, and viewed it as a daily beverage (Ellis 93-176). Nevertheless, one could see the active posture of two camps in the nineteenth century, the teaist and the anti-teaist. The anti-teaists still believed that tea was detrimental to the individual, the society and the nation (Ellis 189). Since the mid-nineteenth century, medication of diet loomed large in Ireland, and physicians agreed that tea beverage could damage people's health. Ian Miller's *Reforming Food in Post-Famine Ireland: Medicine, Science and Improvement* states that physicians believed that excessive intake of tea was one reason for weak constitution (Crusack 180), which coincided with the character physician Dr. Hesselius's opinion that green tea harms human body.

Although Victorian ghost stories depict many characters who are sent to doom by ghosts and demons, the death of Jennings remains confusing because Jennings is quite different from other characters who take evil actions or have moral degeneration in stories of the same category. "Jennings is the only one of Le Fanu's suicides who is a good man with no very apparent guilt or reason to kill himself" (Gates 20). He shows no bad habit that deserves serious criticism, while his minor deviations, his addiction to tea and interest in Swedenborgian New Church, cause essential influences on ethical consciousness of Jennings under the social and historical contexts of the Victorian era.

Jennings is a man with few moral flaws only if he is judged by today's moral standards and ethical practice, because his minor vices in today's view, namely his addiction to tea and interest in Swedenborgian New Church are exactly lethal elements for a clergyman in the Victorian era. It would be confusing to understand

why the demonic monkey haunts Jennings and why Jennings finally commits suicide if we fail to place Jennings in a suitable context. Placing Jennings in the ethical system of the Victorian era, we may find that Jennings is denying his ethical meaning of existence as a human both in body and soul by dint of suicide.

Declination of Religious Identity

The appearance of the black monkey directly challenges Jennings' ethical identity as a clergyman that he lives by. The most conspicuous identity of Jennings is clergyman, and this ethical identity requires him to undertake corresponding responsibility and obligations (Nie 263). Meanwhile, the assumption of such responsibility and obligations strengthens his ethical identity. Thus, religious faith is of great significance to Rev Jennings. Jennings is first a rational existence because "rational will is driven by religious faith, moral principles and ethical norms or rational judgements in a particular context," and "rational will is the inner core as well as outer representation of human factor" (Nie 278). Hence the religious faith of Jennings consists of the pillar of his rational will. The first part of this novella tells readers Jennings' symptoms after repeatedly seeing the black monkey. For instance, Jennings sees the monkey while he is reading to his congregation. When the black monkey suddenly appears and squats on the scripts in front of Jennings, he fails to meet the duties of his sacred calling:

"He has on a sudden stopped short, and after a silence, apparently quite unable to resume, he has fallen into solitary, inaudible prayer, his hands and his eyes uplifted, and then pale as death, and in the agitation of a strange shame and horror, descended trembling." (7)

Jennings' ethical identity as a clergyman diminishes when he falls from the platform. It symbolizes the incapacity of his religious faith to strengthen his clergyman identity. The drive of rational will is leaving, he loses the ability of speech and self-control in the encounter with the black monkey. Thus, Rev Jennings, who falls from the platform and loses speech along with free will, falls into the instinct of creatures from high standards of humanity.

Jennings' religious identity slides into chaos when he deviates from Irish Catholic traditions to the creeds of Swedenborgian New Church. Although Jennings concludes that the tenets of the New Church will do no good to his Catholic belief and his head, he even allows himself to search for answers in Swedenborgian classics when he is confronted with the black monkey.

“Yes, but not good for the mind—the Christian mind, I mean. Paganism is all bound together in essential unity, and, with evil sympathy, their religion involves their art, and both their manners, and the subject is a degrading fascination and the Nemesis sure. God forgive me!” (21)

Jennings’ interest in Swedenborg results in a clash between his identity as a Catholic priest and a Swedenborgian follower. Jennings cannot meet his duties as a priest. The ethical identity as a priest, therefore, gradually diminishes. Despite his interest in Swedenborg, Jennings does not turn to a Swedenborgian clergyman for help; rather he chooses Dr. Hesselius to treat him. For now, Jennings has not yet converted himself into a determined Swedenborgian disciple, but he is already in a dilemma within the issue of faith.

Furthermore, the conflict between religious and scientific explanation about human’s essence causes unfathomable ethical anxiety to Jennings. Jennings is influenced by the New Church, and one sentence of Swedenborg’s *Arcana Caelestia* draws Jennings’ special attention,

“When man’s interior sight is opened, which is that of his spirit, then there appear the things of another life, which cannot possibly be made visible to the bodily sight” (14).

When the previously invisible interior spirit appears as a monkey in front of Jennings, he has to re-evaluate his essence and identity. Concerning the world of spirits, Le Fanu’s ideas “are based to some extent on the teachings of Emanuel Swedenborg” (Tracy xi), and Swedenborg taught that when one’s inner eye, which each individual possesses, opened, it let us “see into the world of spirits, which interpenetrates our own world” (Tracy xii). The demon that originates in the outer world and befalls Jennings is the black monkey, whose appearance symbolizes that the anxiety of evolutionism haunts Jennings.

The demonic monkey is the phantom of evolution theory. Jennings even acknowledges that his head has much to do with a monkey. Especially at the third phase of his disease (chapter nine), when the monkey speaks to Jennings, he has a feeling that “it is not by my ears it reaches me—it comes like a singing through my head.” The black monkey seizes the reasonable head and stops any possibility of prayers, dissipating the ethical consciousness that driven by religious faith. At the third phase, although Jennings has a human appearance owing to natural selection,

he fails to make a successful ethical selection.

Jennings' ethical consciousness of existence as a human is further threatened after his ethical identity has already been challenged. Swedenborg asserted that the soul is light which illuminates the existence, and love along with compassion is heat which flows from one world to the other (Sizer 411), and in this sense, the light and heat combines to form the black monkey's reddish glowing eyes. Once exclaiming "May God compassionate me" and pleading God to save his spiritual world, Jennings henceforth undergoes a consciousness chaos because the projection of light and heat, which should originate with God from a clergyman's point of view, turns out to be a monkey in the context of evolutionism.

Jennings is trapped in an ethical predicament in which the concept of evolution contradicts Swedenborgian ideas. The predicament is that he intends to choose an insight into his existence as a human between the evolutionary and religious explanation, but this is not a multiple-choice question. When he starts to choose, he starts to lose. The books of Swedenborg "directly and emphatically teach the impossibility of the evolution of one form of life into another, of one animal into another, and still more into a man,"¹ which directly contradicts the theory of evolution. Entrenched religious ideas and the emerging theory of evolution together restructure Jennings' ethical consciousness and meanwhile tear down this clergyman. The anxiety caused by the two sides encourages Jennings to make a selection so that he may remove such anxiety. However, the theory of evolution haunts him like a demonic monkey. On the basis of literary ethical criticism, human beings have undergone two selections, one is natural selection which entitles us to have human-looking, and the other is ethical selection which offers us reason and morality so that we are a species of ethical consciousness (Nie 32-3, 35). Thus, it can be safely asserted that ethics make human. However, Jennings intends to choose one of the two selections in order to define his existence. Either to abandon human appearance or ethics results in self-destruction. Jennings epitomizes men whose world was shattered when two selections were suddenly presented in the nineteenth century. The sequence is reverted of first natural selection and second ethical selection since Jennings has already existed as an ethical being before he noticed that he had removed beast form since time immemorial. The more the beast form haunts in his eyes, the stronger the beast factor becomes.

The suicide of Jennings is an ultimate act of forgoing his religious identity as well as faith. Le Fanu has his own consideration in making Jennings commit suicide. "Suicide in nineteenth-century England was both illegal and touched with

1 Darwinian Evolution in The New Church, <http://www.heavenlydoctrines.org/dtSearch.html>

the taint of insanity. [...] suicide was a disgrace, as Sheridan Le Fanu fully realized. The Anglo-Irish shared with the English a terror of suicide” (Gates 15). Besides, “Victorian readers of ‘Green Tea’ would surely have been prepared for a link between religious doubts and *felo-de-se*” (Gates 21). Hence the suicide impulsion of Jennings indicates that his ethical consciousness is doomed to be encroached, demolished and dissipated. Begnal (28) pointed out that “most of his stories are men divided against themselves” as to Le Fanu. The black monkey trespasses from the self-contained soul to the suffering body and leaves Jennings possessing only human appearance. However, in the eyes of Dr. Hesselius who cannot feel the pain of Jennings, the exotic entity tea is the key to the monkey’s trespass.

Declination of Social Identity

Confronted with the black monkey, Jennings turned first to Dr Harley and then to Dr Hesselius for help, and such choices manifest Jennings’ cognition transformation of the monkey from bodily dimension to spiritual dimension. Jennings comments Harley as “one of the greatest fools” (17), despite Harley’s reputation as an eminent doctor, because Jennings thinks Harley only cares about bodily changes, so he follows Hesselius, a person who can write “Essays on Metaphysical Medicine”. Jennings’ choice of the two doctors shows that he has clearly recognized that his illness is rooted in the spiritual world rather than actual life. The monkey phantom should be traced to heart and soul instead of flesh. That’s why Jennings comes closer to Swedenborgian New Church since Swedenborg was considered as a man possessing the mystic ability of divine communion. Concerning the body, Jennings has an excessive intake of tea; concerning the soul, Jennings moves toward paganism, thus violating the Victorian male norm of temperance and self-control bodily and mentally.

Green tea influences both the body and social identity of Jennings. The narrator Dr. Hesselius pays much attention to Jennings’ habit of drinking tea, and excessive intake of tea is his explanation for Jennings’ suicide. Jennings drinks tea at night to keep a clear mind and life vitality; he even changes from black tea to green tea so as to better enjoy the nervous stimulus. Thus Jennings has a positive attitude towards tea. Although he takes tea mostly as a measure of staying awake, his private tea-drinking does not correspond to the custom of tea-drinking in the Victorian era. “After dinner, tea time becomes a special ceremony for women. [...] Women are the centre. They help themselves and others with tea, including men. [...] Men are auxiliary, and they follow the women. [...] The central role of women beside the tea-table is irreplaceable” (Ma 87). Tea-drinking activities are

important social interactions for women to be hostesses, while Jennings defies these customs. Lady Mary even has a quarrel with Jennings about his excessive intake of tea (10). In addition, Adams holds that “self-control, self-discipline secures the most fundamental attribute of traditional manhood, autonomy” in the Victorian era (qtd. in Rocha 142). For Jennings, the consumption of tea “is not a necessity; instead, it is a ‘want,’ a desire, he gives into” (Rocha 142). Therefore, Jennings’ tiny vice of excessive private tea-drinking indicates that he violates the image of an ideal Victorian man. The excessive intake of tea for the body reflects a lack of self-control in spirit, and the deterioration of his health symbolizes the disintegration of his social identity.

Jennings falls into an ethical predicament when he takes excessive tea for a spiritual purpose. By means of tea, he unconsciously sacrifices bodily temperance to develop a clear mind and reserved disposition on the spiritual level. The conflict between flesh and spirit cannot be resolved for Hesselius as well since he can barely do anything before Jennings killing himself, and he even performs the treatment in an awkward way (Bernal 24-5). The mainstream view of flesh and spirit in the late eighteenth-century is that the two were irrelevant, and Hesselius can be seen as a representative in this mainstream because Jennings is just one of his many cases to verify the influence of green tea on men’s nervous system. In contrast, Benjamin Rush, a doctor of that time, proposed that flesh and spirit did correspond, and he believed that diets, medication and other physical factors could influence people’s judgement and intelligence, except that he could only offer a mystic explanation for how the two corresponded. Not until the late nineteenth century was Rush’s view echoed (Sizer 407-8). Jennings is also one among the then mainstream followers. Whether Jennings selects the spiritual or bodily dimension, once the selection is made for the sake of only one side, he will put himself in peril.

Owing the appearance of the black monkey to green tea is an attempt at transforming conceptual evolution theory into an actual exotic commodity. Although Hesselius in his “Essays on Metaphysical Medicine” focuses on individual spiritual world, he does not link body with soul, and still cares more about body just like other doctors, which can be seen from his experience of reading Jennings’ notes on Swedenborg’s books. Thus, for Hesselius, concrete evidence is a qualified cause for Jennings’ illness. Compared with theory of evolution invading into one’s spiritual world, green tea, which invades into Jennings’ body, is such concrete evidence, and they share similar attributes, namely “invasion” of new items. Tea-drinking was common in Victorian England; however, Irish doctors still believed that tea was detrimental to health in the nineteenth century. Moreover, good-looking tea leaves

“were directly imported from China,” and English people drank their tea before bedtime while they “would complain of weak spirit when getting up” (Ma 39-40). This condition is very close to Jennings’. Hence, Hesselius thought of it as a pity failing to verify the relationship between tea and ragged nerves through Jennings’ case. It is a nearly unavoidable conclusion given by a physician that Jennings dies of green tea.

The spiritual world and actual life should not be split into two distinct parts. What is seen is that green tea enters the body, while what is unseen is that the evolution theory challenges the soul, and the latter is the key of curing Jennings. Isolating body and soul delays the treatment of Jennings, and death impulsion is formed when one side aims to eradicate the other. The ethical consciousness of Jennings vanishes along with the chaos of his social identity in a great despair in great despair of unresolved conflict between body and soul under the context of evolution theory.

Jennings selects the spiritual world solely, and in order to demonstrate his free will, he ironically embarks on the death road that the black monkey sets for him. It seems that suicide contradicts Jennings’ volition since he resists with some reason when the black monkey urges him to jump into a shaft for suicide. However, death is the ultimate appealing of Jennings. Ethical consciousness dissipated, ethical identities demolished, rational will and human factor surpassed by irrational will and beast factor, Jennings thus degenerates into beast instinct. The black monkey, which symbolizes the beast factor, becomes the master of Jennings’ destiny. Free will, as a representation of the beast factor (Nie 39), satisfies the monkey’s interference in the fate of Jennings, therefore, Jennings kills himself.

Conclusion

The death of Jennings is a tragic result of double ethical predicaments in which Jennings is trapped in making selections between his natural existence and social existence. A quiet monkey will not cause a normal adult to be clutched by terror in most cases, while Jennings cannot convey to others the horror that he feels when he first sees the monkey (24). In Jennings’ eyes, the black monkey is not just an ugly animal, but an immovable idea of human essence in concept. The black monkey becomes Jennings’ mirror image of exploring himself when evolution theory and religious faith encounter in Jennings’ spiritual world, and such encounter projects the conflict as a monkey, whose image can be found in the real world. The three stages of Jennings’ illness make Jennings identify himself with a monkey, namely phases of intensification that a mirror image projects itself on the subject. When

the black monkey starts speaking at the third stage, it presents itself just like God who creates the world by speech in front of speechless Jennings. Jennings thus must have had a feeling that he resembles the image of a monkey, and the speech of the monkey becomes Jennings' wish in life. Finally, the beast factor triumphs. *Green Tea* touches upon the relationship of various life forms, such as body versus soul, and faith versus intellect. This novella ends up with human destruction when irrational will, in the form of beast factor, drives Jennings' death impulsion to commit suicide; we thus witness a black monkey destroys a man. However, death impulsion can be avoided even if one's spiritual world is threatened. Humans can convert irrational will into rational will by fairly judging the wrestle between the human factor and the beast factor so that the human factor may triumph.

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