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ISSUES IN THE AFTERLIFE IN *PEONY IN LOVE* BY LISA SEE AND *MISS CHRISTINA* BY MIRCEA ELIADE

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to draw a comparison between the situations of the young female ghosts in the novel “Peony in Love” by Lisa See and in the short story “Miss Christina” by Mircea Eliade. The comparison of issues of the afterlife and of falling in love will be considered across two cultures, namely Chinese culture for Lisa See’s novel and Romanian culture for Mircea Eliade’s short story. Both deal with folk beliefs regarding traditional customs for young, restless souls that have never, actually, satisfied their love. What is more, a soul can become restless when the proper burial rituals are not followed, even if only accidentally, by the family. Two young girls turn into ghosts in both stories and haunt the living, to the point where the living become very scared. While, usually, we tend to believe that Asian and European cultures can be extremely different, this comparison can show how strikingly similar these cultures can be. The phenomenon of ghosts that have never gone through the usual life experiences and which haunt the living could even be considered universal. This is one reason why the novel by Lisa See can be successful and have many readers even in European cultures, as readers can sympathize easily with the characters and identify universal age-old folk beliefs.

Keywords: ghosts; psychology; psychoanalysis; folk beliefs; individualism.

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1. Introduction

We tend, as Western culture members, to view Asian cultures in terms of differences, not of similarities.² We may feel that Asian cultures belong to an entirely different world, and our fascination with them comes precisely from the different way in which they think, behave, lead their lifestyle and have created their cultural products. Asian cultures challenge our perception and make us see reality from a completely new and unexpected perspective, much like the way Shklovsky (1917) believed we are influenced by art. According to his theory of defamiliarization, art is supposed to present us with a completely new way of perceiving and understanding a state of affairs or an object.

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² This state of affairs could be explained by the striking differences regarding the way these countries look at architecture, both exterior and interior, and regarding the way these countries look at beauty. Asian cultures believe in simplicity and in leaving nature as close to the way it naturally is when designing public gardens. We could look at the way societies are organized differently, based on hierarchical order in Asian cultures, as they are collectivist, and on equal rights in Western cultures and on individualism. Taking into account the common good or the individual interests makes a difference, yet these differences remain mostly at a traditional level. Nowadays, differences in contemporary life are still visible, yet the tendency towards individualism is on the rise at world level (Santos et al, 2017) in Asian cultures, such as Japan (Ogihara, 2017) included.

Otherwise, we grow to become familiar with everything around us, with the way we have been taught to think about reality and to live our lives without noticing anything. Our routine is broken up by the contact with a completely different culture, which is what makes it all the more interesting.

However, Asian and European cultures also contain similar elements that may be considered universal. We all end up losing dear ones to death and we may still find ourselves thinking about them, not accepting the idea that they are no longer with us. Such emotions which we all go through in the cycle of life have sought explanations through religious and through folk beliefs, and they are still dealt with in this way.

Some aspects of the afterlife prove to be similar across cultures, as we can see in two works of fiction, namely in the novel *Peony in Love* by Lisa See and in the short story *Miss Christina* by Mircea Eliade. The two authors write about old, folk beliefs of Chinese culture and of Romanian culture, respectively. The traditional world remains frozen in time in both stories and cultures, providing the foundation for the customs related to someone's death and to the need for the living ones to respect them. Otherwise, we may wonder why we should care about old folk beliefs and their relevance today, since we have so much scientific knowledge available through centuries of discoveries and since we have come, at some point in history, to question even faith itself. The main relevance of these folk beliefs is, however, easily understood, as they deal with what happens after death. Science has not been able to solve the question regarding what happens after we die (Baciu, 2013, 47). From this point of view, religion, or folk beliefs, can fill in the blanks when it comes to such dilemmas. We can find comfort in such beliefs, from an emotional point of view, since science and reason may just tell us that there is nothing more awaiting our loved ones beyond death.

Both stories imagine what happens with a young girl's soul if she has not fulfilled her dreams and needs of love in life in the world of the living. It does not matter that the Chinese and Romanian cultures are based on different religious beliefs, such as a combination of philosophy and religions in the case of Chinese culture, Confucianism, Daoism (or Taoism), and Buddhism (Ching, 2016), and Christian religion in the case of Romanian culture. The folk beliefs are very much similar when an unsatisfied spirit is still haunting the world of the living, preoccupied by a very worldly emotion, that of love, and, in fact, of erotic passion. We could see this haunting by the two spirits as a regret for not having profited of a certain occasion and of not having lived certain experiences during their lifetime. We can see how, in this case, we, the living ones, imagine life in the afterworld as based on the way we behave and feel in the world here. We attribute regrets and very human emotions to spirits which could be expected, at least according to some views, to completely break free from these very human feelings and needs and move on towards a different phase in their lives, based on spirituality and detachment from this world.

However, if we investigate in detail, Buddhism claims that what we have is the world right before us as we are living. For Christians, at least in the Middle Ages, the focus was on the world beyond the one of the living, to the point where we would spend our time here in this life preparing for the next one. Entertainment, pleasure and love were among the preoccupations that were considered to belong to secular life and prevent us from getting close to spirituality. It was during the Renaissance that the focus was shifted to secular life. We should mention, however, that Buddhism does not mean allowing ourselves to live in the moment, like in the Hedonistic life philosophy. It simply means that we should observe, in detail, what is going on around us, and meditate starting from the changes in nature and from the particularities of the seasons, as well as to be present here and now, not in the past or in the future. Buddhism means being aware of the present moment (Hagen, 2011). The idea is similar to what we currently know under the term of mindfulness, a theory which has been applied to all areas of our life, both personal and professional, and even in the domain of the teaching activity, where we are explained how we should be aware of our emotional needs and how we could make students aware of their own needs with respect to their communication among themselves and with their teachers. What other particular features from the cultural mindset and heritage are present in the experience of the young girls who have become restless spirits, still keeping contact with the world of the living?

2. *Longing for Love Beyond Life Here*

Love can be understood as a very powerful emotion which, throughout the ages, has been contrasted with reason. We can see this opposition in the ways in which, in the Western world, movements in arts and literature, as well as in philosophy and sciences, feature one of them function according to the specificity of the age: the Enlightenment focuses on reason, which may have been favoured due to the scientific development which flourished, while Romanticism rebelled against this worldview and focused on emotions, and expressing them spontaneously, in an attempt to become free from conventions through self-expression.

Love and death have been considered not so far-away from each other by Freud (2015), through his theory of Eros and Thanatos. We can relate the closeness of these two poles of existence to the works of Lisa See and Mircea Eliade to the point where, if we consider the two young women, Peony and Miss Christina, and the way their feelings of love and passion prove to be destructive to both themselves and to the ones around them. For Peony and Christina, Eros and Thanatos are not separate, since Eros is not, for them, a positive, beneficial, life-giving emotion. Thanatos is considered a drive we have to destroy, and, for Peony and Christina, the lines between the two become blurred. Meanwhile, we could claim that it is not only for them that the lines between Eros and Thanatos become blurred. The girls' families can be understood as symbols of the social conventions at the time, and of the way these conventions preach for young girls to obey their families and to control their emotions, including those of love. Love, however, is a much too powerful emotion to be controlled at all times, or even to be set aside in favour of what social conventions and traditions claim that proper behaviour for young girls should be like. Families can bring up more harm than good on their children if they apply to them the conventions of the society they are living in at a certain time, and, thus, ruin the lives of their children, while the intention is to protect them and help them have a good life by making them act properly.

2.1. *Behaviour, Emotionally and Culturally*

Love and death are both universal human experiences, regardless of the culture we belong to. We, as human beings, have various experiences related to them, and we react to them whether it is our own love story or possible death experience, or other people's around us. Cultures establish, during different historical times, various norms and conventions, as well as customs related to these two experiences. We react with emotional intensity when we deal with love and death in our everyday lives. At the same time, we can experience equally intense emotions when we watch visual arts, read fiction depicting these experiences, since we resonate with them. We can also imagine by daydreaming love experiences or anticipate dangers leading to the death of someone we care about. We could claim that love and death can be considered as belonging at an intersection between culture, with its norms and conventions, and psychology, which can explain the way the human mind works in relation to them. Once norms and conventions in society are too rigid regarding the expression of emotions, in particular in relation to love, we can have various tragedies emerging, of which the story expressed in the play *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare, which is now a staple at international level, is just one example.

Tragic love stories come out of not allowing young people to fulfill their dreams and act as they feel like. However, rules are not only there to hinder the happiness of young people, in our case, with respect to love. They are also there in order to protect them from behaving in a way that would be harmful or, at least, not beneficial, not only to them but to their family as well, and also to society. Once young people may feel free to pursue their love stories with the person or persons of their choice, they may take the wrong decisions. This is not just a matter of social pressure and society's judgment, but a matter of being harmed themselves with respect to their feelings. Love stories are very intense experiences, in particular at very young ages. Once the loved ones are not what they were thought to be, or if the love story ends up with the two lovers being dishonest or unhappy with each other, or, even worse, if one of them does not respond by feeling the same, then disappointment and

depression may easily follow. Arranged marriages may be regarded, from this point of view, as being a means of protection against being deceived. Families would arrange marriages based on their own interests regarding social status, friendship. They would try to preserve their wealth or gain some more wealth, however they would also consider what is best for their children, since parents can take mature decisions which are not influenced by powerful feelings in order to ensure a stable marriage. Even so, this state of affairs did not ensure that everything would go on smoothly. Mistakes could be made on both sides, sometimes to the detriment and to the harm of the young people involved. Parents and society pressuring young girls to respect social norms led to the dead young girls' not completely breaking away with this world and still choosing to interact with the living, and not moving on completely to the realm of the dead.

2.2 *Breaking Away from Conventions*

We can notice how both young girls, in Lisa See's novel, *Peony*, and in Mircea Eliade's short story, *Miss Christina*, are spirits situated at the boundaries of the two worlds, namely the world of the living and the world of the dead. We could claim that their status is one of transition, of uncertainty, and of defying boundaries, and, with the boundaries, at a symbolic level, various conventions which may have been around at the time and respected by their families.

Back in the old days, young girls were not expected to express themselves freely, at least not in their behaviour, with respect to having fallen in love. Back in those days, marriages were rarely established based on true love, at least in traditional Chinese culture, during the XVIIth century when the story of *Peony* takes places, but on the decision of their family and of the person chosen as their future husband or future wife. Even during the times when the action of *Miss Christina* takes place, during the time of the 1907 uprising, when the young woman is killed, relationships were formed on the basis of conventions, and not of feelings of love, be they romantic, erotic, or a combination of the two. The young girls were not allowed to express their own wishes and to act on them regarding their feeling of love for a young man of their choice.

Young girls going against the conventions, and having a rebellious attitude, were believed to be bringing problems to the reputation of their families and to their own reputation. It was unacceptable for them to behave in society other than in the way that was established by conventions. It was a completely different world back then if we compare it to the world that we know nowadays. In our times, we are fighting for free expression, as we live, in the Western world at least, in countries where the form of government is based on democracy. Nowadays, our society respects us even if we are different from the norm, regarding lifestyle, values, ethnicity, culture, gender and others. This respect is backed up by laws and rules, as well as by arising-awareness campaigns set up by supranational organizations such as the European Union. In today's world, we are going to therapy to discuss the impact of the education we have received on our personal lives and on our relationships. Therapists advise us to follow our own wishes and needs, as we are becoming aware of them, to ignore what rules we do not comply with based on social pressure. Therapy nowadays seems to encourage us to go beyond living a life that is not according to our own needs and wishes, and to leave social conventions and rules that we have found to be harmful to our emotional health behind. Therapy encourages us to select the social conventions that we want to submit to and to set aside those conventions we find harmful to ourselves. Otherwise, we can feel that we live lives that are not ours, but those versions of lives others pressure us to have. It may happen that others try to project on us and live through us what they themselves have not had the opportunity to live, and we rebel against it all.

Miss Christina, in the short story with the same title, is regarded in a negative light, as the living have projected on her the image of an evil girl ever since she was alive. We, as readers, can only view her behaviour through the eyes of society, whose mindset is clouded by conventions and by various beliefs which impose on people a certain type of behaviour as being the only acceptable one. *Miss Christina* is said to have been a very liberated young woman with respect to expressing her erotic wishes and acting on them, which was considered, at the time, completely unacceptable and it was also considered a behaviour to be condemned in all ways. Stories about *Miss Christina*, at the present

of the story a ghost, haunting the house and the community, portray her during her life as having a lover, but still acting on her erotic wishes with other men, seducing them and provoking them. Gossips about her claim that she was killed during the peasants' uprising in 1907 against the aristocracy for whom they worked, on Romanian territory, while, as a member of the aristocracy, she gave herself to the peasants she gathered to her house and asked them to violate her. Her lover, being jealous, killed her at that moment, and this is how she became a ghost. Readers are made to doubt at some point these gossips, as they may consider the entire situation as completely unlikely to happen, especially during those times. They may believe that Christina's behaviour was very much exaggerated, although they may still accept that this type of gossip may be a symbol of the way she was rebelling against the conventions of her times.

The rebellious behaviour of these young women who express directly who they are is perceived in a negative way in both societies, in both cultures, as we can see from both works of fiction. We may wonder, from the readers' point of view, if we have a background in psychology and psychoanalysis, if the folk beliefs in which these two young girls are included by the community are not a projection of the negative way society has seen such behaviour, projecting on these two young girls what was the worst. This understanding of the two stories comes from applying the reader-response approach to the text, where "meaning is made by a reader, in the act of reading" (Fowler, 2008, 127). A reader having a background in psychology and psychoanalysis would definitely think and interpret the two young girls' behaviour differently than the community of the time, whose background consisted of various folk beliefs about the afterlife. Even the fact that they had in their folk beliefs stories about creatures that could be situated in-between the two worlds, life and the afterworld, could be illustrative of the community members' psychology, in that they themselves had not, for various reasons, let go of the memory of the two girls. Perhaps they still had some unanswered questions about them, and about their relationship with them. In the case of Peony, her family may have felt guilty, especially since the opera show *The Peony Pavilion* has a bad reputation for making young girls love-sick and prone to die from love-sickness after watching the show and yet, her family still organized a staging of the show. We could see here that Peony's family and close ones could be in the stage of not accepting her death, which is part of the grief work as theorized by Freud (1917). The other stage is the one of accepting the loss and moving on. While the young women in both works of fiction behaved rebelliously during their life here, they are also behaving rebelliously in the afterlife.

2.3 *Life Here and the Afterlife, to What Extent are They Different?*

We can see the beliefs expressed through the behaviour of the two young girls in the two stories as being against conventions not only during the life on Earth, but also in the afterworld. They do not conform to the established rules of folk beliefs that they should move on to the afterworld and break all connections with the world of the living. They return to haunt the living, yet, the cause could be located in both cases.

In the novel *Peony in Love*, by mistake, Peony's family does not complete the ritual as they are supposed to when they prepare the burial ceremony on the death of their daughter. We could interpret this as an irony, since the family wanted their daughter during her lifetime to always behave properly. While not being married, she was not allowed to show herself to a man in public, as Peony had left herself to be seen by the young man she fell in love with when the staged play *The Peony Pavilion* was organized by the aristocratic family in order to celebrate Peony's 16th birthday, following the announcement of her marriage to a young man she did not know. According to historical reality, the opera show *The Peony Pavilion* was first seen in 1598, yet in Lisa See's fictional world it is organized later, by half a century. The opera show is based on a poem, with which Peony becomes fascinated to the point where she dreams about such a great love, since she can relate to the feelings, having in view that she is in love herself, and hopelessly so. The heroine of the opera, called Liniang, falls, like Peony, in love with a young man, yet she has to obey the customs and to be married against her will by her parents. Liniang suffers a lot, refuses to eat, and dies. Peony mirrors Liniang's behaviour, to the point where she identifies herself with her. She spends her time writing notes on her copy of *The Peony Pavilion*. Peony also defies other norms of behaviour expected of a young girl in traditional

Chinese society: she meets in the garden with the young man, who is a poet. Later on, right before her death, Peony will discover that her family had chosen, after all, to marry her to the young poet, just by coincidence. Therefore, the man she loved and had chosen herself was the same as the one chosen by her parents, which makes the story all the more tragic, due to the lack of communication between parents and children.

We could claim that the emotional needs of love have not been satisfied by the persons in this world for the two young girls, as they had been the prisoners of the conventions of their age. Their families have also been the prisoners of the rigid mindsets of their times, and, believing they were doing what they should, they brought unhappiness on the two young women. The young women could not rebel in their real life to a high extent, so they continued with their rebellion in the afterlife. Miss Christina and Peony are both of them not accepted by society the way they are. We can see how they are being honest regarding their wishes and needs, while the community and the family disapproves of their behaviour. They remain at odds with society and cannot resonate with society's rules when they are alive and, even more so, when they are dead.

They remain restless souls who, even in the afterlife, go against the rules. In Miss Christina's case, her afterlife should have been based on Christian beliefs, and she should have peacefully passed away and gone to rest forever. Yet, external circumstances, such as her being killed, are not Christian and normal either. She has been ill-treated during her lifetime, and her being killed can be regarded as a symbol of society not accepting her and also suppressing her true personality.

In the meantime, not breaking free from the world of the living on the part of the young girls, now ghosts that haunt the living, can be seen, in the case of Chinese culture, as not obeying the principles of Buddhism. According to Buddhist belief, our lives are subject to loss. We can lose our dear ones, we can lose everything we have, as everything in this world is ephemeral. We should come to accept this. It is clear that Peony does not obey, and does not accept she is no longer alive, as she wishes to spend the night with the man she loves, even if this means to do this through the living body of one of his wives. Additionally, Peony's family members, by allowing themselves not to do the proper burial ritual, also do not accept her loss. Freud would claim that there is no innocent error, and that, unconsciously, by forgetting to do the proper ritual, the family has ensured that Peony would still be with them. Losing her had been hard to accept. As for Miss Christina, she refuses to be a Christian soul in the afterlife. She resorts to being a pagan spirit, a "strigoi", situated in-between the two worlds. Haunting the living as ghosts can be considered a behaviour as rebellious as the one against the conventions during their lifetime.

2.4 A New Understanding of Folk Beliefs, by Means of Psychology and Psychoanalysis

While Miss Christina has been analysed from the point of view of folk beliefs, and while folk beliefs appear to occupy the centre stage of *Peony in Love*, all these beliefs could be grouped and interpreted under the aspect of psychological and psychoanalytic mechanisms. In the two works, the young women haunt the living and even come to manipulate the bodies of other girls to satisfy their own pleasures, intervening in the lives of living men. They wish to seduce their loved ones, as Miss Christina seduces Egor and as Peony tries to spend time in the bedroom of the man she loves through the body of one of his wives. The fact that the community condemns the young girls' behaviour and that they are both seen as evil in the afterlife shows, in an exaggerated manner, the way society disapproves of such attitudes regarding young girls.

Traditionally, the rebellious behaviour of young girls is to be condemned. It is not considered normal, as popular psychology teaches us nowadays through articles meant for the general public, and it is not to be admired as a direct expression of their standing out, as is the case in American culture nowadays, where standing out through a specific, original style is considered the usual way of expressing who we are. Condemnable behaviours on the part of the young girls are projected on the creatures that haunt the family and the community, and which are portrayed as threatening, under the

forms of strigoi (Crihană, 2007; Olson, 1992; Harat, 2010) in Romanian culture and restless ghosts in Chinese culture.

Such manifestations of becoming ghosts and haunting the living, as well as of suffering from unfulfilled wishes, have been analysed as repressions having death as a consequence with respect to *Peony in Love* (Bogati, 2013). We can understand Peony's feeling like a prisoner of conventions and of her family's decisions when she thinks she doesn't have any chance to fulfill her wish and to live a beautiful love story. Psychological issues, such as repression and then death, together with the manifestation of starving for love (Zhang, 2017), were not known at the time when Peony lived, and we can only apply them retrospectively. Retrospectively as well, we can apply the non-conformist mindset to the behaviour of Miss Christina, while also having in mind that during the time she lived she was perceived as evil (Ivanov, 2021).

At the same time, we could claim that everyone projects on the two young women what they feel about themselves. People may feel ashamed and consider themselves evil persons once they have feelings and thoughts which they can identify in the girls. Once, they might have acted the same way as the girls did were there no such strict rules and prohibitions in society regarding the public expression of the feelings of love.

3. Conclusions

While the two works of fiction could be considered part of fantasy literature, which is extremely popular nowadays, as well as analysed according to the folk beliefs alone, the present paper has shown how different cultures can have universal elements, leading to similar cultural products. In our case, we have the ghosts that are situated in-between two worlds, that of the living and that of the dead, which appear in otherwise two very different literatures: Chinese and Romanian. The myths of the haunting ghosts could be best explained through our way of finding it hard to let go of loved ones who are absent from our lives, both in the world of the living and in the world of the dead. We cling to familiar experiences and environments, and, by telling ghost stories, we find a way to still keep the dead close to us.

On the other hand, we can see how the afterlife that we imagine has lots of features in common with the world that we know, here and now, and where the living people are situated. The afterlife also includes unacceptable behaviour, and even the dead are supposed to behave according to some rules. The two young girls who, having turned into ghosts, express their rebellious attitude, show us how much we need to feel that our needs are taken into account as individuals, and that we have the right to express ourselves and to be ourselves in society.

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