

‘GHOSTWRITING’
An Introduction to Ghost Stories by Women

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Abstract

This essay identifies and describes significant topics of ghost stories by selected English and American women writers from the nineteenth century to the present day. It looks at how these writers have used the ghost story to explore common problematic experiences of women such as abusive relationships, troubled marriages, and sexual desire. As a non-realistic genre, the ghost story allows women writers to articulate, confront, and possibly come to terms with disturbing or subversive issues that may not be satisfactorily addressed through realistic fiction.

‘Ghosts, like the poor, have always been with us,’ says R.A. Gilbert (68). Ghosts have appeared in literature since Greek and Roman times and were used as supporting plot devices in the Gothic novels of the eighteenth century. However, the ghost story only became popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when many writers and intellectuals resisted the growing emphasis on technology and rational thinking by developing an interest in the extraordinary and the supernatural (“The Ghost Story”). Since then, ghost story writers have used a wide variety of ghosts and supernatural occurrences in their stories. Despite this diversity, Nickianne Moody states that all ghost stories have one thing in common: their depiction of “a haunting—a return of the dead or the past in some manner” (77). Similarly, Michael Cox and R.A. Gilbert define the ghost story as one that “should reveal to the reader a spectacle of the returning dead, or their agents, and their actions; there must be a dramatic interaction between the living and the dead, more

often than not with the intention of frightening or unsettling the reader” (x).

The writers credited with developing the ghost story’s form include Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, M.R. James, Algernon Blackwood, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Bram Stoker. Major writers of realist fiction such as Henry James, Thomas Hardy, and Rudyard Kipling also wrote a number of ghost stories (“The Ghost Story”). But despite the number of prominent male writers who have contributed to the development of the ghost story, it is also a genre that has proven to be immensely popular among female writers. According to Jessica Amanda Salmonsen, women wrote around 70 percent of the ghost stories published in British and American magazines in the nineteenth century (qtd. in Grimes). Since ghost stories were in great demand among the reading public, they became a lucrative means of income for middle-class women writers. The most prominent women ghost story writers of the Victorian and Edwardian periods include Amelia Edwards, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Charlotte Riddell, Mary Louisa Molesworth, and Edith Nesbit.

Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to compare and analyse the differences between ghost stories by male and female writers, it is worth noting a few significant features of the ghost stories by the male writers mentioned above. Most of these writers’ more famous and frequently anthologized tales of the supernatural depict characters whose experiences with ghosts and other supernatural beings lead them to question their sanity or their beliefs in rationality and science. Stories such as Le Fanu’s “Green Tea” and “Carmilla” and Blackwood’s “Ancient Sorceries” and “Secret Worship” also feature men of science (Le Fanu’s occult doctor, Dr. Hesselius, and Blackwood’s psychic detective, John Silence) who are particularly interested in understanding the supernatural through empirical means. Most of M.R. James’s stories, such as “Oh, Whistle, and I’ll Come to You, My Lad,” “A View from a Hill,” and “A Warning to the Curious,” depict scholars and other educated men whose encounters with ghosts force them to acknowledge the limits of their intellects and senses. These male writers also frequently develop a strong sense of atmosphere in their ghost stories, and very few of their tales have female protagonists or relatively important female characters.¹

For many women writers, on the other hand, especially those who wrote in the Victorian and Edwardian periods, ghost stories became a compelling and imaginative means of depicting their fears, anxieties, sufferings, and resentments towards the restrictions imposed on them by society (Grimes). Nickianne Moody points out:

What is perceived as frightening by the woman writer of ghost stories, and the discourse used to convey it, is sensitive to the changing cultural rather than the literary climate. In fact, the ghost story emerges as a form which has been used consistently to pursue particular public and private debates concerning women's experience (77-78).

Moody's study of nineteenth and early twentieth-century ghost stories by British and American women writers reveals that a great number of them are set in the home and focus on relationships and conflicts within marriage or the family, particularly on "the instability of status and the oppression of patriarchy visible during the transition into marriage" (78-79) or within marriage itself. Often, these types of stories depict terrifying, painful, or even fatal relationships between men and women. As Jennifer Uglow puts it: "Again and again, with almost shocking repetitiveness, the stories attack the symbolic and actual domination of the father, the husband, the lover, the doctor, the cruel emperor—the men of power" (xii).

Some of these stories portray only the threat that the male character poses, and the ghosts function both as manifestations of the heroines' apprehensions and warnings about the dangers of their relationships. May Sinclair's "The Villa Desiree" (1926) and Alison Lurie's "Ilse's House" (1994) are both about recently engaged women who are secretly terrified at the prospect of marrying men who seem too good to be true: handsome, financially stable, generous, and affectionate. Both women are soon warned of their fiancés' dark sides by ghostly manifestations: a hideous apparition of the fiancé's face in Sinclair's story and, in Lurie's story, the recurring apparition of the fiancé's ex-wife, Ilse, who, is not even dead but is only living far away in her home country. The story's protagonist, Dinah, comes to believe that Ilse's ghost is warning her that her fiancé Greg would actually make an unsuitable husband. Dinah's doubts and fears are confirmed when the couple's increasingly frequent arguments gradually reveal Greg's domineering and possessive side, and she is relieved when Greg finally breaks off their engagement:

I remembered how his face had turned into a horror-film preview, and suddenly I felt kind of lucky to have got out of his house. I thought that even if he changed his mind now and took me back, and was as charming and affectionate as before, I would always remember this weekend and wonder if it would happen again, and I would have to sort of tiptoe

round him for the rest of my life (Lurie 21).

Other ghost stories by female writers depict women who suffer from actual cruelty or violence at the hands of husbands, fathers, or lovers. In Edith Wharton's "Kerfol" (1916) and "Mr. Jones" (1928) and Lisa St. Aubin de Teran's "Diamond Jim" (1987), women are imprisoned by men who regard them as property, are interested in their money, or wish to punish them for wayward behavior. Sometimes the male characters' cruelty is extended to both mothers and daughters. One of the ghosts in Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" (1852) is a woman whose father had thrown her and her daughter, whom he believed to be illegitimate, out of their house to die of cold and starvation. The principal male character in Ellen Glasgow's "The Shadowy Third" (1923) apparently murders his stepdaughter and sends her mother off to an asylum so that he can get his hands on their inheritance; and in E.M. Delafield's "Sophy Mason Comes Back" (1930), the poor and illegitimate title character is murdered by her rich lover, Alcide Lamotte, when he discovers that she is carrying his unwanted child. In the last scene of the story, which takes place several years after the murder, the story's narrator meets Lamotte, now a successful businessman, at a dinner party; shortly afterward, he also sees Sophy Mason's ghost. It is not the ghost, however, that arouses terror in the narrator:

It wasn't the poor little revenant that frightened me—but I was afraid... with the worst terror that I have ever known, of that man who had lived a crowded lifetime away from the passionate, evil episode of his youth... and had left the past so far behind him that no echo from it could reach him... It was indeed that which frightened me—not the gentle, anguished spirit of Sophy Mason—but the eyes that saw nothing, the ears that heard nothing, the loud, confident voice that, whilst those of us who had never known her were yet tremblingly aware of her, talked on—of success, and of money, and of life in Pittsburg (Delafield 136).

Many women's ghost stories also revolve around the problems caused by romantic or marital love: neglect, indifference, the loss of a husband to another woman. In Edith Wharton's frequently anthologized "Pomegranate Seed" (1931), the recently married Charlotte discovers that the ghost of her new husband Kenneth's deceased first wife, Elsie, has apparently been sending him letters from the grave. Despite Charlotte's struggles to gain her husband's confidence and win back his love, the story's

conclusion implies that he has decided to return to Elsie. Charlotte's loss is foreshadowed early on in the story, when her friends warn her about marrying Kenneth: '*Marrying a heartbroken widower! Isn't that rather risky? You know Elsie Ashby absolutely dominated him*' (Wharton 237) and '*...whatever you venture to do, he'll mentally compare with what Elsie would have done in your place*' (Wharton 238-239). The letters that Kenneth has been receiving appear empty to Charlotte and her mother-in-law, who examine them towards the end of the story; but as Charlotte points out:

I suppose everything's pale about a ghost... What difference does it make if her letters are illegible to you and me? If even you can see her face on that blank wall, why shouldn't he read her writing on this blank paper? Don't you see that she's everywhere in this house, and the closer to him because to everyone else she's become invisible? (Wharton 267)

Other ghost stories also portray women's fears of being unloved. May Sinclair's "The Token" (1923) depicts a woman who dies without knowing for certain whether her husband truly loves her. Her ghost haunts him in the hope that he will finally admit his love. And in Alison Lurie's more recent "Fat People" (1994), a woman's anxiety about her husband's failure to answer her letters while he is abroad leads her to eat compulsively and to start seeing the apparitions of fat people everywhere. She believes that her husband's love for her gradually disappeared once she started gaining weight.

Women's ghost stories written later in the twentieth century have branched out to depict other topics important to women: marital problems such as domestic violence, psychological abuse, and divorce; the loss of a child or the inability to have one; and mother-daughter relationships. Writers of realist fiction such as Penelope Fitzgerald, Penelope Lively, Muriel Spark, and A.S. Byatt have all written a number of ghost stories as well (Moody 85-86). Some stories, such as Norah Lofts's "A Curious Experience" (1971) and Fay Weldon's "Breakages" (1988) depict women's often problematic relationship with housework. Other tales focus on female desire and sexual allure. Elizabeth Taylor's "Poor Girl" (1955), set in Victorian times, is about a normally prudish governess, Florence, who develops an awkward sexual attraction to her seven-year-old ward, Hilary. She also becomes briefly involved with his father, resulting in her dismissal from service. It is later revealed that she was possessed by the ghost of a future governess who will have an affair with the now grown-up Hilary while taking care of his daughter. However, the ghost in this story can

also be interpreted as an expression of Florence's desire for sexual passion, freedom, and sexual confidence, all of which the ghostly governess seems to possess. This is especially evident in the contrast between Florence's unremarkable appearance—"Her square chin looked resolute, her green eyes innocent, her dress was modest and unbecoming" (Taylor 256)--and that of the ghostly governess, who is more daring and sensual:

Her clothes were unlike anything that Florence had ever seen... the shortness of a tunic which scarcely covered the knees, a hat like a helmet drawn over eyes intensely green and matching the long necklace of glass beads which swung on her flat bosom. As she came up the stairs and drew near to Florence, she was humming softly... silk rustled against her silken legs and all of the staircase... was full of fragrance (Taylor 268).

In Alison Lurie's "Something Borrowed, Something Blue" (1994), female sexual appeal and passion are also closely associated with clothing. The unnamed female narrator is soon to be married, and her colleague Cleo lends her a blue slip (the 'something borrowed, something blue' of the title) to wear beneath her wedding dress. To the narrator's surprise, the slip makes her feel like '*I was a beautiful, passionate woman and... the world and everything in it was there for my pleasure*' (Lurie 182) whenever she puts it on. Soon afterward, she discovers that sometime before she met Mark, her fiancé, he and Cleo had had a brief affair. Realizing that the blue slip might bring back memories of the affair if Mark sees her wearing it, and that this probably had been Cleo's intention all along, the narrator sets the slip aside. However, she neither returns it nor discards it; instead, she decides: '*I would keep Cleo guessing. And I would keep her slip for a while, because you never know when something with powers like that might come in handy for someone*' (Lurie 184).

"Something Borrowed, Something Blue" is more than just a tale of supernatural possession; it also shows how the 'desirable woman' is an image and an illusion that can be created and discarded at will. Like the ghostly appearance of the future governess in Taylor's "Poor Girl," the blue slip in "Something Borrowed" reflects the female protagonist's desire to be sexually beautiful. This preoccupation with image and appearance is also found in Lurie's "Fat People" (mentioned earlier) and "Another Halloween," in which the protagonist feels insecure and resentful of her neighbor Marguerite's doll-like beauty and calm politeness.

Tanith Lee's "Simon's Wife" (1984), like Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed" and Lurie's "Ilse's House," involves a married couple and another

woman. This time, though, the story is told from the perspective of the other woman, Simon's mistress, who stays briefly in Simon's house while his wife Kristy is away. The narrator has never seen his wife but imagines her to be tall, slim, and dark. Then Kristy, looking exactly as the narrator has imagined, returns unexpectedly and attempts to attack her with a bread knife. The narrator manages to escape and, terrified, ends her affair with Simon soon afterward. A year later, she meets Kristy (now also separated from Simon) for the first time and discovers that Kristy is short, plump, blonde, fair-skinned, miserable, and not at all the type of person to attack someone with a knife. Kristy's vengeful ghost, like the ghost of Ilse in Lurie's "Ilse's House," turns out to be a creation of the narrator's unconscious, her guilt and fears made concrete.

While contemporary ghost stories may still involve appearances of the dead, stories such as those by Alison Lurie and Tanith Lee reveal that desire and guilt can also take tangible forms of their own. Women's ghost stories show us that whatever women repress or bury will eventually find a way to come back and haunt them.

SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR RESEARCH AND CLASS DISCUSSION

While this essay focuses only on selected ghost stories by British and American women writers, students may also be interested in examining novels by ethnic American women writers in which ghosts are used to explore issues of race, class, and gender (e.g., Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Maxine Hong Kingston's *No Name Woman*, Louise Erdrich's *Tracks*).² They might also wish to compare ghost stories written by women to stories written by men and look for significant differences in areas such as subject matter, plot, and development of atmosphere and character.

NOTES

¹ Notable exceptions are Henry James's "The Turn of the Screw" and "The Romance of Certain Old Clothes" and Rudyard Kipling's "The Phantom Rickshaw" and "They." In these ghost stories, women are either central or important figures.

² A useful article to consult would be: Redding, Arthur. "'Haints': American Ghost, Ethnic Memory, and Contemporary Fiction." *Mosaic*. [Winnipeg] 34.4 (2001): 163+. Academic OneFile. Web.

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