
The Past and the Present: Peter Ackroyd's Play with the Gothic in *Mr Cadmus**

Przeszłość i terażniejszość, czyli sposób, w jaki Peter Ackroyd
gra z gotykem w powieści *Mr Cadmus*

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Abstract. The aim of this article is to distinguish Gothic fiction conventions which Peter Ackroyd uses in *Mr Cadmus* (2020) in order to present English national identity juxtaposed with cultural otherness. Using parody, Ackroyd ridicules irrational fears commonly associated with immigrants and, simultaneously, outlines their role in building English national identity in the past and the present. Drawing on theories of the Gothic as an expression of cultural anxieties, this article seeks to demonstrate that *Mr Cadmus* can be perceived as fictional dramatisation of the ideas Ackroyd puts forward in his non-fiction – “the English genius” (2002) in particular.

Keywords: Peter Ackroyd, *Mr Cadmus*, Gothic, Englishness, cultural otherness

Abstrakt. Celem artykułu jest wyodrębnienie konwencji wywodzących się z literatury gotyku, które Peter Ackroyd wykorzystuje w powieści *Mr Cadmus* (2020). Intencją pisarza wydaje się być przedstawienie angielskiej tożsamości narodowej w odniesieniu do odmienności kulturowej. Poprzez zastosowanie parodii Ackroyd wyśmiewa irracjonalne lęki powszechnie utożsamiane z imigrantami, jednocześnie zwracając uwagę na ich rolę w budowaniu angielskiej odrębności narodowej

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w przeszłości i terażniejszości. Autorka artykułu, czerpiąc z tendencji gotyckich na płaszczyźnie literackiej, przez które uwidaczniają się niepokoje kulturowe, wykazuje również, iż *Mr Cadmus* może być postrzegany jako próba zmierzenia się pisarza z przywoływanymi przez niego teoriami, a zwłaszcza z ideą „angielskiego geniuszu” (Ackroyd, 2002) – tym razem jednak w formie fikcji literackiej.

Słowa kluczowe: Peter Ackroyd, *Mr Cadmus*, gotyk, angielska tożsamość narodowa, odmienność kulturowa

Throughout his career, Peter Ackroyd has gained recognition as a peculiar writer. In his works, he manages to combine historical facts, which he often rewrites, with amusing and entertaining factors. These, along with a certain level of “darkness” intertwined into the stories, attract the interest of both readers and scholars. The writer’s works have repeatedly been analysed in terms of intertextual play or historiographic metafiction, which could be called his hallmarks. Ackroyd is also well known for his interest in London and English culture. According to the writer himself, both the country and its capital are related to certain traditions among which the Gothic can be listed (Schütze, 1999, p. 17). In the lecture initially delivered in 1993 entitled “The Englishness of English Literature”, the writer raises the importance of aspects that, according to him, might be considered constituting the core of the English *genius loci* (Ackroyd, 2002, p. 330). As he claims, the already mentioned Gothic, along with “theatricality” and Catholic traditions of the country, play an important role in what he calls “the English genius” (pp. 335–340). Ackroyd openly states “that Gothic literature has always seemed to [him – pronoun modified by A.J.-M.] to be, of all types of fiction, the most thoroughly English in inspiration and execution” (2002, p. 338).

In *Mr Cadmus*, well established stereotypes of British national identity are used. The writer manages to ridicule subconscious fears about outsiders and provoke the readers into understanding Englishness as built on the contrast to those who are the subject of these irrational fears. Adriana Neagu emphasizes that “Ackroyd’s greater importance lies in the dialogue that he orchestrates between individual and collective memory, cultural identity and difference, discovery and invention of tradition, or else constructed and »received« modes of Englishness” (2006, p. 219). *Mr Cadmus* is another text where these Ackroydian ways of representation that the scholar notices can be observed. In the discussed novel, the writer reminds the readers of the continuity which mirrors itself in the contemporary English society and its national identity. Neagu claims that the already mentioned “dialogue” one finds in Ackroyd’s writing “is [...] potentially breathing new life into the debate around Englishness, and inviting reflection on England in the European imagination, combined with continental Europe’s idea of Englishness” (2006, p. 219). In relation to that, this paper aims at listing Gothic literary motifs that Ackroyd uses in *Mr Cadmus* and assessing the role they play in presenting modes of Englishness. The analysis, amongst others, will

draw from the research conducted by Tomasz Niedokos who discusses Ackroydian perception of English culture (2011). Attention will also be paid to observations made by Ashleigh Prosser, who suggests reading the writer's London works "as specifically *Gothic* forms of historiographic metafiction [...]" (2017, p. 4).

1. THE "AMBIGUOUS EDGE BETWEEN COMEDY AND TRAGEDY"

Peter Ackroyd believes that the Gothic is dovetailed with the "ambiguous edge between comedy and tragedy [...]" (2002, p. 338) that illustrates the complexity of Englishness (pp. 338–339). Complexity which, as already mentioned, according to the writer also involves an unforgettable connection with the Catholic past of the country (pp. 338–340). It can be claimed that in *Mr Cadmus* Ackroyd tries to uphold the traditions which he praises and considers to be determinants of "English literature" (2002). He does that by introducing his signature trait – intertextual games with the well-known conventions typical of English fiction. In the analysed novel, the writer provides his own take on an English mystery novel. Unusual for the author, but not exceptional, is the fact that a considerable part of the plot takes place outside London. Due to the countryside location, in *Mr Cadmus* Ackroyd builds the illusion of the story fitting into a subgenre of *cozy mystery fiction*. The novel starts in Little Camborne – an English village which might seem ordinary. This is where the lives of two elderly ladies, Millicent Swallow and Maud Finch, get disturbed by the appearance of an Italian foreigner – Theodore Cadmus (Ackroyd, 2020, pp. 1–9). According to Phyllis M. Betz, "the majority of cozy novels are set in small towns or restricted environments, [and, hence – added by A.J.-M.] their populations tend to be homogeneous" (2021, p. 13). Likewise, in *Mr Cadmus*, the atmosphere of mistrust surrounding the outsider entering the hermetic society provides suitable background for a series of events – much like in a "whodunnit". Therefore, the writer leaves the readers with an impression of the subject novel being the cozy. Yet, the intertextual game in the novel is much more complex. The title character comes from an island called Caldera (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 9). In Greek mythology, Cadmus is recognized as the founder of Thebes and the builder of the Cadmea, who also battles against the dragon (Britannica, 2020). As *Mr Cadmus* unfolds, what becomes apparent are the signs that Theodore is not solely looking for a place to call "home" (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 7) but instead might be a revenge-seeker (pp. 102–107). Hence, in the novel, it is also possible to trace elements of *revenge tragedy*. It could be speculated whether Ackroyd, who is not only fascinated by Shakespeare¹ but also, as already mentioned,

¹ Ackroyd is the author of *Shakespeare. The Biography*.

believes in the role of “theatricality” in the construction of “the English genius” (Ackroyd, 2002, pp. 335–336), was trying to achieve an effect similar to the one associated with revenge tragedies. In the aforementioned lecture on English literature, the writer suggests that Shakespeare’s theatre connects oppositions such as “tragedy and farce” (p. 336). Therefore, it is probable that in *Mr Cadmus* he wanted to evoke the said traditions, although in his own, personal style.

The plot of the novel, despite its initial linearity, eventually resembles a collage of threads that does not provide any clear explanation to the described events. Reminiscences of war, familial murder, random crimes, and eventually, supernatural elements are combined within one novel, which seems to embrace disorder. Moreover, once the three neighbours consider organizing a quest for an amethyst (Ackroyd, 2020, pp. 108–114), the novel seems to draw from a *hidden treasure hunt* subgenre. According to Ackroyd, one of the aims of literary creation is “[t]o amuse people” (Schütze, 1999, p. 13). By intertwining references to various subgenres in the novel, the writer enhances the “tension” his works are associated with (*ibid.*) and creates a puzzle-like plot in which the reader is supposed to find the resolution. Additionally, the third-person narration does not help in joining elements of the authorial enigma. The reader is often left with bare dialogues between characters, as if the narrator was momentarily absent. It might be claimed that one of the main aims of the narrator’s (lack of) presence is to mislead the readers into believing that they might be getting closer to some resolutions. Instead, the recipients of the text are left distressed, knowing some “facts” but, at the same time, knowing “nothing”. Furthermore, by omitting to follow one genre or pattern, the writer upkeeps the “heterogeneity” (p. 15) of the novel – an element which, as he claims, is characteristic of “[t]he London sensibility [...]” (*ibid.*). It indicates that *Mr Cadmus* could be understood as Ackroyd’s attempt at creating “real” English literature. The writer, who in his commentaries raises awareness concerning the English literary tradition of instability and constant shifts in atmosphere (Ackroyd, 2002, p. 338), in his recent novel (2020) upkeeps the said convention, enriching it with multiple direct references to the Gothic.

In the following parts of the article, my aim will be to demonstrate how in *Mr Cadmus*, through a literary play with the Gothic and the parody of irrational fears related to various forms of “otherness”, Peter Ackroyd endeavours to define or rather redefine modern English culture. Moreover, the proposed analysis will try to outline the concept that Ackroyd’s recent novel (2020) is the author’s take on what he calls “the English genius” (2002, p. 330). *Mr Cadmus* mirrors a great number of indicators, which, from the writer’s perspective, constitute elements of “national literature” (2002). It could even be claimed that in the analysed novel (2020), Ackroyd is determined to inscribe his own theory in the work of fiction.

2. IS HE “ENGLISH” OR “UN-ENGLISH”?

Scholars' interest in Gothic fiction often concentrates on the symbolism and meaning concealed behind monsters and haunted castles. Therefore, analyses of Gothic literature often touch on psychoanalysis and modes of fear. Particularly interesting in terms of this article is, however, the relation between Gothic narratives and social spirits of the British nationals.

“In early Gothic romances, the monstrous, the supernatural, and the terrifying are typically linked to the foreign – the sublime [...]” (Brantlinger, 2006, p. 153), while what is noticeable in late-Victorian Gothic is the colonisers' fear of becoming colonised themselves (Arata, 1990, p. 623). Stephen D. Arata claims that “fantasies of reverse colonization are more than products of geopolitical fears. They are also responses to cultural guilt. In the marauding, invasive Other, British culture sees its own imperial practices mirrored back in monstrous forms” (*ibid.*). Otherness in the Gothic is not limited to race only, since the genre

is also concerned with the interpretation of other opposed conditions – including life/death, natural/supernatural, ancient/modern, realistic/artificial, and unconscious/conscious – along with the abjection of these crossings into haunting and supposedly deviant “others” [...]. (Hogle, 2002, p. 9)

Judith Halberstam claims that “Gothic fiction is a technology of subjectivity, one which produces the deviant subjectivities opposite which the normal, the healthy, and the pure can be known” (1995, p. 2). In 19th-century Gothic literature, it is the character of the monster that reflects, often irrational, social anxieties of the period. *Mr Cadmus*, despite being the product of the 21st century, is “haunted” by the Gothic tradition.

Ann Radcliffe's novel *The Italian* (2000), originally published in 1796, is one of the stories where Englishness constitutes an important aspect. Cannon Schmitt stresses that Radcliffe's writing was created in times when the idea of “English national identity” (1994, p. 855) was getting established (*ibid.*). According to the scholar, “[t]he text presents in its heroine an incarnation of Englishness” (*ibid.*) although it is not solely related with a place of origin (*ibid.*). “Radcliffe [...] creates heroines who are recognizably »English« – and this is the case even though these heroines are nominally French or Italian” (p. 858). Ackroyd's perception of nationality is related to the concept of Englishness defined by terms other than race. Niedokos outlines that

Ackroyd concentrates on defining Englishness rather than Britishness [...] incorporating the changes in English society that have taken place in the post-war period. The strength of his proposition lies in defining Englishness in territorial rather than racial or nationalist terms [...]. (2011, pp. 176–177)

The scholar emphasises that for Ackroyd, all commonly understood culture-creating aspects such as “the racial composition of the island” undergo changes – unlike “the territory of England” (pp. 14–15).

Ackroyd’s latest novel (2020) confirms his interest in the sense of true Englishness. Theodore, the title character of the novel, seems to be a playful personification of a Gothic outsider whom the writer equips with a disturbing attribute – a parrot. “[C]antankerous Isolde” (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 51) is the cause of Millicent and Maud’s distress. On one occasion the ladies raise their concerns by saying:

‘[...] And I cannot trust myself to set foot in his house while that – that *thing* – is there.’ She was referring to Isolde.

‘He lets it out of its cage, you know. I can hear it flapping about.’

‘*Don’t.*’ (*ibid.*, p. 46)

This would suggest that there is something threatening about the parrot. Yet, the animal is an element enhancing theatricality. The initial feeling of terror gets substituted with laughter. “Poor tragic Isolde” (p. 34) has to deal with the death of her partner, Tristram, who lost his life, although not due to “his heart” (*ibid.*), but ironically to “diarrhoea” (*ibid.*). On the level of the represented reality, the bird might seem scary, although Ackroyd makes the readers aware of the irony he uses in depictions of the creature. This animal representation is in line with the writer’s approach towards the Gothic. Amongst other qualities of this literary aesthetic, Ackroyd lists the fact that it “teeters between comedy and tragedy [...]” (Ackroyd, Wolfreys, 1999, p. 112) and adds that “you’re never sure whether you should laugh or you should cry” (*ibid.*). Therefore, the neither-scary-nor-funny parrot could be perceived as the novel’s first corroboration of what the author calls “the Cockney genius” (*ibid.*). Petr Chalupský, in his book on Ackroyd’s London novels, analyses the writer’s attitude towards the past and the present and states that the significance of those included in the circle of “Ackroyd’s visionaries” (2016, p. 24), amongst others, “lies in their ability to embed their unique visions in this continuum of ideas and experience by drawing from, rather than ignoring or repudiating, the inheritance of the past” (*ibid.*). In this sense, the creation of Cadmus equipped with the “beasty” parrot falls in the said pattern. Although the character is strongly anchored in the Gothic, he is still eccentric and original.

The stereotype of an Italian “wearing green trousers and a scarlet sweater, with a plaid scarf tied loosely around his neck” (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 3) is used to indicate that “[t]his [...] is the foreigner” (*ibid.*). The visual appearance of Mr Cadmus instantly reveals his deviation from the norms of the English countryside. One of the main female characters says: “[e]ven before he [Mr Cadmus – added by A.J.-M.] opened his mouth, I knew he was foreign” (p. 5). Such presumptions seem to be

aimed at building up tension in the readers akin to one that the Gothic terror of the otherness may have imparted. When a robbery at the post office occurs, one of the residents, during the conversation with Maud, suggests:

‘Of course it might have been your new neighbour. The foreign gentleman.’ [...] ‘I dare say he has something on his mind. He is always *peering*.’ (p. 44)

This convention of a threat-posing foreigner, bearing hallmarks of racial intolerance, is a recognizable element of the early Gothic. Howard Malchow discusses aspects concerning the relation between Gothic literature and racism (1996) and notices that “[b]oth the gothic novel and racist discourse manipulate deeply buried anxieties [...]” (p. 5). Discrimination presented in *Mr Cadmus* is practised not only against the title character but also an ethnic group, namely Gypsies. In England, representatives of this community were often connected to fortune-telling and were subject to multiple acts making their existence uneasy due to their nomadic way of life (Kenrick, 2007, pp. 74–78). Disrespectful attitude of characters in Ackroyd’s novel, manifests itself particularly in addressing the group with the word “Gypsy” spelled with lowercase letters. Their presence in the area raises society’s concerns. There are numerous negative connotations based on stereotypes about Gypsies, for instance, “What do they call themselves? Travellers. They’d better not travel around here. They are nothing but trouble” (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 44). This stereotype of a Gypsy being a fortune-teller is also used to show how one’s own guilt and trauma can be transferred onto others. Having visited a fortune-teller, Maud describes the lady as a “[n]asty dirty gypsy” (p. 132) only because she implied that there might have been a baby in her life (pp. 132–133). This seems to mirror Agata Zarzycka’s observations who, in her article “The Gothicization of World War II as a Source of Cultural Self-Reflection in *Miss Peregrine’s Home for Peculiar Children* and *Hollow City*”, discusses how the quoted Gothicization of past events may influence their perception. She notes “that by locating the source of one’s fear evoked by the monster, one in fact locates the source of their own potential monstrosity, revealed in the process of specifying the kind, scale and complexity of the subject’s prejudice towards otherness” (2016, p. 241).

Even though national otherness can be perceived only as raising fear, it seems that one of Ackroyd’s main aims was to direct the reader’s attention to the definition of Englishness. The writer uses oppositions to show that things can be “English” or “un-English” (Ackroyd, 2020). This attitude reveals itself in the novel, in particular, in descriptions of ordinary situations. Once Miss Swallow visits the protagonist, she expresses her opinion of the neighbour’s space that she sees as “heavenly” (p. 34) and “[v]ery daring” (*ibid.*). In reply, Cadmus adds: “I hope it is not too daring. Too un-English” (*ibid.*). Furthermore, once a formal relationship between

Cadmus and Maud gets established, the protagonist is still seen by the society as someone foreign. The banner hung at a summer fete announcing the marriage of “Signor and Signora Cadmus” (p. 132) is criticized as something that should not be publicly displayed as “[i]t is not really English” (*ibid.*). In *Mr Cadmus*, Englishness is defined in terms of contrasts which seems to be related to what Niedokos noticed, namely, that Ackroyd

prefers to perceive one side of English character, usually the one more pronounced and therefore clichéd, such as English conservatism, pragmatism or Protestantism, as a visible veneer of something lying deeper underneath – the hidden, and perhaps “truer” trait of English nature. (2011, p. 59)

Superficially, the English culture presented in the discussed novel is pragmatic. The ordinary life of Little Camborne is contrasted with London, which, from Maud’s perspective, is “too loud and too crowded” (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 74). For her, London denotes a place where all her secrets and her real “self” are buried. This is where she gave birth to an unwanted baby, who eventually got killed (pp. 17–24).

It could be argued that this representation is connected to the writer’s own attitude towards the countryside. Ackroyd is known for his strong bond with the place of living and its history (Schütze, 1999, p. 9). Despite spending most of his life in London, the writer experienced a countryside lifestyle once he moved to Devon (McKay, 2020). Ackroyd’s perception of the countryside can be, however, regarded as ambiguous. When talking about his time outside London, the writer is intrigued by the “sacredness” (McKay, 2020) which can be found in the unobstructed nature and yet, recognizes the ominousness that seems to hide under the ordinariness (*ibid.*). This point of view is reflected in *Mr Cadmus*. In Ackroyd’s recent novel (2020), the traces of Devon’s *genius loci*, along with tracks of its spiritual character, are of a similar aura to the ones held by ancient valley in another book by the writer, namely *First Light* (1989). Little Camborne, however, apart from the already depicted attributes, also embraces all the “clichéd” aspects of Englishness. At the same time, London conceals the “hidden nature”, as much of the novel’s characters, of true Englishness.

In *Mr Cadmus*, the Ackroydian play with the Gothic is not limited to nationality and superficial English emblems. Diane Hoeveler notes that

in order to modernize and secularize, the British Protestant Imaginary needed an “other” against which it could define itself as a culture and a nation with distinct boundaries. In Gothic literature, a reactionary, demonized, and feudal Catholicism is created in order to stand in opposition to the modern Protestant individual who then alternately combats and flirts with this uncanny double in a series of cultural productions that we recognize as Gothic novels. (2013, p. 2)

For Ackroyd, who himself was raised a Catholic, tradition of Catholicism in England is of particular significance (Niedokos, 2011, p. 10). In *Mr Cadmus*, he uses a character of a foreign Catholic, whose beliefs are confronted with a standpoint of members of an English church. When visiting a local cathedral, Cadmus notices the absence of “the Mother of God” (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 37) and general austerity of the interior deprived of symbols (*ibid.*). Maud reminds him that in Anglican churches these would be considered “idolatry” (*ibid.*). Despite not knowing the words of the preachers and therefore being unable to participate actively in the mass, Cadmus decides to take part (*ibid.*). “[T]o Peter Ackroyd, the Reformation represented an unqualified disaster which broke the continuity of English culture [...]” (Niedokos, 2011, p. 97) and in *Mr Cadmus*, he tries to remind the readers of the bond existing between pre-Reformation England and Roman Catholic Church. Maud notices that Cadmus “*is not a heretic. [...] He is a Christian*” (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 38). Yet, when he addresses the reverend as “Father”, (p. 39) she explains the situation by saying that it is the first time Cadmus visits “one of *our* [English – added by A.J-M.] churches” (*ibid.*). The readers are reminded of the contradictions ruling the community – the Italian might not be a heretic, but he is still an outsider. In *Mr Cadmus*, references to Catholicism reflect Ackroyd’s personal opinions in which he tries to prove that constituents of the English tradition, including the Gothic, are connected to the said religion (Ackroyd, Wolfreys, 1999, p. 113). As much as these already mentioned qualities create Englishness, immigration constitutes another inseparable element of the culture. In one of his interviews, the writer notes that foreign nationals and the criticism pointed at non-natives is hardly new. It has always been present, no matter the circumstances (p. 103) and his recent novel (2020) could be understood as a more elaborative comment on the said matter. This conviction of the ever-recurring character of the nation is also noticeably linked to the author’s belief in rather unique “sense of time in London [...]” (p. 105). In *Mr Cadmus*, one is facing the issue of hidden intolerance towards outsiders, which, despite being ridiculed in the represented world, in reality appears to be an ongoing and serious matter. It seems that Ackroyd strives to prove that certain attitudes reflected in the Gothic motifs, despite being considered rooted in the past, cannot be ignored.

3. A STORY OR HISTORY?

In the discussed novel, Ackroyd uses elements of the Gothic not only to define Englishness and draw attention to the issue of racial tensions but also to remind the readers that no conclusiveness can be expected as much from the novel as from what is considered a historical fact. In *Mr Cadmus*, situations pertaining to

historical events are incorporated into the plot of the novel. This is highly typical of the writer who is known for his attitude of questioning the existence of one objective truth. According to him, no elements which could not be distorted exist in the world (Onega, 1996, p. 214). In an interview with Susan Onega, Ackroyd uses the term “so-called facts and so-called truths” (1996, p. 214), which, in relation to *Mr Cadmus*, could be treated as an indicator suggesting that the novel’s plot is of a rather elusive nature. Moreover, no conclusiveness can be expected from the story.

The readers get to know the characters’ past in relation to the events of the Second World War. Cadmus, during the war period, is confronted with soldiers fighting for opposing countries. From the perspective of the English army, the Germans are presented as evil. Young Cadmus is warned against them when one of the English soldiers says “[s]tay away from the Germans. They will kill you. They are evil devils” (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 86). At the same time, the description of the Germans gets confronted with an action of an English soldier who commits rape on the protagonist and explains the act as something “what the Germans do” (p. 87). This representation of evil is juxtaposed with the reality when the protagonist comes across a German. Once the “other side” soldier sees fear in a child’s eyes, he assures him that he is “not the devil” (p. 88) and proves himself to be honest (pp. 88–91).

Steffen Hantke analyses the character of the World War II Veteran from the Gothic perspective and points out that

[i]t is this historical and cultural mechanism of managing individual and collective memory, of *expressing* the acceptable cultural narrative and *repressing* whatever deviates from it, which takes place around the figure of the veteran – [...] – which renders any veteran of any war available as a Gothic trope. (2016, p. 101)

In the novel, the concept is visible through glorification of English soldiers. In Little Camborne, Cadmus is perceived as suspicious. At the same time, English war veterans are acclaimed heroes (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 103). For Cadmus, the English veterans become a subject of dealing with the past. Experiences that might have been repressed for years are the drive for the protagonist’s actions. The foreigner is a victim of war harmed by those who are perceived heroes.

It seems that Ackroyd uses the motif of a war hero for two reasons. Primarily, he manages to raise suspicion over Cadmus, who is no longer perceived as just a stereotypical and a little mistrustful outsider but instead, for the readers, becomes a revenge seeker. Additionally, the writer raises concerns over the verifiability of historical facts and the way they can be interpreted by society. Subjectivity of reception in *Mr Cadmus* is expressed, in particular, through the acceptance of other war-related actions. Abortion and disposal of babies can be listed as one such

situation. When talking with the inspector about Maud's death, Millicent implies that she knew of Maud's pregnancy although she states that "[n]obody wanted a German war baby" (p. 156). The said situation had nothing to do with the war. A young girl had been given alcohol and used by a boy named Harry (pp. 17–21). Yet it seems that from Millicent's perspective killings of children born of German rapes on Englishwomen sounded more acceptable (pp. 156–157). All of these events can be regarded an extended reflection of Ackroyd's opinion concerning what could be called an identity. He claims that "we are inventing ourselves as a person [...]" (Onega, 1996, p. 214), which, as *Mr Cadmus* proves, could also stretch over to perception of others. The characters in the novel recreate themselves depending on the situation they are in, leaving the readers questioning their "real" or rather "leading" selfhood. Additionally, the lack of inconclusiveness might be interpreted as a confirmation that, ironically, the lack of facts is a fact.

The already listed Gothic-inspired themes are not the only ones possible to trace. Echoes of familial murder, which is considered "a typically Gothic theme" (Wallace, 2016, p. 84), can also be observed. Ackroyd uses it when he presents the relationship between Miss Swallow and her family. Young Millicent feels "trapped in the little house, with all its smells and its dustiness" (2020, p. 10). The house is a place where she has to live with her mother and grandmother who she refers to as "*them*" (p. 12). Hatred over a family house is a rendition of hatred towards the family. Therefore, both the family and the house have to be destroyed. The situation not only makes the reader question the stability of blood ties but also presents London as home to repressed memories. This is the capital where both main female characters committed their crimes and where their "memories of the past" are buried. Such a presentation of London is hardly new to Ackroyd, as the city usually plays an important role in his writing. Prosser notices that in the writer's works one can observe "a belief that the city [of London – added by A.J.-M.] is home to a Gothic *genius loci*, an uncanny spectral consciousness able to exercise a powerful influence in its inhabitants' lives (and deaths)" (2017, p. 66). The scholar claims that "Ackroyd's historiography of the »spirit of place« [...] becomes a familiar, yet unfamiliar, vision of London's »repressed« or »unofficial« history as a palimpsestic narrative of uncanny eternal recurrences [...]" (Prosser, 2017, pp. 75–76). *Mr Cadmus*, despite being set predominantly outside the capital city, mirrors Prosser's perception of Ackroyd's London.

According to Laurence Talairach-Vielmas, "the trope of the madwoman in the attic is perhaps one of the most potent images of Gothic fiction" (2016, p. 32). The character of Maud can be read as a fear-rising interpretation of the said concept. In *Mr Cadmus*, the attic is a joint space to all three cottages (Ackroyd, 2020, p. 159). After Maud's death, Millicent, Cadmus, and Inspector Barrington decide to enter the

locked space and discover what is to be understood as the evil side of the deceased lady. The characters find, among other things, “scattered photographs of relatives torn in half” (*ibid.*). Millicent, who seemingly was Maud’s friend, says: “I think she planned to kill us all. She hated the lot of us” (p. 160). None of the two plotlines mentioned above concerning Millicent or Maud provide a straightforward answer to what at first seemed to be a *cozy mystery story*. Furthermore, what should be noted is that in the discussed novel (2020), elderly feminine characters are of great significance. This seems worth analysing in terms of Ackroyd’s formerly stressed attitude concerning the process of developing female characters. In 1996, the writer said that he “find[s] it very difficult to create sympathetic or real, old female characters” (Onega, 1996, p. 216). Ackroyd, however, also revealed that the inspiration for the three main characters in *Mr Cadmus* came from three people whom he saw in London (McKay, 2020). Despite that fact, the writer’s inability to form kind lady-like representations resulted in Millicent and Maud resembling constructs of rewritten Gothic tropes of rather negative connotations.

In the 2020 novel, Ackroyd also includes another of his established “traditions”, namely the presence of occultism. By doing so, the writer, in a fictive environment, demonstrates his thoughts on English culture and its connection to past occurrences. In one of the final parts, referring to Caldera, Cadmus tells the minister Tony that:

‘This is not a Christian country’ [...]

‘And if the island is not Christian it does not obey Christian precepts. [...] You must ask your parishioners, if you have any. Adultery. Bigamy. Murder, perhaps? Anything is possible.’ (p. 179)

Eventually, Tony becomes a sacrifice (p. 180). Before dying he is reminded by Cadmus that “Caldera is older than Christianity” (*ibid.*). In light of the analyses conducted above, the island could be read as a literary reflection of England, which should be aware as much of its Christian roots as of its history reaching even further back in time. Moreover, by using religion, Ackroyd seems to redeclare his already known attitude towards England and its literary traditions. The writer strongly believes that the said Catholic past of England becomes visible and is connected to the aspects he actually decides to include in his most recent novel (2020) – “[t]he gothic, the pantomimic, the camp and the theatrical aspect of the Cockney [...]” (Ackroyd, Wolfreys, 1999, p. 113).

4. CONCLUSIONS

In *Mr Cadmus*, Peter Ackroyd does what he is well known for; namely he draws from the past and plays with historically established conventions. The novel, which uses a variety of Gothic themes and motifs, is a story of oppositions – Englishness is opposed to un-Englishness, Catholic religion to the Church of England, internal monstrosity of English society to externally threatening outsiders. The said Gothic-inspired themes seem to be used to present the struggles faced by modern English culture. In *Mr Cadmus*, Ackroyd, considering his extended literary biography, one more time tries to make sense of the English past which, in his own view, is strongly related to pre-Reformation Christian roots (2002, pp. 336–339). The plot, initially resembling a detective novel, gets confronted with irony and parody, whose strategy aims at raising the instability of the story. The writer opposes stereotypical perception of English culture and strives to prove that there is more to be uncovered under the broadly recognized superficial image of islandic society. None of the patterns, including the employment of the said oppositions and parody or Gothic themes, is new for Ackroyd. The same rule applies towards the attitude to the past and the present, which, in relation to the writer's London, Chalupský describes as “invisible and rationally intangible lines of continuity that have affected the face of the city for ages [...]” (2016, p. 279). This belief in the cyclical nature of history in *Mr Cadmus* is expressed through the adoption of Gothic motifs pertaining to the perception of outsiders. In recent years, the United Kingdom has been undergoing changes forced by Brexit. The decision to leave the European Union was dictated by various reasons and social attitudes towards immigration as well as the desire to decrease the number of incomers rank very high on the list of factors influencing the said resolution (Goodwin, 2017, p. 61). It would be a mere speculation to say that Ackroyd, either consciously or unconsciously, was trying to raise any concerns with regard to Brexit. However, undoubtedly, *Mr Cadmus* reflects social tensions related to the question of immigration present amongst the English people. In the Gothic, literature used to mirror unjustified fears over those considered “others”. In the analysed novel (2020), Ackroyd seems to outline that history repeats itself and decides to use the said tradition originating in the past. The author substitutes the fear with laughter, which often makes the presented anxieties seem ridiculous.

It is worth stressing that Ackroyd praises the idea of the “English genius” (2002). In *Mr Cadmus*, it is possible to notice all the aspects associated with writers whom he refers to as “Cockney Visionaries” (Schütze, 1999, p. 9). In his recent novel (2020), Ackroyd manages to transfer these concepts into superficially calm and monotonous countryside surroundings. Additionally, by playing with the Gothic and multiple literary conventions, the writer conveys his standpoint into a work of fiction.

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