

**THE
RIGHT
FIT**



GHOST STORY IN A BOX **English Literature**



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**University of
Reading**

GHOST STORY IN A BOX

Welcome

Ghost Story in a Box is a card based game designed to encourage GCSE level students to tell ghost stories as a group, learn about genre conventions, and to investigate the wider contexts of these stories.

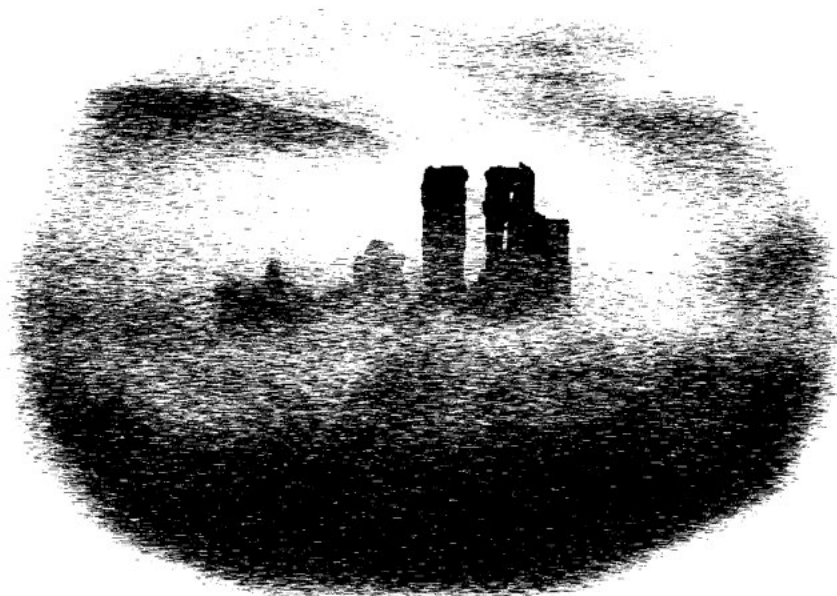
It aims to introduce literary ideas of trope, structure, context, and criticism through an engagement with a popular form of literature, of which some students may have awareness, but probably not a detailed knowledge.

The game encourages collaborative creativity. It also promotes a shared experience of the outcome of this creativity.

Contents

In this box you will find:

- Instructions and additional information booklet x2
- A spinner x2
- A set of 28 cards x2
- 6 suggested introductory paragraphs x2
- A flash drive loaded with extra copies of materials copies and useful additional resources.



The ghost story

Ghosts have always been with us, and they are as diverse as the cultures in which they have manifested: comic or tragic; bent on revenge or devoid of meaning and purpose; insubstantial or disconcertingly solid; young or old; famous or obscure. There are ghosts that speak, and others that are silent, and not all ghosts are human.

As long as there have been ghosts, there have been stories about ghosts, but not all such stories are *ghost stories*. The term, it can be argued, references a particular *genre* of literature, which is to say that ghost stories share certain themes, and work within certain structures. Often the more sophisticated ghost stories will subvert these rules to wrong-foot their audiences. The subversion of a rule is, however, an acknowledgement of its familiarity and power.

The first modern *ghost story* in English is often said to be *The Apparition of Mrs. Veal*, published in 1706 and attributed to Daniel Defoe (the author of *Robinson Crusoe*). This short pamphlet, detailing an 'appearance', rather than a haunting, goes out of its way to convince the reader of the authenticity of its narrative. From 1764, with the emergence of Gothic Literature, ghosts began to feature in entertaining and disturbing stories that often focused on extreme emotions and the inescapable legacy of the past. The 'golden age' of the British ghost story falls largely within the nineteenth century, however. It is often understood to have occurred in the period from 1830 to 1914, that is, from shortly before Victoria became Queen to the beginning of The First World War.

During this time there is a great deal of experimentation with form, but also a coalescing of conventions. When the early twentieth century ghost story writer M.R. James attempted to formalise the genres conventions, he came up with 5 rules; The ghost story should:

- 1 Seem truthful (even though what it describes is often ridiculous, the story should take its narrative seriously);
- 2 Offer 'a pleasing terror' (the audience should enjoy a chill running up their spine, or the hairs on their arms being raised);
- 3 Not include explicit violence (even when it is at its most horrible, the ghost story should be subtle);
- 4 Not 'explain the machinery' (the ghost should not be debunked, nor should the writer dwell on the nuts and bolts of how a haunting works);
- 5 Have a contemporary setting (the ghost story should be set in the present).

However, all of these conventions were flouted at some time even in 'the golden age'!

Focusing only British ghost stories from 'the golden age' is problematic. Many of the greatest ghost stories were written far more recently (like Toni Morrison's extraordinary novel *Beloved*) and many of the greatest ghost stories are not written in English (consider, perhaps, the tradition of Japanese *Kaiden*). Focusing on 'the golden age' also necessarily shifts our attention away from film. This is a shame, as many of the most memorable ghosts haunt the screen rather than the page.

What makes ghost stories so popular? One possibility is simply that they have a purpose: a ghost story should be subtly scary. This means that, even if we are not great literary scholars, we can still make a good judgement on what makes a successful ghost story. We can all *feel* whether a ghost story is successful or not. When we try and write such stories ourselves, the task is made easier, because we know what we are meant to be doing. Entertain and unsettle!

How to Play

The game is designed for groups of 6–8.

Choose a session leader. This could be a Teacher or Teaching Assistant.

If this is the first time to play, the session leader reads out one of the introductory cards. These offer a ready-made, atmospheric opening paragraph to the story.

Each player takes it in turns to activate the spinner. This will either point to an instruction for the player to follow, or prompt the player to pick a card. Following the instruction on the spinner or the instruction on the card, they should carry on the story from where it was left off, speaking for up to a minute.

Once a card is used it should be placed at the bottom of the pile.

Each player should have three turns and this should be agreed in advance. The session leader should remind players when there are 5 turns left. This is a sign that the story needs to be moving towards its end.

Top tips

- Don't go too big too fast. Not every entry has to be a big set piece. Ghost stories are full of suspense, so take your time to set the scene and suggest what is to come, particularly in the first round.
- Remember to build on what has already been said. This is an exercise in *listening* as much as speaking.
- Be supportive! Each section needs to work well for yours to be a great story. Encourage the other players. You can ask the rest of the group for help if needed, but once a player starts telling their section, everyone else needs to stay quiet.
- It is fine if there is 'umming' and 'arring'. The idea is that this should be improvised, fun, and inventive. It should sound like a 'camp-fire' story, more than a perfectly polished work of literature.
- Players should be given a few minutes to collect their thoughts before they begin. When the speaker starts, everyone else must remain silent.

What is the booklet for?

Each of the cards has a corresponding explanatory text. These can be located in the booklet and on the flashdrive. These are brief documents, introducing the writers of the ghost stories mentioned on the cards, exploring contexts, and suggesting thematic connections to other stories.

What is the difference between spinner prompts and instructions on cards?

If the spinner indicates 'pick a card', then the player picks one. The cards are also prompts, and function exactly like the instructions on the spinner, but they relate to ghost story elements that appear less often such as 'introduce Christmas' or 'introduce an animal'.

What happens if the spinner lands on the same section, or the same card is drawn twice?

Carry on, this is all part of the fun of the game! A repetitious denial of supernatural activity starts to suggest the narrator has something to hide! A repetitious uncertainty as to the possible presence of a ghost suggests a story that turns on questions of truth, or a narrator or character having some kind of crisis of faith. Two sets of stairs? That is a *strange* repetition, so make it central to the haunting.

What makes a good ending?

Towards the end the ghost should appear in its most terrifying aspect, or the confusion in the mind of the lead character should reach its peak. Endings are often successful if they return to an idea, image, or event introduced at the very beginning. If the story has begun in a classroom, how could you engineer a return to that place? If the story began with a disturbing sound, or a bright, sunny day, how could you reintroduce these in a scary fashion?

The story players create together could have a genuine 'sense of an ending', but this is putting a lot of pressure on the final speakers. The game will work just as well if the conclusion to the story is left open.

Suggestions for playing

There is a familiar image in American popular culture of children telling ghost stories to each other, either at a camp or at a sleepover, sat in a circle, using their torch to uplight their face when they speak. Why not set the room up *something* like this when playing this game? Players should engage their audience, look them in the eyes, and try to make their time as effective as possible.

Creative Writing

Some students may be more confident than others in creative writing. Here is some very broad advice on creating the story.

- The session might work especially well immediately after sessions in which students have prepared for the creative writing aspect of their GCSE. All they have learnt there about producing descriptions and narratives can be directly transferred. Some, but by no means all, of the techniques to keep in mind might include:
 - Sparing use of metaphors and similes. Is all the metaphorical language introduced going to be linked together in some way? Are all the metaphors used to describe a house drawn from 'the sea', for example, or from 'conflict'?
 - Vary sentence length. It is always effective, for example, to use ever longer sentences when describing someone beginning to panic as they realise they are lost. Then: bang! A short sentence, or even a fragment, can bring a shock as the individual in question is suddenly confronted by something terrible. Speakers should be aware of the rhythm of their sentences.
 - Devices such as the rule of three or anaphora will give a section structure.
 - Direct address or rhetorical questions can keep the audience engaged.

Suggestions for extension work

When you have finished your story, it does not mean you have finished with the ghost story! There are many ways in which you can extend your study of the genre. Here are some suggestions:

- Write an ending, or rewrite the ending. When telling your story together, you might find that the conclusion to the story is left open, or that you were not quite happy with the way the story ended. This is very much to be expected. If the story did not end with a satisfying conclusion, however, one extension exercise might involve the students in the group each writing their own conclusion to the story.
- After the story has been completed, students could read the notes in the booklet corresponding to the cards with which they have worked. Students could read the stories and poems in question, research their authors, or create a presentation on one of the themes.
- Students could write up the story they have told, either individually or collectively.

Introductions

1) Uniform

Nadia was pleased she was making friends at her new school. She finally felt accepted, like she was part of things, confident enough to join in group projects and reveal details about herself. It all seemed so different now from what had gone before. The last thing she wanted to be reminded of was her old school, which was why the girl in the uniform bothered her so much. Nadia had first noticed her one morning on the bus, halfway down the aisle and hunched over, with her hair across her face, slumped silently between the old woman and the window. It had seemed strange that a pupil from her old school would be on her new bus, but perhaps the girl was taking part in some sports event. Nadia had not even paid too much attention when she had seen her again, once or twice, loitering outside the school gates.

No, it was only when she had glanced at the girl at the back of the hall, during assembly, that Nadia had really started to worry. There was no reason why someone wearing her old uniform should be in attendance, but when she had tried to point her out to others, when she had looked for her as they all filed out, the lonely figure with the hair over her face seemed to have vanished. After that, Nadia had begun to see her more often, sometimes in the strangest places and always only for a second, out of the corner of her eye. One afternoon, glancing out of a classroom window, she saw the girl in the uniform on the far side of the playing field, standing under a tree, barely sheltered from the pouring rain. Next, she was there in the shadow of the stairwell, melting into the darkness the moment Nadia's new friends arrived ...

2) Shelves

At 9:30am every Sunday, Cameron went to his cousins, to be handed a bike, each one different from the last. The supermarket had been built on his side of town, but it was still a twenty-minute ride away. Skirting the back of the shiny new estate, Cameron enjoyed the sun, or bowed his head to the rain, until on his right he passed the little road that led to the train station, signalling that the first part of his journey was almost up.

It is surprising how many people find their way to a Supermarket at 10am on a Sunday. Perhaps, thought Cameron, on one particular Sunday in February, it was the busiest time, and a half an hour delay would see him step into a place devoid of people. There was no way to tell. He picked up a basket, and began his familiar route: vegetables to tins, cordial to dairy. And as always, when staring at a seemingly random shelf – it was the tomato sauce this time – *the feeling* came to him. It was a good feeling. Warm. Perhaps it was the abundance: so many bottles, so frequently replenished. Perhaps it was the orderliness: it was not surprising, after all, that this young man took delight in regimentation. Whatever. The feeling was intense, but brief. Moments later, Cameron was walking up the aisle, his mind doing its best to be somewhere else ...

3) Estate Agent

By the time I stood before the property, it seemed like an old friend, its size and position having kept it in my sights the best part of an hour. It was an old Queen Anne house, no doubt rather grand in its day, and for once in no worse repair than the owner's photographs suggested. I was still unsure why I had ditched the car; the tramp over had got me wet and cold. The idea of being inside was not unpleasant. I fished around in my pocket for the key.

4) The Forgotten Gardener

Old Mr Makenzi missed his wife, but his garden had long given him solace. Smart and ordered raised beds stood to attention close to the house, dahlias basked in the sunshine along the freshly stained fence and the manicured lawns gleamed. Mr Makenzi liked order, it helped him remember his thoughts. It was a shame then, that, down at the bottom of the garden, where the hedgerow gave way to dirt track, grew an abundance of weeds. Grasping brambles gave way to insistent nettles and not much else besides. Mr Makenzi knew, or rather, he had forgotten that he knew, that no amount of strimming or weed kill would thwart this invasion. For some unknown reason the soil was just more fertile there.

It is on a fine spring morning, that we join Mr Makenzi as he walks down the path, strimmer in hand to do battle with these green squatters. 'Mrs Makenzi needs to darn these,' Mr Makenzi thinks for the third time today, as he hitches up his trousers, forgetting, as he does so, that the last time Mrs Makenzi did anything, let alone darn a hole, was 12 years ago, just before she followed this same path to the bottom of the garden and disappeared from Frank Makenzi's life altogether.

5) Sleepy Simon

If late-night cleaners at the public swimming baths noticed patterns of damp footprints circling the changing rooms that, of course, was not out of the ordinary. If these imprints wandered into areas that were out of bounds, then that was hardly unexpected, for you know how inquisitive children can be. A low sobbing in the shower cubicle could easily be the wheezing of the generator or a trick of the air conditioning. And, as for the slap of sodden clothes in unlit corners, well, there was no doubt an explanation for that too.

If every evening, children found a tightly rolled towel lodged on the same bench which, when unwrapped, contained a pair of swimming trunks labelled 'Simon', then it was common sense to hand them in to 'lost property'. If those trunks then reappeared in the same position every night, a schoolboy prank was to be suspected.

If a watching parent, high up in the stalls, happened to glimpse something, drifting beneath the swimmers, perhaps a pair of waterlogged pyjamas, they would naturally put the sight down to overwork, rubbing their eyes and cursing that meeting that had kept them late at the office. If, on attending a dinner party, a fellow guest made an offhand remark that they had once glimpsed something similar, the only result would be a slight lull in conversation, as if someone had dimmed the lights. The host would quickly change the subject and talk would return to their children's achievements ...

6) Scouting

We all said that Kate McGregor's story was fine, and some of us said more, but it had fallen flat, as Kate herself knew, and the enterprise might have ended there if it was not for little Clair. We had expected something thrilling, and Kate's ghostly furniture just did not fit the bill. Being the only one amongst us with no connection to Scouting, we would have met a tale of a spooky caretaker, let alone an extra child, with genuine terror, simply to let it be known we could let divisions slide. If chairs and tables appearing in inconvenient locations may suffice as a subject for staffroom conversation, they do not meet the requirements of a ghost story, delivered on a cold night in a large and unfamiliar house.

The youngest of our group had begun to talk to each other, and Peter, the driver, had turned his attention to the fire. It was our first night, and I was already regretting the change of venue almost as much as the Group Scout Leader Gillet's decision to invite Kate. A scout outing does not require the participation of representatives of the local school, however closely the two institutions might be bound.

Gillet himself seemed distracted. No doubt the house had some part to play. Recently plastered and bare of ornament, it had been restored with no thought to comfort, as if its implied guests brought with them a checklist, yet no capacity for repose. Gillet's discomfort was such, however, that I suspected an additional trigger, most likely distaste for the supernatural. The thought was evidently shared by some of the older scouts, and so Tom Reynolds stepped up, disinterestedly asking if anyone had anything else to tell. Rather than taking this for what it was – a knock on the head for the business at large – little Clair Torrence began to blush, averting her eyes for a moment, then looking at us each in turn with a strange kind of desperation. Just as it seemed to me that, despite her discomfort, the girl would speak, Gillett, stirred himself as if some purely internal process had reached its end. 'Now come to think about it,' he murmured, 'I do have something. It is somewhat old. Sorry. Do any of you remember Captain Thrace?'

7) Ghost Story

'It's called Ghost Story in a Box,' said Miss Matthews. 'It's a game. To get us to tell ghost stories.'

'We're going to tell ghost stories,' sung out Kirsty, in a babyish voice.

'Oh, so scary Miss.'

'Scary-boring.'

'There is this bit I've got to read here,' Miss Matthews called out, but then thought better of it. She sighed, and did a little dance with her forearms. 'Then ... Look, it says get into groups of eight'.

Chairs were scraped back as the normal hubbub of the classroom resumed. Elija and Liam were leaning against the largest desk in the room. Elija turned his eye for a moment on its owner ...

'Right,' thought Miss Matthews, 'here we go', and began to read from the card: '*Ghosts have always been with us, and they are as diverse as the cultures in which they have manifested ...*'

Extra information for cards booklet

Animal: Corresponding with Card 1

'Green Tea'

'Green Tea' is a novella, a 'long' short story, and part of a longer work entitled *In a Glass Darkly*. On the face of it, the plot sounds ridiculous: a gentle clergyman drinks too much green tea, is convinced that he is being persecuted by a little monkey, and falls to his death on the stairs. In Le Fanu's hands, this material is transformed into one of the most disconcerting stories ever written. It has been said that this tale is the first really successful psychological ghost story. Le Fanu is interested in the inner life of the story's protagonist as much as the facts of the case.

The story's success can partially be attributed to the narrative frame, in which Dr. Martin Hesselius, a physician specialising in 'metaphysical medicine' writes that he will introduce us to some of his more interesting cases, the five stories that make up *In a Glass Darkly*. The first of these is 'Green Tea'. At first glance, Hesselius is offering a reassuringly rationalist take on events, yet his scientific explanation includes the possibility of demonic possession.

The story focuses on Reverend Jennings, kind, unworldly, and slightly comic. These qualities make his transformation into one who sees himself the victim of vast and blasphemous forces all the more shocking: his linguistic register shifts from mild to Bible-black, finally condemning 'the enormous machinery of hell' that has been set in motion to seal his fate. The sweet-natured Jennings finds himself not in a human world, but one of cold automation and super-heated evil. And the monkey is its symptom ...

It is an extraordinary animal. Malignant, vicious, and uncompromising, it jumps off the page at us as surely as it first rushes towards Jennings: a thing of horrid vitality, vividly drawn, but in the fewest possible strokes ...

The events that follow are disturbing for their brutality, yet subtle, ironic, ambiguous. Is this a tale of madness? Does it document a haunting, or a possession, or a medical condition? Or is this kind of choice between madness and devilry more apparent than real? Might certain medical conditions, that are themselves open to rational description, allow access to the realm of spirits, and all the dangers that lurk there?

Quotation from the text:

I saw again these two dull lamps, again together near the floor; again they disappeared, and again in their old corner I saw them. So, keeping my eyes upon them, I edged quietly up my own side, towards the end at which I still saw these tiny discs of red.

There was very little light in the 'bus. It was nearly dark. I leaned forward to aid my endeavour to discover what these little circles really were. They shifted position a little as I did so. I began now to perceive an outline of something black, and I soon saw, with tolerable distinctness, the outline of a small black monkey, pushing its face forward in mimicry to meet mine; those were its eyes, and I now dimly saw its teeth grinning at me.



Life and Works:

Born in 1814, Sheridan Le Fanu was a Protestant writer in Ireland, at a time when the Catholic population were poor, and were legislated against. Le Fanu stood up for Catholic rights, and was subsequently barred from entering government in London.

His life was touched by tragedy. His wife suffered severe mental health issues, and died very young. He subsequently became a recluse, and was known as 'The Invisible Prince' because of this: it was said that he only wrote his texts after midnight during this period. 'Green Tea' was published in the year of Le Fanu's death.

He wrote historical fiction as well as ghost stories, but is probably most famous for his Sensation Novel *Uncle Silas*, about an evil old man who kidnaps his young relation for profit.

Animals in The Ghost Story

Animals appear in many ghost stories, including Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*, L.G. Moberley's 'Inexplicable', and William Hope Hodgson's wonderfully titled 'The Horse of the Invisible'. The nearest to the monkey in 'Green Tea' is, perhaps, the demonic cat that causes misery in M.R. James' short story 'The Stalls at Barchester Cathedral'.

As Susan Owens describes in *The Ghost: A Cultural History*, haunting in early ghost stories could be very physical, with ghosts as shape changers, trying to gain the attention of the living, usually so those they encountered might make some kind of change in the world that would allow them rest. Often, such spirits would manifest as animals. This notion of the physicality of animal haunting is engaged by Tananarive Due in her short story 'Ghost Summer', and by Obby Robinson in his poem 'Black Dog Ode'.

Connecting 'Green Tea' to other stories:

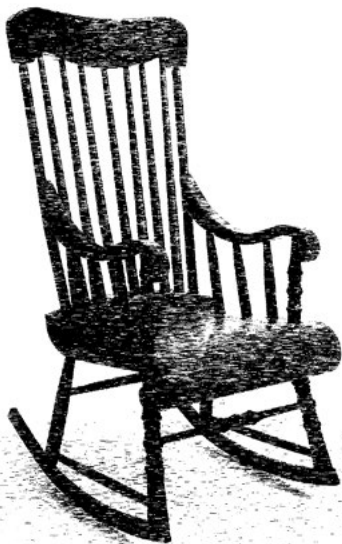
- 1 The framing device. Having a story introduced by a narrator not involved in the subsequent tale allows the events narrated to appear distanced, and thus uncertain and ambiguous. There is a tension in 'Green Tea' between the scientific narrator, and the religious calling of those suffering at the hands of the monkey. Again, this allows a certain amount of distance between the telling and the tale. The sense of a story being told again and again also relates to the idea of haunting. The story persists, just as a ghost persists, condemned to repetition. See also: Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*; the drama version of Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*.
- 2 Religion. Religion is a part of our mundane everyday lives. It also calls upon something else, something greater and other. When the otherness of religion returns to us, the results can be destabilising for our sense of the world. Like Sheridan Le Fanu's 'Green Tea', the work of M.R. James often centres on religious men. These tend to be unworldly, slightly boring, eccentric figures. Their otherwise repetitive, bureaucratic lives often feature a singular obsession, one that opens up a sublime, hidden, and disturbing world of possibilities.

Furniture: Corresponding with Card 2

'Who Knows?'

In summing up his experience, the narrator of Guy de Maupassant's 'Who Knows?' could well be reviewing the story itself: 'the thing is so bizarre, so inexplicable, so incomprehensible, so silly!' Comic and terrifying by turns, de Mauspassant's short work is an account of the circumstances that led the anonymous narrator to be incarcerated in a hospital. Temperamentally disinclined to partake in society, the narrator has spent his life in the company of objects: he is a collector of expensive furniture. One night, returning home, he is shocked to witness every item he owns stampeding from his house, and is only too happy to go along with his servant's summation that he has been robbed. Taking the advice of a doctor, a programme of travel is enacted, but it would seem that the narrator can never escape his furniture, nor whatever malign will direct its actions ...

'Who Knows?' is not a straightforward ghost story, but the uncanny animation of objects, the sense of being haunted by something inescapable, and the suggestion of a malign agency behind incomprehensible events, can situate the work within ghost story traditions. Maupassant often wrote stories with a supernatural twist, but as a devotee of the emerging discipline of psychiatry, he always included the possibility that such phenomenon arose from the troubled mind of his protagonists. 'Who Knows?' will take you only ten minutes or so to read, and it is probably not like anything you have encountered before!



Life and Work

Guy de Maupassant wrote in France during the latter half of the nineteenth century. He was raised by his literature-loving mother, who had gained a rare divorce from his violent father. Maupassant would become friends with the greatest writers working at the time, but, like the protagonist of 'Who Knows?', he had an aversion to company, and loved to travel alone. Although a celebrated realist novelist (see *Bel-Ami*, for example, a work that has been made into a film starring Robert Pattinson), he is arguably most famous for his short stories, many of which include supernatural elements and brilliantly engineered twists. Especially recommended is 'la Horla', a truly intense account of a daemonic haunting that will appeal especially those with an interest in the spooky figure of 'the double'.

Quotation from the text

I saw my writing desk appear, a rare curiosity of the last century, which contained all the letters I had ever received, all the history of my heart, an old history from which I have suffered so much! Besides, there were inside of it a great many cherished photographs.

Suddenly – I no longer had any fear – I threw myself on it, seized it as one would seize a thief, as one would seize a wife about to run away; but it pursued its irresistible course, and despite my efforts and despite my anger, I could not even retard its pace. As I was resisting in desperation that insuperable force, I was thrown to the ground. It then rolled me over, trailed me along the gravel, and the rest of my furniture, which followed it, began to march over me, tramping on my legs and injuring them. When I loosed my hold, other articles had passed over my body, just as a charge of cavalry does over the body of a dismounted soldier.

Furniture in The Ghost Story

One of the most disconcerting ghost stories concerning furniture is mentioned in passing by the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud in 'The Uncanny' (1919), his classic short essay on the supernatural in and out of fiction. In 'Inexplicable' by L.G. Moberly, a couple are delighted by the crocodile-legged table left in their new house, until they begin to hear at night the sound of movement downstairs ...

As we know, many ghost stories are set in haunted houses, and the furniture in those houses is caught up in the haunting. A famous example of this is the rocking chair in the stage version of Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*, but you could also look to Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* and Tananarive Due's *The Good House* for further examples.

It is not, perhaps, a surprise, that furniture should be such a prominent feature in ghost stories. You may well point out that there is nothing particularly frightening about a sofa. True enough. But who hasn't had a jump when entering a familiar room at night to see the coat on the back of a chair? One simple reason for this is that there is something oddly human about furniture. We share our houses with furniture, after all; it is often 'person sized'; when we go out, it seemingly waits within for our return. In our minds, I think, what is inanimate, 'dead' and familiar, can easily become animate, 'alive' and strange.

There is another way to think about furniture as person-like and haunted. The philosopher Karl Marx understood commercial objects as *haunted*. For Marx, there is always more to an object than there initially seems, and it only takes a slight shift for that excess to be experienced as repressed, and thus sinister and lurking. When Marx tries to explain this, he does indeed use the example of a table: a pile of dead wood that, when transformed into a 'commodity', seems to us to have an identity and life of its own. What especially interests Marx is that any sense of the object's independence requires turning one's attention from all the complex human relationships that are necessary to its creation and status.

We might say, therefore, that furniture in ghost stories is haunted not just because it has a certain uncanny presence, but because it hides within itself many stories: what is the history of the forest from which the wood was sourced? What labour was exploited in the creation of the finished item? Who went hungry because of this exploitation? Was this labour located in a place other than the country in which the chair is now located? If so, how might this relate to a history of colonialism? How was the chair transported? And how is the value of the item you see before you premised on the vast yet invisible operations of Capitalism? Watch the chairs in ghost stories: as in all good horror tales, these repressed elements have a habit of returning, as, for example, a crocodile crawling round your floor in the dark ...

Connecting 'Who Knows?' to other ghost stories

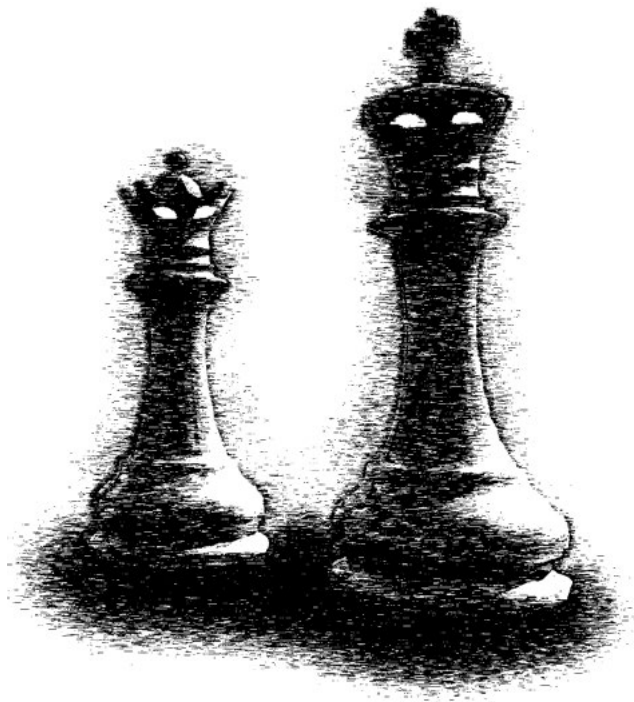
- 1 **Obsession.** Many ghost story protagonist's find themselves becoming obsessed with the mystery with which they are confronted. Some stories, such as Charlotte Perkin's Gillman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', exploit the kind of first person narration featured in 'Who Knows?' to hint at a protagonist whose obsessions are indicative of issues with mental health. See also Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* and 'The Beckoning Fair One' by Oliver Onions.
- 2 **Isolation.** The narrator of 'Who Knows?' is a recluse, and in this he is in good company, as many ghost story protagonists have a desire to be alone. Many of M.R. James's character's are lonely academics, happy to live their lives away from other people. Others such as the eponymous protagonist of 'The Signalman' by Charles Dickens suffer isolation by necessity rather than choice. Finally, certain gregarious characters will become increasingly isolated as they are drawn into the world of spirits, such as the protagonist of 'The Beckoning Fair One'.
- 3 **Hysteric Questioning .** The phrase 'Who Knows?' can be read as a desperate demand or a jaded shrug. Although there is something unanswerable about this question, it would seem it must never-the-less be asked. Such questions result in a text that is open-ended and riven with anxiety. 'The Signalman' is another great example of this unresolved, self-questioning text.

Rules: Corresponding with Card 3

The Ghost Bride

In *The Ghost Bride* by Yangsze Choo, ghosts are not free to haunt in any way they choose, but instead are subject to all manner of restrictions. The afterlife is an uncanny double to the everyday world, and the rule-bound, hierarchical and bureaucratic society of nineteenth century British controlled Malaya, where the story is set, finds repetition in the spirit realm. *The Ghost Bride* begins when a young woman, Li Lan, is persuaded to enter into a traditional 'ghost marriage' in order to protect her family from financial ruin. A rich young man has died, and he will not stop haunting his family until he finds happiness, and his murderer has been brought to justice. Unfortunately for Li Lan, the ghost believes the culprit to be the man she loves, Tian Bai. Accidentally overdosing on a medicine given to her by a medium, Li Lan enters the afterlife, and with the help of the mysterious Er Lang, she negotiates the labyrinthine structures of the realm of the dead to solve the crime and achieve her own happiness.

The Ghost bride is a hugely entertaining and poetic novel, and one that combines many genres: a ghost story; a whodunit; a reworking of myth. It is also a love story of a kind that might be familiar to readers of *Twilight* and *The Hunger Games*, as amidst Lu Lan's adventures, she must choose between two suitors: Li Lan, her childhood love, and Er Lang, her supernatural protector.



Life and works

Yangsze Choo is a fourth-generation Malaysian of Chinese descent. As her father was a diplomat, she travelled all around the world when growing up, never staying in one place for too long. A profile in Harvard University magazine, where she eventually studied, states that: 'At each stop she was the new kid, always the foreigner on the outside looking in'. Her degree gained her a job in management consultancy, but all the time she was writing in secret, drawing especially on the stories and environments of her early childhood. *The Ghost Bride* was her first novel, and was nominated for the Shirley Jackson Award for Novels, and the Carnegie Medal, and in 2020 was made into a TV series by Netflix. Her follow up, *The Night Tiger*, gained even greater success, and also mixes supernatural, whodunit, and romance plots.

Quotation from the text

On our way back to the front door, we passed a servant arranging funeral goods to be burned in one of the courtyards. These were miniature effigies of wire and brightly coloured paper that were burned for the dead to receive in the underworld: paper horses for the dead to ride on, grand paper mansions, servants, food, stacks of hell currency, carriages, and even paper furniture. It was a little unusual to see these goods laid out now, as they were usually only prepared for funerals and Qing Ming, the festival of the dead. The devout could, however, also burn them at any time for the use of their ancestors, for without such offerings, the dead were mere paupers in the afterworld, and without descendants or proper burial, they wandered unceasingly as hungry ghosts and were unable to be reborn. It was only at Qing ming, when general offerings were burned to ward off evil, that these unfortunates received a little sustenance. I had always thought it a frightening idea and looked askance at the funeral goods, despite the gay-coloured paper and beautifully detailed models.

Rules in The Ghost Story

Ghosts often find themselves subject to all kinds of rules and restrictions, and those investigating them can find that success depends on solving puzzles, some logical, others completely counter-intuitive. Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*, with its secret rooms, poetic clues, and never-to-be-revealed mysteries is a great example of this, as is Helen Oyeyemi's *White is for Witching*. Some stories explicitly reference games when appealing to rules, as is this case within J.H. Riddell's 'A Strange Christmas Game'. Certain other stories, such as Charles Dickens' 'The Signal Man' concern the impossibility of decoding a haunting. There is something particularly apt about all of this concern with trying understand the rules that structure the incursion of the spectral realm: the ghost story itself is also built on rules. Indeed, the game you have been playing today is dependent on that fact. A text such as 'The Signalman' is, in part, about the impossibility of correctly interpreting such rules, however. In the best ghost stories, there is something elusive about the structures they rely upon, and the meaning they offer.

The Ghost Bride's vision of a bureaucratic afterlife, echoing tedious everyday structures, is perhaps offered most famously in the horror comedy *Beetlejuice*, where the eponymous ghost is employed by what seems to be a large corporation, displaying all the worst qualities of managerial culture.

If you enjoy supernatural stories which feature strange rules and restrictions, I would recommend straying from the ghost story and reading Diane Wynne Jones' *Fire and Hemlock* or Margaret Mahy's *The Changeover*

Connecting *The Ghost Bride* to ghost stories.

- 1 Love. Mourning can be understood as a process that allows one, however temporally, to keep a loved one alive, either through identification or internalisation. It is not surprising, then, that ghost stories can be love stories, with a beloved haunting those they have left behind. Some of the most famous cinematic ghost stories are built on this premise, including *Ghost* (1990) and, more recently, the haunting and bizarre *A Ghost Story* (2017).
- 2 Solving a crime. Ghost's can be inexplicable or even meaningless, but they often haunt because they want something, and more often than not, this is to right a wrong. Numerous ghost stories are also whodunits. See Susan Hill's *The Little Hand* and Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black* for two examples of this tradition.
- 3 The double. In the novel, a character called Fan takes control of the protagonist's body, an eerie possession that connects to the trope of 'the double' to be read in texts such as Edgar Allan Poe's 'William Wilson'.

Questions: Corresponding with card: 4

'The Signalman'

'The Signalman' by Charles Dickens is a very mysterious nineteenth century ghost story. It is a narrative that introduces many questions, but provides no final answers.

It begins with a narrator coming upon a railway cutting while out walking. Covering his face with his left arm, he calls out "'Halloa! Below there!" The signalman who attends this lonely part of the railway line does not look up, as might be expected, but gazes instead into the nearby railway tunnel. The narrator calls out once more, asking permission to descend. The signalman is reluctant, but agrees.

This signalman, it gradually transpires, believes he is receiving messages from the dead. Twice already, a figure has appeared, the first time saying the same words and striking the same pose as the narrator when above the cutting, the second time, holding both hands to its face.

The communication bell in the signal box has also sounded, but it becomes clear that no one other than the signalman can hear it! After each ghostly appearance, a tragedy occurs. The signalman, stuck in a repetitious, lonely job, has heard a new message. He believes a new tragedy is about to occur. What this is, and why it leads to so many unresolved questions, I will leave you to find out.

Early in the story, we find that the signalman is employed in his machine-like job because he failed college – too much 'wild living'. Now, in an isolated signal box, he is trying, and failing, to educate himself. It seems that his inability to learn a new language, or teach himself algebra, is echoed in his difficulty in interpreting the ghosts that visit him. Whether in his education, or in his experiences with the ghost, the signalman finds that he cannot make sense of the information given to him.

In the tale, both the narrator and the reader find themselves caught up in the signalman's inability to provide answers to the enigma that confronts him. As Andrew Smith, author of *The Ghost Story 1840–1920: A Cultural History*, suggests:

In 'The Signalman' the ghost serves to raise questions about interpretation because the tale is an alternative manifesto for the ghost story, one which invites the narrator and the reader to dwell on the problem of interpreting the ghost which more formulaic tales do not. What the ghost story actually means is therefore subservient to the ability to ask the question about what it is supposed to mean.

Dickens has created a text that forces the reader into an uncomfortable position of uncertainty. Is this really a ghost story? What do the figures mean? Is there a moral or message to the tale? Like the signalman himself, we can never be certain.

Quotation from the text

Resisting the slow touch of a frozen finger tracing out my spine, I showed him how that this figure must be a deception of his sense of sight; and how that figures, originating in disease of the delicate nerves that minister to the functions of the eye, were known to have often troubled patients, some of whom had become conscious of the nature of their affliction, and had even proved it by experiments upon themselves. 'As to an imaginary cry,' said I, 'do but listen for a moment to the wind in this unnatural valley while we speak so low, and to the wild harp it makes of the telegraph wires.'

That was all very well, he returned, after we had sat listening for a while, and he ought to know something of the wind and the wires, – he who so often passed long winter nights there, alone and watching. But he would beg to remark that he had not finished.

I asked his pardon, and he slowly added these words, touching my arm, –

'Within six hours after the Appearance, the memorable accident on this Line happened, and within ten hours the dead and wounded were brought along through the tunnel over the spot where the figure had stood.'

Life and Works

Charles Dickens is arguably the most well known of all the writers mentioned in these notes, and *A Christmas Carol* is surely the most famous ghost story ever written. Experiencing poverty in his early life, Dickens remained shocked by the experiences of the disadvantaged in Victorian Britain. His novels were hugely popular in his lifetime, and he is regarded as one of the greatest writers of all times. Dickens once published an article in his own magazine dismissing ghosts, but they clearly held a fascination for him, and he wrote numerous ghost stories. Dickens experienced two rail disasters, and 'The Signalman' is thought to have been influenced by the Staplehurst rail crash on 9 June 1865, a year prior to the publication of the story, and 5 years to the day before Dickens died.

Anxious Questions in The Ghost Story

The psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan defines hysteria through a question: 'che vuos?', that is, 'what do you want of me?' Although this can be taken as a straightforward demand to know the mystery of another, the question, for Lacan, also turns on the needs of the speaker. If I know what someone else wants of me, then perhaps I can know something about my own wants, or shape my own wants according to their wishes. I ask 'what do you want of me?', because if I know the answer to this, I could begin to work out who I should be. The trouble, for Lacan, is that no one can give us a final answer to this question; the other (here, the 'you') is unknowable, a mere projection of our own need to have an answer to the question of what it is we want.



If this all sounds rather complicated, that is because it is. The essential point here, however, is that asking questions is often motivated by a desire to know about ourselves and our own responses as much as whatever it is the question explicitly addresses. Such questions tend not to have any clear answers.

When ghost stories are full of questions – *What is making that sound? What does this spirit want of me?* – it is not necessarily a sign that there is a hidden mystery waiting to be solved, but, instead, that the protagonist is unsure of themselves, that there is something lacking in them, that they might be, in their own way, as insubstantial as a ghost ...

As Andrew Smith argues, such questioning is also related to the ghost story as a genre. Characters in a ghost story who question the meaning of events can result in a questioning of the ghost story and its conventions. At the

most simple level, this means you can get really great effects from introducing a character who says things like 'but why should I go down to the basement?'; 'but what does the ghost do when it is not the anniversary of its death?' etc.

Connecting 'The Signal-Man' to other stories

4 Technology. In one sense, 'The Signalman' is about the dangers and potential dehumanism of modern technology. The eponymous character is said to work like a machine, and the railway he serves causes the deaths of many people. Technology and ghost stories have a long history. One great way to explore the link would be to research the history of ghost photography. A comparable concern can be read in many contemporary ghost stories, from the haunted televisions of the terrifying film *Ring* (1998), to Kate Pullinger's digital ghost story *Breathe*.

Christmas: Corresponding with card 5

'Smee'

With 'Smee', A.M. Burrage has created one of the most frightening Christmas ghost stories: a group of young people play a Christmas game of hide and seek, but there would seem to be one guest too many ...

'Smee' is perhaps the perfect example of a certain tradition of ghost stories set at Christmas that emerges from the late nineteenth century. It begins with a group of people celebrating together, then choosing to entertain themselves with ghost stories, a signal for events to take a darker turn. Daniel Cheely, in an article on 'Smee', includes this brilliant description of this type of tale:

Let's say, perhaps, that our frolicking friends are feeling 'warmly vulnerable' during a ghost story session at a Christmas Eve gathering. Let's remove the last vestiges of safety and allow winter's symbolic doom to come inside. It's warm. Festive. Have a drink. Merry Christmas! Fires. Games. Ghost stories. And then – real ghosts haunt the house. Frightful! This is what I would call A Christmas Haunted House.

As with many classic ghost stories, 'Smee' also features 'nested' narration: it is a tale within a tale.

It also calls upon a familiar narrative: the story can be read as a reworking of the traditional tale of 'The Mistletoe Bride'.

Quotation From the Text

And *she* was there? The girl who broke –'

'No, no,' Mrs Fernley interrupted. 'He told us he wasn't there when it happened.'

Jackson considered. 'I don't know if she was there or not. I'm afraid she was. I know that there were thirteen of us and there ought only to have been twelve. And I'll swear that I didn't know her name, or I think I should have gone clean off my head when I heard that whisper in the dark. No, you don't catch me playing that game, or any other like it, any more. It spoiled my nerve quite a while, and I can't afford to take long holidays. Besides, it saves a lot of trouble and inconvenience to own up at once to being a coward.'

Tim Vouce, the best of hosts, smiled around at us, and in that smile there was a meaning which is sometimes vulgarly expressed by the slow closing of an eye. 'There's a story coming,' he announced.

Life and works

After the death of his father in 1906, 17 year old Alfred McLelland Burrage began writing popular fiction for boys as a way to support his family. His writing was interrupted by The Great War, in which he fought with distinction, but he returned to commercial writing after peace was declared, and this remained his occupation until his death in 1956. It was only after his death that he became best known for his immaculately crafted ghost stories. The great M.R. James was himself a fan, saying of Burrage's *Some Ghost Stories* that it 'keeps on the right side of the line and, if about half his ghosts are amiable, the rest have their terrors, and no mean ones.' Burrage shares with James an interest in subtle spooks, and a world in which a gentle and convivial atmosphere can all too quickly become anxious and ghostly.

Christmas in the ghost story

The link between ghost stories and Christmas has long debated. As Sally O'Reilly has argued in an essay for *The Conversation*, there seems to be an established tradition of dark or fantastic tales being told during, or set within, winter, including *Beowulf*, *A Winter's Tale*, and *Frankenstein*. The Victorians were responsible for remodelling this legacy specifically in terms of Christmas, and one text in particular has done more than any to cement the link between reindeers and revenants, advocat and apparitions: *A Christmas Carol* by Charles Dickens. This work did much to develop a contemporary understanding of Christmas: if not quite a time of revolution, then at least a period that offers the chance for the world to be remade in a slightly better version of its present shape. It also introduces many ideas that will become more generally familiar in the ghost story: a succession of spooks; the spirit as moral teacher; the link between memory and haunting; the intimate relationship between the ghost and finance.



In the 1970s, the BBC began a series of *Ghost Stories for Christmas*, and these really helped cement the link between ghost stories and Christmas in the British imagination. I cannot recommend these highly enough. Included are a version of Charles Dickens' *The Signalman* and M.R. James' 'Oh, Whistle, and I Will Come to You, My Lad'. The tradition was revived with great success recently by Mark Gaitis.

There are many great examples of Christmas Ghost Stories, however. Try, for example, 'A Strange Christmas Game' by J.H. Riddell, 'The Kit-Bag' by Algernon Blackwood, or Jeanette Winterson's *Dark Christmas*.

It is not hard to understand the connection between Christmas and ghost stories. Imagine each year something like a Russian doll, with each month, especially after summer, revealed to be smaller than the last. After you get a look at 'December', the fear is there may be nothing left inside. No New Year, only darkness at the end of lane. Or outside the window.

Time for a ghost story ...

Connecting 'Smee' to other ghost stories.

- 1 Nested narration. Perhaps the most obvious connecting text is Henry James' 'The Turn of the Screw'. Like James's classic text, 'Smee' is a tale within a tale. The 'nested' narration removes the reader from the event depicted, creating a notion of estrangement and uncertainty. It also, like a haunting itself, suggests a repetitious chain. Once told, the story is to be retold, haunting listener after listener.
- 2 Games. A connection can also be made to the texts discussed linking to card three 'Rules'. The haunting with 'Smee' is tied up to the rules of a game. Although rules and restrictions often apply to haunting, here I think it is crucial that the tale recounts a game gone bad. Like 'A Strange Christmas Game' by J.H. Riddell, Burrage's text keeps to the Christmas Ghost Story tradition of introducing a merry activity that soon takes on a sinister turn. For another great ghost story that turns on the idea of a seductive and strange game, see E.F. Benson's 'Pirates'.

Letter: corresponding with card 6

'The Turn of the Screw'

'The Turn of the Screw' by Henry James is, perhaps, the most disturbing and endlessly fascinating ghost story. Certainly, no other example of the genre has resulted in so much critical commentary. The story concerns a governess looking after two children in her first posting. She has been instructed to deal with all issues herself, a situation that becomes increasingly difficult when she comes to believe her two charges are being haunted by the spirits of two corrupt servants. Is this really the case, or is the governess suffering from mental ill health? James never lets us decide with confidence.

Central to the ambiguity of the story is the 'nested' or 'boxed' nature of its narration. An initial narrator tells of Christmas party, at which he heard a number of ghost stories. In response to these, another guest asks his servant to bring him a letter he had kept locked away, which he then reads to the assembled crowd. This letter is that written by the governess, describing the terrible events she experienced. Included in this letter, in addition to the voices of those she meets, is a letter that itself contains a further letter! It is a tale within a tale within a tale ...

Quotation from the text

I can see Douglas there before the fire, to which he had got up to present his back, looking down at his interlocutor with his hands in his pockets. 'Nobody but me, till now, has ever heard. It's quite too horrible.' This, naturally, was declared by several voices to give the thing the utmost price, and our friend, with quiet art, prepared his triumph by turning his eyes over the rest of us and going on: 'It's beyond everything. Nothing at all that I know touches it.'

'For sheer terror?' I remember asking.

He seemed to say it was not so simple as that; to be really at a loss how to qualify it. He passed his hand over his eyes, made a little wincing grimace. 'For dreadful – dreadfulness!'

'Oh, how delicious!' cried one of the women.

He took no notice of her; he looked at me, but as if, instead of me, he saw what he spoke of. 'For general uncanny ugliness and horror and pain.'

'Well then,' I said, 'just sit right down and begin.'

He turned round to the fire, gave a kick to a log, watched it an instant. Then as he faced us again: 'I can't begin. I shall have to send to town.' There was a unanimous groan at this, and much reproach; after which, in his preoccupied way, he explained. 'The story's written. It's in a locked drawer – it has not been out for years. I could write to my man and enclose the key; he could send down the packet as he finds it.' It was to me in particular that he appeared to propound this – appeared almost to appeal for aid not to hesitate. He had broken a thickness of ice, the formation of many a winter; had had his reasons for a long silence. The others resented postponement, but it was just his scruples that charmed me. I adjured him to write by the first post and to agree with us for an – early hearing; then I asked him if the experience in question had been his own. To this his answer was prompt. 'Oh, thank God, no!'

'And is the record yours? You took the thing down?'

'Nothing but the impression. I took that *here*' – he tapped his heart. 'I've never lost it.'

'Then your manuscript –?'

'Is in old, faded ink, and in the most beautiful hand.' He hung fire again. 'A woman's. She has been dead these twenty years. She sent me the pages in question before she died.'

Life and Works

Henry James, known as 'The Master', was a supreme literary craftsman, writing perfect, poised prose that allows for multiple interpretations, and often 'traps' its readers in ironic or uncomfortable interpretations. He is often understood to be a key writer in the shift from broadly realist novels to modernist forms: his characters find themselves in complex social situations, entertaining contradictory feelings and thoughts, and James aims to convey the subjective experience of this in all its richness. Our existence is layered and nuanced, James suggests, and we should resist reducing this into something 'vulgar'. The result is a prose style that celebrates ambiguity.

James was born in New York in 1843, but after 1870, lived mostly in England, with occasional stays in Paris and Italy. He met with the most successful writers in both England and France, and was celebrated during his lifetime for his writing, which included over 20 novels. One of the best ways to get into his work is through his short stories, however. Try 'The Figure in the Carpet', a funny, profound, and infuriating shaggy-dog story about art, interpretation, and secrets.

Letters in The Ghost Story

Gothic stories are often built around letters. Such an 'epistolary' structure allows the events to be uncertain and ambiguous: rather than one authoritative narrator, we have numerous, subjective, competing voices. It distances the reader from events, and asks them to use their imagination to fill in the gaps in the story telling.

Letters are also, in their own way, a little like ghosts. Through them, we can read the words of the dead, and, perhaps, imagine that we can hear their voices. They are little monuments, fragments left by people in the past that persist after their death.

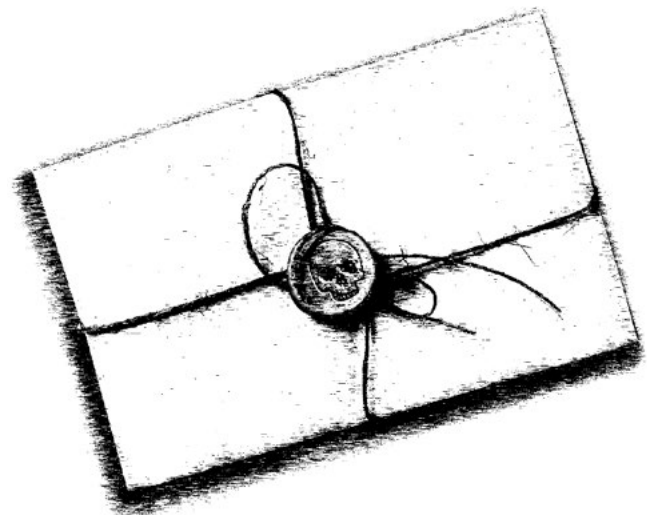
As 'The Turn of the Screw' demonstrates, letters can also be linked to ghosts through repetition: the letter in James's novella is repeatedly forwarded, the tale passed on to new audiences, haunting whoever comes to hear it. The story is its retelling, just as the ghost is its persistence, its repeated appearance. The story and the ghost are kind of empty iterations, in other words: there is nothing to them outside their repetition. As Shoshona Felman argues in her extended, demanding essay 'Turning the Screw of Interpretation', arguably the greatest work of criticism on the ghost story, this is particularly apt: 'the chain of narrative voices which transmits *The Turn of the Screw* is also, at the same time, a chain of readings [...]'. Because its central narrative involves multiple voices reading previous texts, when we begin to read the text of 'The Turn of the Screw', we find ourselves not comfortably outside the narrative, but implicated within it, perpetuating its structure. As readers, we echo the characters in the book: reading a text, trying to make sense of it, but, finally through this being trapped in its logic. As we try to make something of the letters in 'The Turn of the Screw', there is an uncanny sense in which *they are making something of us*.

For a brilliant recent take on this theme, see the journal entries in Michelle Paver's *Dark Matter*, and intense novel of love, isolation, and the horrors of the past.

As suggested on the card, you could easily substitute the letter for some other form of correspondence and still keep within this convention: a set of Tweets, or a phone message would work just as well.

Connecting 'The Turn of the Screw' to other stories.

- 1 Christmas. It is often forgotten that James has produced a Christmas ghost story. Indeed, it is, perhaps, the story that most establishes the contemporary conventions of the festive haunting: a group of revellers gather by a fire and entertain themselves with ghost stories, yet one such tale begins to produce an unexpected and unlooked for effect ...
- 2 Children. The critic Sally Shuttleworth argues that to understand *The Turn of the Screw*, one must be aware of developments within Victorian psychology that the work can be read to question. During the nineteenth century, the child became the focus of scientific study as never before. In James' tale, while the child does indeed become the focus of a rigorous, questioning gaze, it resists easy understanding. The tragedy unfolds through a desire to finally understand and make entirely explicable the child. Ghost stories often feature children. Perhaps this is, in part, because childhood innocence can so easily shift to otherness: the seeming unmarked purity of the child can become a monstrous or meaningless blankness. There is something uncanny about children, in other words: their threat lies in their being the least threatening of people. Spooky children often feature in the works of Susan Hill, for example, including *The Woman in Black* and *The Little Hand*, while in Tananarive Due's 'Ghost Summer' and H.R. Wakefield's 'The Red Lodge' children have an ability to make contact with spirits.



Hidden Room: Corresponding with card 7

White Is For Witching

In Helen Oyeyemi's recent novel, young adult twins return with their father to live in a large sea-side house on the South Coast of England, now converted into a hotel. Their mother died while working in Haiti, and the house was hers, inherited from a line of women tormented by strange powers. Miranda, the slightly younger female twin, shares other traits with some of her forebears, including pica, a medical condition that compels her to eat non-edible food: chalk; plastic.

Told through multiple narrators, steeped in dread, and heavy with the weight of recent history, *White is for Witching* is a work of haunting ambiguity. Thus, although the reader is all too aware that a malign force is closing in on Miranda, its nature is never made it clear. It might be: the spirit of her great grandmother; a monster from Nigerian folklore; the racism and hatred that has long marked the place to which she has returned; the house itself, grown sentient; unsettled family dynamics; Miranda's own psychological impulses. Likewise, in Miranda, the reader is offered a character who defies easy judgment: a victim of the house, or its destructive accomplice? And what is this young girl's fate? The question with which the narrative begins is never finally resolved: *where is Miranda?*

White is for Witching takes many familiar Ghost Story tropes, and from them creates something startling and original. Crucially, it seems to me, this is a novel about legacy, both cultural and familial. Are we terrorised by the structures into which we are born, or is it our lot to perpetuate these chiefly to the detriment of others? Does domestic life offer privilege and power, for example, or does it instead entrap and terrorise those to whom it is gifted? Is racism a creed emboldening to those asked to perpetuate it, or does it bring down all who come under its sway (especially if they are women)?

Life and Works

Helen Oyeyemi's novels often place supernatural or fantasy narratives in contemporary settings, referencing literary and folklore traditions, yet subverting expectations. She wrote her first novel, *The Icarus Girl*, while studying for her A Levels. Like *White is for Witching*, it is an innovative ghost story, this time centred on the theme of the double. Like the protagonist of *White is for Witching*, Oyeyemi studied at Cambridge

University. Her most recent novel, *Gingerbread*, was published in 2019. She featured in the BBC documentary *Being the The Brontës*.

Quotation from the text

Then she opened Suryaz and Deme's letter. It was written in a round and extra-neat hand that was unmarred by the splotches the fountain-pen nib had made in several places.

The letter read:

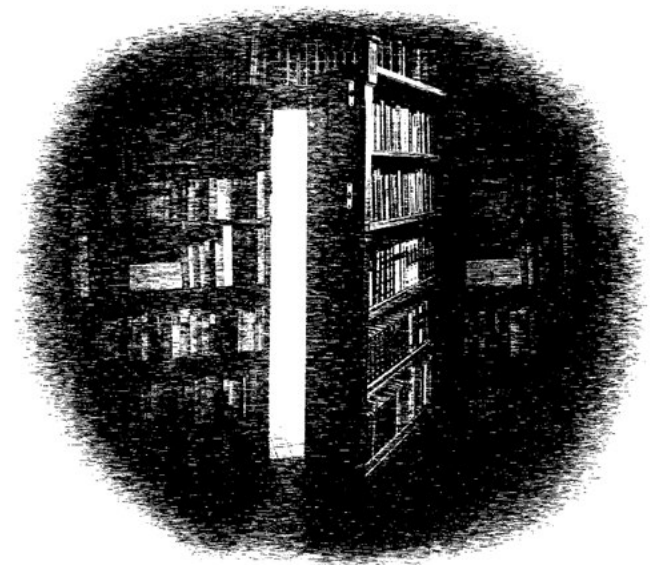
'This house is bigger than you know! There are extra floors, with lots of people on them. They are looking people.

They look at you, and they never move. We do not like them. We do not like this house, and we are glad to be going away.

This is the end of our letter.

Yours sincerely,

Deme and Suryaz Kosarzadeh.'



Hidden Rooms in The Ghost Story

The house in *White for Witching*, although attractive, is large and was not designed for its present purpose as a hotel. There are parts of it – the lift, for example – that remain out of place, liminal spaces. Natural laws do not seem to apply as they should there: it is a place of apples in winter. It is also a place of hidden spaces. Indeed, there is a whole extra floor that is sometimes accessible within its impossible geometry. Such non-places are a familiar part of ghost literature.

Sometimes, these are mundane; physical environments that are off-limits for some reason or another, such as the secret room in Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*. The recent television adaptation of *The Haunting of Hill House* introduces something stranger: a room that is at the heart of the house, while also not a part of it; impossible to enter, yet familiar to all. A certain tradition of psychoanalytic scholarship is very interested in such rooms, as it claims that we are all, like these houses, centred round *nothing*.

Thinking about these strange structures can, therefore, help such critics to understand something about the experience of people. Here is the psychoanalytic critic Joan Copjec, writing on such a room in Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca*:

This room marks simultaneously a surplus *and* a deficit, an outside *and* an inside, a particular room within the house *and* the house as a whole [...] The barred room is [...] the most horrible part of the house – not because it is a distillation of all its horrifying features but because it is without feature, the point at which the house negates itself.

One of the most celebrated evocations of the hidden room in recent literature can be read in the experimental novel *House of Leaves* by Mark Z. Danielewski.

Connecting *White is For Witching* to other stories.

- 1 Demons.** A number of ghost stories included in this resource can double as tales of demonic incursion or possession. The haunting in 'Green Tea', for example, is understood by its central character specifically to be the work of Hell. Tananarive Vue's *The Good House*, with its horrifying 'Baka', is another great example of this, as is Babak Anvari's brilliant feminist supernatural film *Under the Shadow*.
- 2 Sentient house.** There is also a connection to be made to other texts featuring a haunted house, where the building is a character in itself: sentient; desiring; malevolent. The most celebrated house of this kind is perhaps Shirley Jackson's *Hill House*.
- 3 Multiple narrators.** Many ghost stories feature a 'chain' of narrators, with the story containing multiple instances of its own telling. One effect of this is that of a story haunting each narrator as it is passed on. Another is the creation of uncertainty: there is not one authoritative speaker, but multiple, and often inconsistent, voices. It is this structure that Oyeyemi develops and subverts: in *White is For Witching*, the story is divided between the protagonist's brother, her girlfriend, and the house itself. None of their takes on what has happened are quite to be trusted, and the reader must actively attempt to forge a narrative from their incomplete and subjective testimonies.

Sensitive: Corresponding with card 8

Beyond Black

In *Beyond Black*, Hilary Mantel has decided to set her tale of history and haunting not in a glamorous past of village graveyards and country estates, but in the squalid, downtrodden present of Southern England. Her novel rejects the ethereal spectres that float through Victorian literature, introducing instead visceral hauntings in a world of physical pain, aesthetic disgust, and ethical compromise.

Alison Harte is a medium, having inherited a genuine, yet unwanted, gift for having the dead contact her. She has little control over the process: Alison can try to block out the ghosts, but this makes her sick. They must be heard, but when she listens, she is as likely to hear lies, irrelevance, and abuse, as positive messages for the living.

Most insistent and disturbing of all the deceased is her 'spirit guide' Morris, who, when alive, was an intolerant, abusive, and generally disgusting man. As Alison states, most mediums 'have spirit guides with a bit more about them – dignified impassive medicine men or ancient Persian sages – why does she have to have a grizzled grinning apparition in a book-maker's check jacket, and suede shoes with bald toecaps.' As Alison begins to record her experiences with Colette, her cynical and dismissive assistant, it is clear that she is also moving towards a confrontation with Morris, and 'the men', a gang of spirits that follow in his wake. 'The men', we begin to understand, once tormented Alison in real life, and are in some way the cause of her present physical and psychological distress ...

Life and work

Dame Hilary Mantel is one of the UK's most celebrated contemporary novelists. Her novel *Wolf Hall* was turned into a multi-award winning BBC drama series. The novel is the first in Mantel's trilogy on Thomas Cromwell. Mantel received the Booker prize for *Wolf Hall*, and secured it again with *Bring up the Bodies*, the second book in the Cromwell trilogy. She was the first woman to be awarded the prize twice.

Mantel has written 12 novels. Her work is often set in real historical settings, as is noted for the richness of its research, but, as can be seen in *Beyond Black*, she is not tied to one particular genre of fiction. A number of her stories have provoked controversy, and she has been both questioned and praised for her criticism of The Royal Family and Margaret Thatcher.

Mantel was the patron of the Endometriosis SHE Trust, and for many years her endometriosis condition went undiagnosed. Like the protagonist on *Beyond Black*, she has experience of dealing with prolonged physical and mental ill health.

Quotation from the text

She was wearing her wedding dress, and it hung on her now; she was gaunt, and it looked crumpled and worn ... She had pinned some of her press cuttings to her skirts; they lifted, in some other-worldly breeze, and flapped. She consulted them, lifting her skirts and peering; but, in Alison's opinion, her eyes seemed to cross.

'Give my love to my boys,' Diana said. 'My boys, I'm sure you know who I mean.'

Al wouldn't prompt her: you must never, in that fashion, give way to the dead. They will tease you and urge you, they will suggest and flatter; you mustn't take their bait. If they want to speak, let them speak for themselves.

Diana stamped her foot. 'You do know their names,' she accused. 'You oiky little greasepot, you're just being hideous. Oh, [...] Whatever are they called?'

Sensitives in The Ghost Story

In *Beyond Black*, the dead are a mixed bunch: the famous and the forgotten; the purposeful and the confused; the benign and the malign. Some of the spirits are contacting Alison specifically, because there is business in the past involving her that has yet to be resolved. Others, however, talk to her by chance.

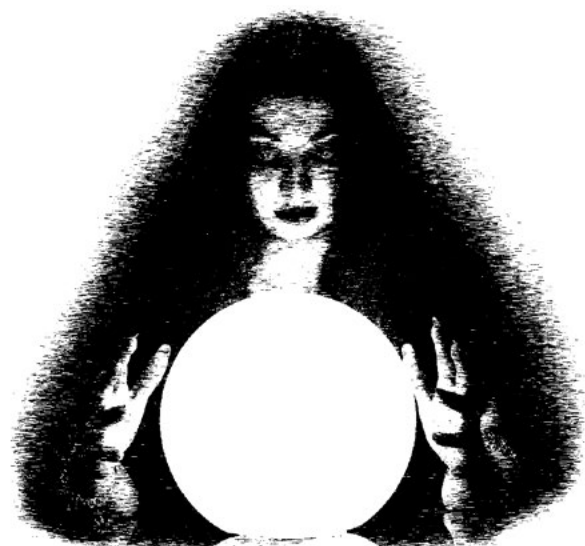
Some ghost stories involve spooks who appear to everyone equally; others have revenants who contact a particular individual, either because they are family members, or to warn them of a singular fate.

A medium or sensitive in a ghost story enables a character to know what others do not (because, for example, she can hear what others cannot hear), while not having any privileged idea of the meaning of her knowledge (because the message is not necessarily for her). This is good news for a ghost story writer: the medium can move the narrative forward even as they remain as clueless as the reader, allowing the writer to withhold crucial information.

Sensitives in ghost stories are often outsider figures within narratives: think of Old Wong in *The Ghost Bride*, or Whoopie Goldberg in the film *Ghost*. Why do you think this might be? This is a convention that it might be worthwhile subverting. Outsider sensitives can also be comic characters. They are generally helpers, rather than, say, rivals.

Goldberg's character in *Ghost* is also an example of the trope of a sensitive who is originally, or sometimes works as, a fake medium. A further example of this can be seen in the character Rose Dooley from the recent film *Extra Ordinary*. Although a comedy, this film shares much in common with *Beyond Black*, and comparing the two would be a great exercise in understanding how comparable ideas can result in very different texts.

Probably the two most celebrated sensitives within the ghost story are Eleanor from Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, and Danny Torrance from Stephen King's *The Shining*.



Connecting *Beyond Black* to Other Stories

1 Hell. In the novel, *The Devil* may well make a brief appearance as 'Nick', the enigmatic leader of 'the men'. Mantel has created a narrative that positively reeks of evil: the world Alison inhabits is one of violence, abuse, and corruption. It is an evil that is linked to a particularly Christian framework. In many ghost stories, the Christian afterlife, if mentioned at all, is centred on purgatory, rather than Hell. There are complex historical reasons for this, as argued famously by Stephen Greenblatt in *Hamlet in Purgatory*: from the C16th, the rise of the English ghost can be understood as an expression of a Catholic world view that has been recently and violently repressed. Put simply, although the notion of purgatory (the boring realm between life and life eternal) had been removed from an official conception of the world, it lingered on in the idea of the ghost, doomed to wander until penance had been paid. The spooky nature of the ghost has come to be bound to this notion of fruitless repetition. The ghost, in the Victorian imagination, is cold, iterated, and insubstantial, rather than hot, focused, and physical. It comes from the past, not from pandemonium. That said, there are ghost stories that share in Mantel's sense of fire and brimstone, most notably, perhaps, the monkey from Sheridan le Fanu's 'Green Tea'.

2 The squalid contemporary. It is no surprise that ghost's are associated with the past. They help us mourn what is lost. An argument has been made, for example, that ghostly trains only fully enter the popular British imagination with the decline of the railways. Although the characters in *Beyond Black* are haunted by past crimes, the setting is not one of elegant decline, but of an unpleasant present: spiritualist meetings held in scout huts; grubby new age conventions; sordid hotels; already run-down satellite towns. Shaking off the 'heritage' aspect of the ghost story is one way to breathe new life into it. In this regard, one could compare *Beyond Black* to Oliver Onion's 'The Beckoning Fair One', or a film such as *Dark Water* directed by Hideo Nakata.



Money: Corresponding with card 9

'The Ghost of the Bank of England'

A young doctor works in Jamaica for an eccentric, rich man who is afraid of dying. Returning to England, he receives a cheque for £1,000, and deposits it in The Bank of England. The cashier who takes the cheque looks rather odd. Subsequently, the young doctor is arrested, as the cheque he has deposited is dated the 12th Sept, and, it is discovered, his rich patron died on the 11th. All is resolved, as it is revealed that the cheque was post-dated, but the experience continues to disturb the doctor: during the course of the story, a neighbour (conveniently!) explains that he once worked for the bank, and tells of a cashier who conspired to get an innocent fellow worker in trouble for a financial crime. This conspiring cashier hoped the scandal would help him to get close to the innocent man's sister, with whom he was in love.

The plan went awry, and the innocent man died in prison. The cashier haunts the bank after his death, condemning any who attempt to deposit the cheque of a dead man.

This is not, perhaps, a great ghost story: the narrative manages to be both slight and overly complicated. It is strangely over-determined, however. More is going on here than first meets the eye, and – so to speak – it would be difficult to balance its books. What, for example, are we to make of the fact that the young doctor returns to his wife from Jamaica looking like 'a ghost'? And what precisely is the significance of the wronged employee's sister's daily visits to The Bank of England subsequent to his death? The most one can say, perhaps, is that everyone is touched by the world of finance in this short work, and all in their own way seem as ghostly as the ghost.

Life and works

This is an anonymous story, published in 1869. The ghost story appeared often in popular publications. These were commercial texts, written quickly for a mass market. They were not intended to be lasting objects of interest and can, in their own way, be as mysterious and insubstantial as the ghosts they describe.

Quotation from the text

I told them about the man's strange, old clothes, his thin, white face and the red scar in the shape of a letter Y. 'He didn't look alive,' I said, 'he looked more like a dead man.'

'That's because he was dead,' said Mr Deacon. 'You saw the ghost of Isaac Ayscough. Do you remember the story I told you that day? Do you know that his ghost always comes when the cheque of a dead man is cashed? Ask any banker,' he said, turning to the detective. 'Ask anyone at the Bank of England or any bank in the country. They all know the story of the ghost in the Bank of England.'

The police asked hundreds of questions that day and they heard the same story from everyone in the bank. Finally, they had to believe it and, in the evening, I was a free man.

Money in The Ghost Story

For the nineteenth century philosopher Karl Marx, money is odd. Especially in its paper form, money is abstract. It has no intrinsic worth nor essence; it is devoid of life: you cannot eat bank notes, or make a comfortable dwelling from them. Despite this, money can transform the world, and thus it has a strange vitality; it can seem oddly full of life. For Marx, money can also introduce disconcerting reversals, as the pursuit of money alienates us from our genuine desires, making our feelings seem unimportant, while it promotes a desire for things that are worthless: 'substances often become shadowy, and shadows substantial'. Instead of making ourselves happy, we make money; instead of using money to achieve happiness, money uses us to make more money.

For these reasons, there is something spectral and spooky about money, Marx argues. Like a ghost, it is lifeless yet animated, and indeed, it generally collapses the kind of oppositions required to separate the living from the dead.

It reduces us also to something ghost-like: automated spectres, going about the business of reproducing wealth, despite such activity distancing us from anything that could give our lives meaning.

We become automaton, like the ghost endlessly tracing its little circuit through walls and yew-lined ways. We are not in charge, but are instead compelled by something beyond us. It is a flat, repetitious, meaningless existence.

It has been widely argued that the rise of the ghost story in the nineteenth century is tied to this understanding of the ghostliness of economic modern living (see Andrew Smith, *The Ghost Story 1840–1920*; Peter Bose, *Ghosts: Psychoanalysis, Deconstruction, History*). Here we might think especially about Dickens's 'The Signal Man', but Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, Oliver Onions' 'The Beckoning Fair One', M.R. James's *The Treasure of Abbot Thomas*, Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, or Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* can all be read in economic terms.

The links between ghost stories and money is not always about alienation in this sense, however. As early as 1716, with Joseph Addison's *The Drummer, or the Haunted House*, we have a narrative concerning a hotel owner keen to promote the ghosts in his establishment, as he realises he can make money from them. Money also is vital to narratives concerning inheritance, and thus the influence of the past upon the present.

Connecting 'The Ghost of the Bank of England' to other stories.

1 Colonialism. The story sets up a connection between money, and Colonial adventure, although the connection is oblique. We do not know why the ship on which the young doctor meets the rich man is travelling to Jamaica, or what connection the rich man has to the country. What is clear is the subtle relationship between Jamaica and The Bank of England, the transactions that see money circulate internationally. The relationship between ghosts and colonialism is one that can be read in many ghost stories. Sometimes the relationship is explicit, as in Rudyard Kipling's 'The Strange Ride of Morrowbie Jukes' or John Lang's 'The Ghost upon the Rail'. Elsewhere, as in 'Inexplicable', the haunting effects of Colonialism are more subtle. There, the text must be read carefully if we are to draw out the suggestion of a disruptive return to the home country of the pain it must inflict in those far beyond its borders.

Children: Corresponding with card 10

'Ghost Summer'

A young boy and his sister are taken to visit their grandparents in the country. They are excited not only because of the food and the company, but because in the woods around this house, children can see ghosts. Some adults dismiss this, others, who experienced the phenomena themselves when young, know only too well its reality. Things are different this year: the boy's parents are having problems with their marriage, and it looks like they may end up leaving America to stay with their mum in Ghana. And the ghosts ... well, the ghosts seem more active than ever.

What starts as a gentle, acutely observed family drama, ends with nail-biting action. The children are making a ghost hunting documentary. They feel cold water in their grandparents lounge. They see spectral children. Excited, they get their father involved. And pretty soon, all three are being chased through the woods by a great dog, alongside the spirits of three young black brothers who disappeared from the town many years before.

Vue really ramps up the pressure. This is a complete thrill ride of a story! It also acts as a profound, disturbing, yet hopeful meditation on race and history in America.

Life and Works

Tananarive Due was born in Florida, to parents both active in the Civil Rights movement. She studied literature at university, and worked as a journalist, before embarking on a writing career. Her stories are often concerned with the supernatural. Her novels *The Good House* and *The Between* are especially recommended, as, while not ghost stories, they touch on many aspects familiar to the genre. Due features in the documentary *Horror Noire: A History of Black Horror*, and teaches a celebrated course in Black Horror at The University of California, Los Angeles which focuses on Jordan Peele's film *Get Out*. Due notes that 'Ghost Summer' was based on a real archaeological dig in which she and her family were involved. The story received multiple awards, including the British Fantasy Award in 2016.

Quotation from the text

Davie felt a cramp from sitting in the same position with his hip bone against the hard floor, so he shifted until he was sitting criss-cross applesauce. When he did, he felt something wet seep into the seat of his pyjama pants. Wet and cold.

He touched his pyjama pants, and they were soaked. His hand splashed into a shallow puddle of cold liquid. 'Hey,' he said, nudging Neema. 'You spilled your water.'

Neema blinked her eyes open, alert, and held up her half-empty water bottle, tightly capped. The light through the window allowed him to see her in the moonlight. 'Not-uh,' she said. 'The top's on.'

But before Neema had said a word, Davie realized the water couldn't have come from Neema's water bottle. No way had Neema's water bottle been this cold. And there was too much. Water was all around them. 'Crap-o-la!,' Davie whispered, and rushed off to take off his pyjama top. He started wiping the floor as fast as he could, because Grandma would have a serious meltdown if her floor got spotted with water. Who else would she blame but him?

Davie's pyjama top got soaked through as soon as it touched the floor. Davie saw a shimmering sheen of water across the entire living room, from the foyer all the way to the kitchen, toward the back hall. *The floor was completely covered in water.*

A scent had been faint at first, but now he realized it filled up the entire room. The living room smelled like the water in the fish-tank where his third grade teacher, Miss Richmond, kept the class' frogs and turtles. Sour. Like old, rotting plants and leaves.

Children in The Ghost Story

In the opening to Henry James' 'The Turn of the Screw', a group of Christmas revellers begin telling each other ghost stories:

'I quite agree – in regard to Griffin's ghost, or whatever it was – that its appearing first to the little boy, at so tender an age, adds a particular touch. But it's not the first occurrence of its charming kind that I know to have involved a child. If the child gives the effect another turn of the screw, what do you say to two children –?'

'We say, of course,' somebody exclaimed, 'that they give two turns! Also that we want to hear about them.'

What is it about children that connects them to the ghost story? Well, on the one hand they are familiar (we were all kids at one time, after all), yet they are also other: strange, unfamiliar. When we were young children, we were not quite ourselves, not quite who we have grown up to be. As we discuss at length in the entry on 'doubles', the 'uncanny' is the disturbing sensation of something being familiar and unfamiliar at the same time. Children, like ghosts, are uncanny.

The rise of the ghost story in the nineteenth century also coincides with a rising fascination with childhood. New scientific approaches to psychology had children as their focus. But the more we looked at children, and the more we knew, the less we seemed to understand. Again, there is something mysterious and other about children.

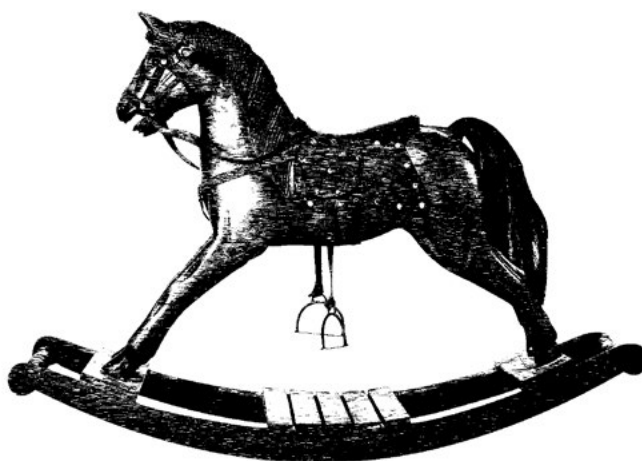
Children are, of course, also often seen as innocent, and innocence, uncannily, can conjure up its opposite. If the monstrous does not make an appearance, yet one knows that it is there, then whatever innocence one encounters is disturbing: it seems to cover something too hideous to be shown.

One of the most haunting ghost stories to feature children is E.F. Benson's 'Pirates'. A middle-aged man with a heart condition takes up residence in his long abandoned family home. There, as the youngest child of five, he also felt abandoned as his siblings grew up, a feeling that has stayed with him through life. On his return, however, the sounds and scents associated with his lost content are almost tangible ...

In 'Ghost Summer', children have a unique insight because the ghosts in the town died as children. Children see what adults cannot see. They can make connections to the past that are not available to their parents.

Connecting 'Ghost Summer' to other Stories

- 1 Documenting. The dad in 'Ghost Summer' is a documentary film maker, and his son also experiments with the form, both because of a natural interest, and, perhaps, as a way to gain recognition from a man he clearly loves. Vue is engaging what might seem a contemporary trend within ghost story narratives: the subgenre of 'found footage' horror. Vue is also playing with an older tradition here, as ghost stories are often concerned with the notion of documenting, recording, and creating evidence. Here we might turn, for example, to Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* or the television film *The Stone Tape*.
- 2 Trauma. Some events are so horrific, that, at the time they are experienced, they defy understanding. They can be 'understood' only in terms of their after-effects. Such effects are inevitably ongoing. 'Ghost Summer' is about the traumatic legacy of one event in America's past, and how it brings into focus a history of racism, and how also it impacts upon the racism in contemporary life. Probably the most celebrated ghost story to engage such political trauma is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, which engages the ongoing effects of slavery.



Stairs: Corresponding with card 11

The Haunting of Hill House

The *Haunting of Hill House* is cool. I can think of no other word that really does the novel justice. This is partly because of Shirley Jackson's prose style: knowing and ironic, pared down when necessary, but also possessed of a poetry that eclipses anything else in the genre for intensity and confidence. The characters also seem really contemporary, despite being written 70 years ago: Eleanor, risking everything for what is, for her alone, the most wonderful of times; sophisticated Theodora, who may not be the liberatory figure she first appears; handsome Luke, a positive force, yet an entitled thief and liar also; Dr Montague, whose radical academic mission is an expression of the banal careerism of one who understands very little. Above all, the novel has a punky, iconoclastic nastiness, made all the more devastating through its empathy. It is not that the novel is blind to the intricacies and warmth of human desires, but that it is all too aware of what happens when such desires come up against something as inhumane and implacable as Hill House.

Eleanor Vance is timid and brow beaten, after spending her life looking after her sick mother. She is also a psychic. She signs up for an experiment Dr. Montague is conducting into the ghostly phenomena active at a place called 'Hill House'. Stealing a car from her overbearing sister, she arrives to join the three other people involved in the experiment. The building, heavy with a sense of evil from the first, seems to grow steadily more active. Or is it merely Eleanor, slipping steadily deeper into mental distress? Friendships are made and broken, secrets revealed, and the opportunity for a lasting escape finally presents itself...

Quotation from the text:

No live organism can continue for long to exist sanely under conditions of absolute reality; even larks and katydids are supposed, by some, to dream. Hill House, not sane, stood by itself against its hills, holding darkness within; it had stood so for eighty years and might stand for eighty more. Within, walls continued upright, bricks met neatly, floors were firm, and doors were sensibly shut; silence lay steadily against the wood and stone of Hill House, and whatever walked there, walked alone.

Life and Work

Shirley Jackson is one of America's greatest writers of Gothic and supernatural fiction. She has a unique style and focus that makes her work instantly recognisable. Born in California, she came to prominence in 1949, aged 33, with the publication of her unforgettable short story 'The Lottery'. I won't give anything away about this – just please give it a read!

Jackson suffered with ill health for most of her life, and her freedom of movement was curtailed by agoraphobia, made worse by the amphetamines and barbiturates she had been prescribed.

A house-bound existence is central to her novel *We Have Always Lived in the Castle*. This work really is like nothing else: hilarious; disturbing, poetic, haunting, feminist. It has influenced just about every significant horror and fantasy writer working today. Why not join them?

Stairs in The Ghost Story

Jackson's narrative reaches a climax with the ascent of a rickety set of iron stairs that are a prominent feature of the house, and have been looming over the action from the start. During her stay, Eleanor has been haunted by pleas for help, and she clearly hears her mother's voice in the night, calling for her. She follows the sound, and they lead her to the stairs. Will her story end here? Or is there another, final, cruel twist waiting?

Stairs are liminal spaces. That is, they are not in one place or another, but are a kind of border between. Like ghosts themselves, they are suspended between places.

Stairs allow a range of spooky effects. Because they are not really places to hang out, the sense of a lingering presence on them can be disturbing: nothing should dwell upon a stair. They also often lead to a space that cannot be seen. A child's toy falling slowly down the stairs points to a presence where one thought there was an absence only, a presence yet unknown and out of reach.

Stairs feature in many ghost stories, and often are imbued with something like sentience, and many characters meet their fates upon them. Take, for example, the stairs in Oliver Onions' 'The Beckoning Fair One' that seems to act out the violent impulses of a haunted house, or those in M R James' 'The Stalls of Barchester Cathedral', made from cursed wood.

Connecting *The Haunting of Hill House* to other stories

1 Hauntings and Madness. Shirley Jackson leaves open the question of what exactly transpires in Hill House: is this an account of a malign, sentient building, or an individual experiencing mental illness? A number of ghost stories deliberately tread the line between objective haunting and subjective experience. Here we might turn to Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw*, Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', or Oliver Onions' 'The Beckoning Fair One'

2 Group experience. A haunting will often be experienced alone: one of the first things a ghost story writer often does is isolate her protagonist. Reversing this trend can lead to an interesting take on the genre. In *The Haunting of Hill House*, Eleanor is emotionally distanced, but she is physically surrounded by others. Ghost stories that occur at parties, such as 'Smee', also make the most of this effect. One of my favourite examples of a haunting experienced by more than one person at a time is in Takashi Shimizu's film *The Grudge*. Often, when we watch horror films, we think to ourselves 'what would happen if they got the authorities involved'? That is exactly what happens here. Two police detectives go to the haunted house to sort matters out, only to be met by something truly horrible coming down...the stairs.

Double: Corresponding with card 12

'The Yellow Wallpaper'

In one sense, 'The Yellow Wallpaper' is not quite a ghost story, but read in another, it offers a genre specific tale, complete with a haunted room and phantom figures. The story is narrated by a young woman, confined to bed by her husband. His doctor recommends a 'rest cure' for her post-partum depression: she has become ill after the birth of her child. She is not allowed to move, or to create, or to tend to her child. She must simply lie back and do nothing. She begins to see patterns in the yellow wallpaper. And soon: a figure. More than one figure. Women are moving beneath the wallpaper. What will happen when they emerge?

'The Yellow Wallpaper' is a key text in discussions of twentieth century Western feminist literature. It works as a tale of terror, and also as an ambivalent ghost story. It also offers a radical critique of assumptions about women and mental health, offering a complex meditation on the relationship between creativity and oppression.

It also has one of the perfect endings to a short story imaginable: hair-raising, tragic, and ebullient.

Quotation from the text

At night in any kind of light, in twilight, candlelight, lamplight, and worst of all by moonlight, it becomes bars! The outside pattern I mean, and the woman behind it is as plain as can be. I didn't realize for a long time what the thing was that showed behind, that dim sub-pattern, but now I am quite sure it is a woman. By daylight she is subdued, quiet. I fancy it is the pattern that keeps her so still. It is so puzzling. It keeps me quiet by the hour

Life and Work

Charlotte Perkins Gilman was born in Connecticut, to an impoverished but literary family. Largely self-educated, she became an advocate of feminist and socialist causes, and wrote a celebrated work on gender politics, *The Home: Its Work and Influence*. Divorced from her husband at a time when this was rare, she subsequently had long-term relationships with both men and women. Her literary output includes *Herland*, a classic of Utopian fiction.

As Elaine Showalter discusses in *The Female Malady*, a critical study of the literary representation of female mental health, Charlotte Perkins Gilman was inspired to write her story after her own experience of the 'rest cure', and the work was a significant contributing factor in the abandonment of this misogynistic and counter-productive medical practice.

Perkins legacy is far from straightforward, however. She was a racist, and the ideas she promoted included subjecting African Americans to forced labour.

Doubles in the ghost story.

Why should seeing your double be so frightening? Most of us look at ourselves everyday in the mirror, after all, and the result is generally not fear. Our faces are familiar. Boringly so, sometimes. Why, of all things, should one's own face be a source of fear? In a 1919 essay, the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud comes up with an answer. He is interested in the feeling of 'the uncanny', a peculiar and unnerving sensation in which something is felt to be familiar and strange at the same time. Freud is writing in German, and his term for the uncanny is *Unheimlich*: 'unhomely'. But oddly, the term can mean homely as much as unhomely. Why is this? Well, think about the best kind of home. It would be warm, and safe, and private. Because of this, it would also be secret, hidden...occult. The safe and familiar can, for the very reasons they are so, become their other: unfamiliar, obscure.

The same kind of reversal can be applied to ourselves. Our face is the most familiar thing to us, but seen from the outside, it becomes weird and threatening. Have you ever been on a bus, and looked out the window to see some particularly odd looking stranger, only to realise that it is your reflection? That's the uncanny effect. For Freud, it makes sense that the double is fascinating and disconcerting. In one sense, we know ourselves better than anything else in the world. We are always in our own company. But for all that familiarity, there is something still alien about us. Think about yourself when a baby. That was still you, but whatever thoughts and desires you had then seem impossibly distant now. And what of yourself when asleep? Or enamoured? Or enraged? We are strangers to ourselves, and the condition of meeting that stranger is the condition of the uncanny. You can see me talk about this in a series of videos I made for The University of Reading: <https://uni4me.co.uk/activities/the-uncanny-gothic-literature/>

In 'The Yellow Wallpaper', the figures are breaking their way out of restriction, working in the interests of the narrator, yet threatening her as well. As another psychoanalyst, Otto Rank, claimed, the double might initially be experienced as a protector, but it soon comes to threaten our existence. One of the most threatening doubles of this kind is the antagonist in 'William Wilson' by Edgar Allen Poe, a figure intimately connected to the narrator he haunts. Doubles feature in many Gothic stories, including Stevenson's *Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Hogg's *The Confessions of a Justified Sinner*, and, arguably, *Frankenstein*.

Connecting 'The Yellow Wallpaper' to other stories

- 1 Creativity. Creativity is connected to ghosts, because both, it could be argued, require invention. The stories we make up are, in their own way, haunting. The characters we invent can seem real, and almost seem to enjoy a life of their own, but they are also insubstantial. Many ghost stories feature creative individuals. See, for example, Wakefield's 'The Red Lodge' and Oliver Onions 'The Beckoning Fair One'.
- 2 Feminism. The ghost story has been a female form of writing. Authors such as Vernon Lee, Charlotte Riddell, May Sinclair, and Toni Morrison have, in their very different ways, engaged the form to discuss and explore female experience. The idea of being a spectral form, engaged in repetitive activities, unrecognised, and disempowered certainly allows some authors to negotiate a certain set of feminist concerns. But as Andrew Smith argues in *The Ghost Story 1840–1920* the ghost stories that are interested in money, legacy, and objects enable subtle, questioning explorations of gender within society.



Physicality: Corresponding with card 13

'Black Dog Ode'

We like to think the physical has no place in the ghost story. At its best, the genre is above all that! Obby Robinson often questions this idea in his work. Indeed, in one of his short stories, 'The Chinese Ghost', Robinson puts this idea in the mouth of an arrogant and (as it turns out) racist narrator, who likes to think he is an expert in the history of literary hauntings:

'That the English Ghost Story is robust is beyond doubt; it has been sending shivers down spines for at least three hundred years, and three hundred years before that, in all likelihood, when fires were lit, and ale drunk, talk would turn at last to the matter of the spook. Yet the English ghost is a delicate construct. All too easily the thing half-glimpsed, the hand half-felt, and the word half-heard are filled out by the arch of gore, the monstrous hoof, and the virgin's scream. Whatever material our greatest and most enduring tales are made of, it is gossamer thin, and tolerates no rough handling.'

Obby Robinson explores and subverts a counter-tradition, one that understands ghosts to be sometimes experienced as solid, worldly, and even a little bit vulgar. In his poem 'Black Dog Ode', he asks us to imagine meeting something that is purely physical; devoid of any conceptual framework, spiritual aspect, or wider meaning. Pure matter only. Perhaps, he suggests, you would not even notice the encounter. Something wholly and radically physical would not, after all, have a name. It would not even be understood as 'physical', because that would be an understanding! It would just be *there*. Because of this, however, we would not necessarily know it to be there. Robinson suggests, only half-jokingly, that absolute physicality would be ghostly, as insubstantial, in its own way, as it's opposite.

Robinson in this poem is calling on the tradition of the Black Dog, or 'shuck', a ghostly animal from British folklore that spells doom for anyone unlucky enough to see it.

The poem follows closely the form of the 'Sapphic Ode'. The rules this requires were not designed for the English language, giving the poem a slightly halting, uneasy atmosphere.

Life and Times

Shying away from publicity, Obby Robinson comes from a small English town and has published one collection of supernaturally themed poems. He has also published numerous short stories in collections, including *Lethmachten: The Most Haunted Town in England*, with James Stoorie and Katharine Orton (author of the celebrated children's books *Nevertell* and *Glassheart*). He frequently performs his poetry, most recently at festivals organised by The Museum of Rural Life in Reading, and The Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford.

Quotation from the text.

This is the complete poem, from Robinson's 2014 collection, *The Witch House of Canewdon and Other Poems*.

Black Dog Ode

Late that evening, I came upon a stray dog
Waiting at the river, each hair upon its great form
Seemed to me as black as the deepest water
Resting in the silt.

Although I am not one for superstition,
There was an undeniable, uncanny thrill:
Death is said to accompany such creatures.
I put out my hand

Half in dread that it would find nothing but air.
Shocking it was for me, then, when the sure touch
Objects alone possess was all my fingers
Met, more terrifying

Than any insubstantial shade could be.
For what is more spectral than matter shorn of
Reflection, and felt without feeling? The ghost?
It is but a thing,

Dumb in its solidity. Why else is Shuck content
Only to stare and be still? My hand had stretched
Out beyond the want in which all life is steeped,
Grasped I know not what...

Look! I bring it forth that you might see. Shake it.
Can you feel the cold fire? For such a far flung thing
It is interesting how soon it comes upon one.
Carpal close at times.

Here I take my leave. Care should be taken when
Walking at night, by rivers especially. The
Nub of our world should not be felt: it is a
Great black dog. Fare-well.

Physicality in The Ghost Story

As Susan Owens suggests in her *Ghosts: A Cultural History*, the strictly insubstantial ghost is something of a Victorian invention. Earlier spirits were physical, as evidenced in the tales collected by M.R. James as *12 Medieval Ghost Stories* (written originally in around 1400). This physicality, moreover, was often associated with animals, with one ghost appearing in the 'phantom shape of a horse rearing up on his hind legs', another changing from a crow to a chained dog, before at last settling on a human form capable of communication.

In 'The Whistling Room', William Hope Hodgson rekindles this tradition of material spooks. A room is haunted by a whistling that fills all who hear it with horror. And the whistling, it turns out, is made by two lips that appear from within its fleshy floor. 'The Whistling Room' is a violent, nauseas story of revenge, part of a series of tales that feature Hodgson's ghost detective, Carnacki, a kind of psychically inclined Sherlock Holmes.

Physical, fleshy horror returns to a number of more recent ghost stories. See, for example, Stephen King's *The Shining* or Tananarive Vue's 'Ghost Summer'. The sense of the physical is clearly echoed by those ghost stories such as Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that subvert expectations through the introduction of an 'obvious' ghost, a spirit so mundane, it could pass for a person, or an everyday object or animal. The materiality of haunting is also key to the stories of Vernon Lee, as discussed in the card on 'Objects'.

'Black Dog Ode' and other stories

1 Poetry. There are many famous and haunting poems concerning ghosts. Some, like 'One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted' engage philosophical questions, others, like 'The Listeners' offer compelling and dramatic narratives. If you wish to explore ghost story poems in more detail, a great place to start is the work of Thomas Hardy: 'The Voice'; 'I Found Her Out There'; 'After a Journey'; 'The Phantom Horsewoman'.

Subjectivity: Corresponding with card 14

'One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted'

'LXIX', also known as 'One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted', is a short but highly influential poem. In it, Emily Dickinson suggests that the usual trappings of Gothic stories distract from what is truly disturbing. Galloping through an abbey, or meeting a ghost at midnight, are all well and good, but if you really want a scare, you need to go inward. You may confront someone on such a journey, this suggesting a self that is divided, unknowable. Dickinson's poem goes further in disturbing the notion of a stable self than might at first be apparent. It is not, after all, we who confront our double, but an 'interior' meeting a 'cooler host': 'it is not only the ghostly self that is rendered strange and alien, but the seemingly active subject. Our interiors seem oddly featureless. This disturbance is increased by a sense of doubling and repetition; if one is not a chamber, the brain still has corridors, and thus although we may not be houses, the language of architecture is necessary to an understanding of our nature.

Quotation from the text

Here is the full text of the poem:

One need not be a Chamber — to be Haunted —
One need not be a House —
The Brain has Corridors — surpassing
Material Place —

Far safer, of a Midnight Meeting
External Ghost
Than its interior Confronting —
That Cooler Host.

Far safer, through an Abbey gallop,
The Stones a'chase —
Than Unarmed, one's a'self encounter —
In lonesome Place —

Ourself behind ourself, concealed —
Should startle most —
Assassin hid in our Apartment
Be Horror's least.

The Body — borrows a Revolver —
He bolts the Door —
O'erlooking a superior spectre —
Or More —

Life and Work

Arguably the greatest of American poets, Emily Dickinson has a unique voice that, once heard, is not easily forgotten. Her poems are elliptical, challenging, and precise; wonderfully simple, and amazingly complex. Born in Massachusetts, Dickinson lived a rather isolated life, and comparatively little is known about her. The few poems published in her lifetime were heavily edited, making them conform to conventional structures. After her death, her sister Lavinia found her original poems, and they began to make their way into the public domain.

Subjectivity in The Ghost Story

'One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted' points to what many ghost story writers understand: the haunted landscapes of the ghost story are not external to the self. These stories grant psychological insights, and what is hidden from us in them is also horribly near.

Many of the greatest ghost stories offer subjective narratives. It is often unclear whether the ghosts that descend come from the grave or the imaginations of the story's protagonists. Possibly the most celebrated of such narratives is 'The Turn of the Screw' by Henry James, which is either the story of a governess who is trying to protect two children from two corrupt ghosts or who is suffering from mental illness while attempting to carry out her duties. A comparable ambivalence can be read in Le Fanu's 'Green Tea', Onions' 'The Beckoning Fair One', and Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'.

'One need not be a Chamber – to be Haunted' and other Stories

- 1 The double. The notion of an 'ourself, behind ourself concealed' clearly connects to the notion of the double. As in Dickinson's staging of an encounter with the self, many ghost stories feature meetings with doppelgangers. Traditionally, meeting yourself was thought to be a warning of death. For examples of such doubles, see 'The Poor Clare' by Elizabeth Gaskell, or 'William Wilson' by Edgar Allan Poe. For a brilliant example in popular music, see 'The Impression of J. Temperance' by The Fall, a tale of changelings, dog breeders, and vets, with its ringing final chant: 'His hideous replica'.
- 2 House. Although Dickinson insists haunting can happen to one who is not a chamber, the poem sets up a connection between people and buildings. Like buildings, people have an interior, and it is there, often, that a spooky encounter occurs. We can connect this to the notion of the 'sentient house'. Buildings such as those in *The Haunting of Hill House* are as much characters as anyone else. To spend a night in such an abode is like wandering through a vast, alien mind. Dark things lurk in those corridors, just as, perhaps, less than savoury things reside in the more neglected passageways of our own brains.

Ruins: Corresponding with card 15

'The Listeners'

Walter de la Mare's poem is often anthologised, and is widely loved by young and old alike. You may even have encountered this work at primary school.

In one sense, the poem is straightforward. A traveller rides to an abandoned house, knocks on its door, and gets no answer. The narrator knows what the traveller does not, however: the house is occupied. As the traveller leaves, it becomes clear he has attempted to fulfil a promise. The nature of this is not revealed, nor is any additional contextual information. When is the poem set? How long has the house been abandoned? Who are 'the listeners'?

Well, who? The listeners are called, but they do not respond. They hear a message, but refuse, in a sense, to receive it. They have been understood by critics as representative of nature, or a deity, or the past: in each, the essential narrative is clear: one wishes to communicate, to fulfil one's duty, yet the object of one's concerns remains indifferent.

A few years ago, *Adventures in Poetry*, a Radio 4 documentary, examined the lasting appeal of 'The Listeners', and explored its relationship with radio, a medium that was becoming popular in 1912, when the poem was created. The idea of a voice reaching out to listeners who are unable to respond has a particular resonance here, suggesting something uncanny about this popular form of technology.

Quotation From the Text

Here is the full text of the poem:

'Is there anybody there?' said the Traveller,
Knocking on the moonlit door;
And his horse in the silence champed the grasses
Of the forest's ferny floor:
And a bird flew up out of the turret,
Above the Traveller's head:
And he smote upon the door again a second time;
'Is there anybody there?' he said.
But no one descended to the Traveller;
No head from the leaf-fringed sill
Leaned over and looked into his grey eyes,
Where he stood perplexed and still.
But only a host of phantom listeners
That dwelt in the lone house then
Stood listening in the quiet of the moonlight
To that voice from the world of men:
Stood thronging the faint moonbeams on the dark stair,
That goes down to the empty hall,
Harkening in an air stirred and shaken
By the lonely Traveller's call.
And he felt in his heart their strangeness,
Their stillness answering his cry,
While his horse moved, cropping the dark turf,
'Neath the starred and leafy sky;
For he suddenly smote on the door, even
Louder, and lifted his head:—
'Tell them I came, and no one answered,
That I kept my word,' he said.
Never the least stir made the listeners,
Though every word he spake
Fell echoing through the shadowiness of the still house
From the one man left awake:
Ay, they heard his foot upon the stirrup,
And the sound of iron on stone,
And how the silence surged softly backward,
When the plunging hoofs were gone.

Life and work

Walter de la Mare was born in Kent in 1873. He worked as a statistician, but in 1908 he was awarded a civil list pension, meaning that he could focus on writing. He wrote poetry, novels, and short stories, often with a supernatural theme, and he especially valued writers who embraced what he called 'childlike imagination': visionary, subjective, internal. His ghost stories include the novel *The Return*, a tale of possession and implicit doubling, and his supernatural fiction influenced a whole generation of horror writers, most notably, perhaps, H.P. Lovecraft. He died in 1956.

Ruins and monuments in The Ghost Story

Ruins feature widely in Gothic literature, and become a feature, too, of the ghost story. The connection is complex. When the Gothic genre began, in the middle of the eighteenth century, the medieval structures that once dominated the British landscape were in ruins, and architects of the time began to draw inspiration from them. Edmund Burke's hugely influential essay on the sublime is a further, connected influence. The sublime is an aesthetic category, a form of artistic experience that makes us feel insignificant and overwhelmed, but by doing this, returns to us our sensations, and confirms our existence. Mountains might make me feel threatened, but they thus also make *me* feel. Ruins are classed by Burke as sublime, and when they appear in ghost stories, one can see why. Ruins tend to be large, and thus they overwhelm those who view them. They are also monuments to the past; their decline speaks of the great stretch of historical time, in opposition to the relatively tiny span of a human life. Lastly, and linked to the previous statement, ruins indicate the temporality of worldly power. They suggest the insignificance of present politics, present loves or hatreds: these too will crumble (here, if you are studying Shelley's 'Ozymandias' at GCSE, you might make a further connection...). In 'The Listeners' all three are in operation. The echoing, empty house is large enough for the listeners to throng about its stairs; the traveller is fleeting, he arrives and departs, but the listeners are, to quote Wakefield's ghost story 'The Red Lodge', the 'permanent residents' of the house; the listeners are passive, and whoever they were, and whatever promise was made to them, is lost to the reader.

Ghost stories are often incomplete: the ghost can be figured as mysterious and enigmatic, and often much is left to the readers imagination. Just as a ruin is a partial building, the ghost story can be understood as a partial story. A connection here can be made to the numerous letters that appear in ghost stories: there is an 'epistolary' structure to many such tales. A letter, after all, is a kind of monument, what we have left when someone is no longer here to speak.

In terms of monuments and ruins, I would particularly recommend a recent publication by English Heritage, who asked eight of the UK's leading authors to write ghost stories in response to sites owned by the charity: Kate Clanchy ties very modern tensions to the ancient site of Housteads Roman Fort, while Mark Haddon proves that inspiration can come from the more recent past, with a tale involving a Cold War bunker.

'The Listeners' and other Stories

Agency. Ghosts are often mysterious and 'other', but some writers subvert narrative expectations, and grant them a sense of agency and sympathy. Just as in 'The Listeners', some stories imagine a haunting from the point of view of the ghosts. Here we might turn to two popular films: *The Sixth Sense*, and *The Others*.

Both are famous for their twists, and I have probably said too much about them already, so will stop here! Both are, in a sense, quite conventional ghost narratives, differing from the usual only in so far as this allows them to effectively deliver the usual (stunning) twist. Recent texts have introduced the point of view of the deceased as part of a more experimental approach to the genre. Here I am thinking of David Lowery's film *A Ghost Story*, Ali Smith's *Hotel World*, and George Saunders Booker Prize winning *Lincoln in the Bardo*.

For a lighter version of this approach, see the BBC comedy *Ghosts*. Here, a country house is inhabited by numerous ghosts – from a caveman to a scout leader – and we experience along with them the boredom and alienation of the afterlife, but also its moments of tenderness and humour.

Picture: Corresponding with card 16

'The Mezzotint'

Is there a more perfect ghost story plot? An art dealer recommends a 'mezzotint' picture to a collector, Williams, the curator of a university museum. A mezzotint is a kind of engraving, and this one is rather boring: 15 by 10 inches, in a black frame, and looking like any other image of a country house to be found in pubs up and down the country. Williams returns to the image again with a friend some days later. On closer inspection, the engraving is actually rather well done, and...there seems to be a figure just about visible, just above the lower frame, just a head, seen from the back. It is probably looking towards the house. Returning to the work a little while later, Williams is shocked to see a more substantial change. In the middle of the lawn, a grotesque figure, down on all fours, is crawling towards the house. When Williams looks again, because, of course, he must look again, things get much worse ...

Quotation from the Text

[...] it was by this time rather late in the evening, and the visitors were on the move. After they went Williams was obliged to write a letter or two and clear up some odd bits of work. At last, some time past midnight, he was disposed to turn in, and he put out his lamp after lighting his bedroom candle. The picture lay face upwards on the table where the last man who looked at it had put it, and it caught his eye as he turned the lamp down.

What he saw made him very nearly drop the candle on the floor, and he declares now that if he had been left in the dark at that moment he would have had a fit. But, as that did not happen, he was able to put down the light on the table and take a good look at the picture. It was indubitable – rankly impossible, no doubt, but absolutely certain. In the middle of the lawn in front of the unknown house there was a figure where no figure had been at five o'clock that afternoon. It was crawling on all-fours towards the house, and it was muffled in a strange black garment with a white cross on the back.

Life and Work

M.R. James was born in Kent in 1863, and entered Cambridge University as an undergraduate in 1882, where he subsequently worked as an academic specialising in medieval literature and history. He is best known now for his ghost stories. James' characters tend to be unworldly academics, but they exist within a recognisable contemporary world, one haunted by its past, and, if one reads between the lines, one also adjusting the societal change. Curiosity leads these academic types to open doors that should, James suggests, remain firmly closed. The stories are subtle, with the horrors tending to be glimpsed, rather than seen outright, but for all their quietness and gentility, they can be haunting and disturbing. The popularity of James' ghost stories, and their link to Christmas, was secured by the BBC's one-off TV dramas 'A Ghost Story for Christmas', initially aired in 1971, and revived in 2005.

Images and pictures in The Ghost Story

Our image is us, yet it is also not us. The best portraits can seem vibrant and animated, more so even than living flesh, but they are not truly alive, or, at least, they should not be. The ghost story has a long tradition of introducing images that problematise the division between appearance and actuality. These images do not have to be realistic: in Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper', for example, an abstract pattern resolves itself into a human figure, which begins to haunt the unfortunate young woman who gazes upon it.

The *uncanny* nature of the image is especially clear in relation to photography. The ghost story developed as a genre during the development of photographic technology. The photograph can seem to double us, allowing us to persist beyond our own passing, but in a form that is repetitious, superficial, deathly. The photograph is rather like a ghost. The connection between the two is not simply poetic: in the heyday of spiritualism, during The Great War, spirit photographs become very popular. If you look online, you will be able to find many images of ghosts from this era. Ghost photography is still very popular, especially since the recent resurgent interest in ghost hunting, prompted by the success of the television show *Most Haunted*.

The connection between images and ghosts is not one bound to past technology. Television, computers, and phones can all be referenced in ghost stories concerning pictures. One great example comes from the novel *Ring* by Kôji Suzuki. The film version of this, by Hideo Nakata is particularly terrifying. When we watch a ghost story on television or in the cinema, there is always a comfort in saying to ourselves: 'it's not real, it's just an image on the screen'. *Ring* is especially effective in robbing us of the comfort.

Comparing 'The Mezzotint' to other stories

- 1 Academia. A connection can be made to Sheridan le Fanu's 'Green Tea', as the clergyman in that tale is rather like the typical M. R. James protagonist: male; genteel; unattached; interested in spiritual or academic matters; a little bit silly. They seem unlikely to be touched by anything horrific or extreme, and that is why their fates and testimony are so affecting. Academic protagonists offer other advantages. As an academic myself, I do recognise, I am afraid, the cliché that we can be a little bit detached from what we study. We are passionate about our interests, of course, intensely so, but we do sometimes forget that what we write about has a reality beyond our slightly dry obsessions. M.R. James's protagonists are often historians of some kind. They engage with the past, but make of it a kind of intellectual game. The ghost encounter they inevitably experience can be understood as a meeting with the *reality* of history. The past is no longer a source of academic delight or point-scoring, but a thing of immediacy, anguish, violence.
- 2 Art. Ghost story protagonists are often creative types: novelists, musicians, artists. This is not exactly surprising: most ghost stories are written by these kinds of people as well. A connection is sometimes made, however, between seeing ghosts, and creative practice. Both can be understood as works of invention and to be haunted by a ghost is, perhaps, a little like being haunted by an idea, or being inspired in general. Discussions of art are relatively common in the ghost story, therefore. Think of the writers and artists in Oliver Onions' 'The Beckoning Fair One', the discussion of music in 'The Old Nurse's Story' by Elizabeth Gaskell, or that of theatre that opens the play version of Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*.

Return: Corresponding with card 17

'Gap Year'

Phil is a young man taking a 'gap year' in order to save enough money to go travelling. He is house-sitting for his aunt, in the delightful 'Bluebell Cottage', and working also in a nearby all-night garage. As he busies himself stacking the shelves in his isolated workplace, he cannot help thinking back to when he was younger, and used to holiday in the cottage. At first he looked forward to this time out, not least because he would be in the company of his older cousin Lucy. But then Lucy changed, and the visits became dreadful. And then one night, out on 'Two Sticks Lane', Lucy disappeared. ..

'Gap Year' turns upon the idea of return. The short story begins with Phil, bored in his work, wishing to return home. As he goes about his mundane duties, memories return to him, and feelings and connections long since buried return as well. We never quite know what happened to Lucy, but as the narrative begins to suggest, tonight she is returning to her mother's house, because the memory of Phil has returned to her, and she will be waiting there on his return...

Quotation from the text

Moving in procession, they edged out on to the road, Annette drawing alongside the police car. She wound her window down, indicating that PC Batts should do the same.

'I remember now, the name of the house where I stopped!' she shouted. 'It was called Bluebell Cottage'.

She finally made it home, thought Phil, alone again. Walking down the verge, he glanced pensively along the lane; the way he had come, the way he would return.

I know what I will find. The dogs will be out in the front garden, disturbed from the hearth. Cowed, whining, they will slope down the gravel path as I approach, the gate on the latch. The front door will be open too, only slightly ajar. And inside in the half light, cousin Lucy will be waiting.

Life and Times

James Stoorie is a writer of supernatural fiction from the United Kingdom. He is one of the consultants on this project, responsible for choosing many of the ghost stories discussed here. He also wrote many of the introductory paragraphs you may have used at the start of your own story. His most recent novel is *The Book of Joy*, a weird, funny, and affecting fantasy narrative about making art, connecting with others, and the perils of modern living. He is presently working on a new novel, *Afterwitch*, and his short story 'Heirlooms' is being made into an animated feature by the artist Hannah Taggart.

The Return in The Ghost Story

'Sometimes They Come Back': this title to one of Stephen King's short stories carries with it both hope and threat, and thus indicates the tensions that often inform narratives of return. Is there any wish more dearly held than that the dead might return to us? Yet is not the realisation of such a wish fraught with the most horrific possibilities? It is an irony that is at the heart of many supernatural narratives, with the traditional tale of 'The Monkey's Paw' perhaps the best known example.

The return in the ghost story can sometimes be a personal or psychological matter. In Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House*, for example, the ghost encounter is the occasion for the return of many repressed memories and feelings. The end of the BBC's initial version of 'Whistle And I Will Come to You' has a crusty old academic returning to what seems to be a childlike state of fear when confronted by one of the most brilliantly realised ghosts on screen.

In Colonial ghost stories, the return often represents wider concerns, with settlers in a country beset by the spirits of all they have had to repress and exploit in order to enjoy a life of ease. Here we might think of Steven Spielberg's film *Poltergeist*, and the well worn trope of the white family who have inadvertently built their home on 'an Indian burial ground'. The fact that the settlers in such narratives eventually triumph indicates the problematic politics such texts can support.

In *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, the return indicates the impossibility of fully repressing both personal and societal trauma: the reappearance of a young woman brings back to her mother unacknowledged feelings of love, grief, and fear, yet also suggests the impossibility of contemporary America ever succeeding in the mistaken endeavour of obscuring the legacy of slavery.

Connecting 'Gap Year' to other stories

1 Teenagers. We have discussed childhood elsewhere, but there is a particular connection between teenagers and ghosts. David Clowes' graphic novel *Ghost World* has nothing to do with the supernatural, being instead a chronicle of the challenges of growing up in contemporary America, but its title suggests a connection

between the in-between state of young people on the brink of adulthood, and wandering spirits, caught between life and death. Many of Stephen King's supernatural narratives focus on this period of life, and Tananarive Vue's 'Ghost Summer' explicitly explores the connection between teenagers and ghosts. James Stoorie's ghost stories often feature teenage protagonists. Here I would especially recommend the short stories 'Genie', 'Twitchers', and 'The Face in the Curtains'.

Ghosts and teenagers are brought together most obviously, perhaps, in narratives concerning Poltergeists. Whether you believe in ghosts or not, Guy Lyon Playfair's non-fictional account of such a phenomena in *This House is Haunted: The True Story of the Enfield Poltergeist*, might help develop an understanding about what is at stake in the idea of such connections.

Obvious: Corresponding with card 18

Beloved

A former enslaved woman, Sethe, is living with her daughter, Denver, but the house they occupy is haunted. It is supposed the ghost is that of Sethe's eldest child, who she killed while trying to evade capture years before, knowing the horror of the life that would await her otherwise. Sethe had aimed to kill all her children, but was prevented from so doing. The spirit's activities are so distressing, it has driven Sethe's sons from home.

Paul D., a man who had been enslaved in the same house as Sethe, comes to live with her. He dismisses stories about ghosts, and all is quiet for a while. But on returning home one day, the three residents encounter a woman asleep near their front steps. As soon as Sethe sees her, she has a desire to urinate, and is reminded of her waters breaking in child birth. The woman has skin as smooth as a baby's, and no recollection of her past. She says her name is 'Beloved'.

Beloved stays with Sethe, who comes to believe that her guest is her eldest daughter, somehow returned to her: the name 'Beloved' was all that Sethe could afford to write on her daughter's gravestone. And the longer Beloved stays, the more powerful, demanding, and disruptive she becomes...

It could be argued that *Beloved* is the greatest of all ghost stories. It is genuinely frightening and affecting, its characters are brilliantly realised, while its narrative concerns only seem to become more relevant and urgent over time.

Quotation From the Text

It took her the whole of the next morning to lift herself from the ground and make her way through the woods past a giant temple of boxwood to the field and then to the yard of the slate-grey house. Exhausted again, she sat down on the first handy place – a stump not far from the steps of 124. By then keeping her eyes open was less of an effort. She could manage it for a full two minutes or more. Her neck, in circumference no wider than a parlour-service saucer, kept bending and her chin brushed the bit of lace edging her dress.

Women who drink champagne when there is nothing to celebrate can look like this: their straw hats with broken brims are often askew; they nod in public places; their shoes are undone. But their skin is not like that of the woman breathing near the steps of 124. She had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hand.

Life and Works

Toni Morrison was one of the most significant authors of the twentieth century. Born in Ohio in 1931, she studied English Literature at University, and later became the first black female fiction editor at the publishers Random House. She published eleven novels, *Beloved* being her fifth. It won the Pulitzer prize for fiction. She also was a highly acclaimed children's writer, and literary critic. Morrison was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993.

Obviousness in The Ghost Story

Beloved is around from the very start of the novel, but her appearance in front of the house is shocking and subversive due to its unquestionable reality. It is not that her introduction lacks the ambivalence characteristic of the ghost story: the sun is so intense, when Sethe sees her, she can only make out her black dress, as if her body is not really there. But when Sethe comes closer, there is no doubt about the reality of the new arrival. This is not the kind of half-glimpsed spectre familiar from the works of Henry James or M.R. James. *Beloved* is real. She is *obvious* in a way ghosts are not expected to be.

If the obviousness of *Beloved* can be read in terms of a subversion of genre conventions, or a commentary about the concrete nature of what we desire, miss, and repress, it is also linked to the wider issue of slavery in America. However much the trauma of slavery – and the 'sixty million or more' who died through it – might be avoided within certain political narratives within the USA, it is everywhere apparent. The legacy of slavery is *obvious*. It does not follow that it is simple, however. It is unthinkable; affective; irresolvable; requiring justice.

The notion of a ghost that is too obvious in its manifestation, and the sense in which this can subvert expectations, has been key to a number of ghost stories. Most famously, the film *The Sixth Sense*, directed by M. Night Shyamalan, achieves its surprise ending through exactly such a ruse (I will not explain further...). In literature, the same effect is produced by the horror writer James Herbert in his novel *Haunted*. The essential move here is to introduce the ghost into the narrative early on, as something everyone simply accepts as part of everyday life. That boring person you chatted to earlier on the bus; that pen left on your desk earlier? *They were not really there!*

Beloved and Other Stories

- 1 Return. *Beloved* in such a complex and literary novel that the connections one can make to other works through it can seem innumerable. A good place to start, however, might be the notion of return: 'Anything dead coming back to life hurts.' When the repressed returns in *Beloved*, it does so in fidelity to the past, while also bringing into being something new and strange. The things of the past are and are not what they always were.
- 2 Motherhood. A number of especially affecting ghost stories feature mother's mourning for lost children. The most well know of these is probably *The Woman in Black* by Susan Hill. Such is the pain of loss, that mourning cannot be worked through, hence the haunting that occurs across generations.

Voice: Corresponding with card 19

'Sweet William's Ghost'

'Sweet William's Ghost' is one of the 305 ballads collected in the nineteenth century by Francis James Child. They became known later as *The Child Ballads*, and are a major influence for many contemporary musicians. Ballads are ostensibly simple poems that tell stories, often, but not always, in quatrains, with a rhyme in every second and fourth line. The ballad is both repetitious and propulsive, moving inevitably and speedily towards its conclusion, yet achieving this with a strange, immovable calm.

The Child Ballads are often tragic, sometimes comic, and, as the singer Anais Mitchell suggests: '[...] so beautiful, so strange and weird'.

'Sweet William's Ghost' seems straightforward enough: a man returns to the door of the woman he loves, knocks upon it, and a conversation begins. We know from the first that he is dead, yet rather than being repelled, the 'constant Margaret' is intent on finding a way that they might be together. When it is clear that none will be forthcoming, she dies of grief, and thus, inadvertently perhaps, stumbles on a solution to their predicament.

In point of fact, no such happy ending is entertained by the ballad itself: although 'Sweet William's Ghost' tells of a world where the dead return, and thus can enjoy a kind of life, the spirit is taken to be something less than the self. In common with all of *The Child Ballads*, there are many such complexities at play here: William will not enter through Margaret's door, for fear of killing her, but it is this resistance that leads to her death.

To really understand the power of 'Sweet William's Ghost', you need to hear it performed. It is a ballad about hearing an uncanny voice, and a voice is required if we are to properly share in this sense of the uncanny. There are many versions of the ballad, but, for me, the most hair-raising is by the folk musician Alasdair Roberts. I find its most intense moment to be when Roberts sings:

'There's no room at my head, Margret,
There's no room at my feet;
There's no room at my side, Margret,
My coffin's made so meet.'

How to account for the strange effect of this? In one sense, it is about the nature of performance itself. Roberts' voice is his own, but also that of the unnamed narrator, and Margaret's, and that of William's spirit. The voice might seem an intimate, personal thing, but, in this recording, one voice speaks for everyone, troubling the certainty of identity.

The words of the song can be read to disrupt such certainties also. If it is only 'my spirit, Margret,/That's now speaking to thee', how are we to account for this 'my'? The speaking apparently is achieved by the spirit alone, yet this is a claim spoken by the spirit's owner. There is an unaccountable excess here, an impossible division in the voice, one that stages a disruptive return to all of the speech within the ballad.



Quotation From the Text

Here is the full text of 'Sweet William's Ghost'

There came a ghost to Margret's door,
With many a grievous groan,
And ay he tirl'd at the pin,
But answer made she none.

'Is that my father Philip,
Or is't my brother John?
Or is't my true-love, William,
From Scotland new come home?'

"'Tis not thy father Philip,
Nor yet thy brother John;
But 'tis thy true-love, William,
From Scotland new come home.

'O sweet Margret, O dear Margret,
I pray thee speak to me;
Give me my faith and troth, Margret,
As I gave it to thee.'

'Thy faith and troth thou's never get,
Nor yet will I thee lend,
Till that thou come within my bower,
And kiss my cheek and chin.'

'If I shoud come within thy bower,
I am no earthly man;
And shoud I kiss thy rosy lips,
Thy days will not be lang.

'O sweet Margret, O dear Margret,
I pray thee speak to me;
Give me my faith and troth, Margret,
As I gave it to thee.'

'Thy faith and troth thou's never get,
Nor yet will I thee lend,
Till you take me to yon kirk,
And wed me with a ring.'

'My bones are buried in yon kirk-yard,
Afar beyond the sea,
And it is but my spirit, Margret,
That's now speaking to thee.'

She stretchd out her lilly-white hand,
And, for to do her best,
'Hae, there's your faith and troth, Willy,
God send your soul good rest.'

Now she has kilted her robes of green
A piece below her knee,
And a' the live-lang winter night
The dead corp followed she.

'Is there any room at your head, Willy?
Or any room at your feet?
Or any room at your side, Willy,
Wherein that I may creep?'

'There's no room at my head, Margret,
There's no room at my feet;
There's no room at my side, Margret,
My coffin's made so meet.'

Then up and crew the red, red cock,
And up then crew the gray:
'Tis time, tis time, my dear Margret,
That you were going away.'

No more the ghost to Margret said,
But, with a grievous groan,
Evanishd in a cloud of mist,
And left her all alone.

'O stay, my only true-love, stay,
The constant Margret cry'd;
Wan grew her cheeks, she closd her een,
Stretchd her soft limbs, and dy'd.

Life and Times

Francis James Child was born in 1821 in Boston, and although his family were poor, free education in his home city enabled him to secure a place at Harvard University. After further study in Germany, Child returned to Harvard as a Professor of rhetoric. His academic interests were varied, and he edited a great number of works by British poets while in his post, but his most famous work is that focused on the traditional ballads of England and Scotland. He published ten volumes of these ballads between 1882 and 1898.

Voice in The Ghost Story

If you listen to a recording of the ballad, then the artist is not there with you. Their voice, which seems such an intimate and essential part of who they are, has been detached from them, gaining a kind of life of its own through the recording process. Conventionally, we think of voice as coming from somewhere inside us, and thus, when detached, it can bring into question some fundamental assumptions about who we are.

It is in this context that the philosopher and cultural commentator Slavoj Žižek writes of 'the disruptive power of the voice, of the fact that the voice functions as a foreign body, as a kind of parasite introducing a radical split'.

It is an understanding developed by another philosopher with an interest in contemporary culture, Mark Fisher, in his definition of what he terms 'the eerie'. Fisher begins by thinking about the plaintive cry of a bird. If it sounds like the bird is talking to us, is this affecting because it suggests that the creature might actually be trying to communicate like a human, or that when humans communicate, there is nothing behind this, their speech as hollowed out as a birds? Imagine an old record player in an attic. There are some discs with it, so you put one on. It's a person's voice. You listen. They are talking nonsense, and you find yourself saying so out loud: 'This is nonsense!' 'No its not', replies the record.

Is what is disconcerting in this the idea that there is a spirit communicating through the object, or, instead, is it that when we speak, we might as well be records: automated; evacuated; dead? For Fisher, such examples of strange voices suggest the eerie always turns on a questioning of agency. 'What kind of agent is acting here?' he asks, '[i]s there an agent at all?'

Voice is played upon in many ghost stories, with Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black* a recent example, a novel that explores the challenges of hearing the dead speak. I would also recommend Vernon Lee's 'A Wicked Voice'. For a text focused on questions of agency and voice, perhaps the most obvious example is the sequence in *Dead of Night*, a British horror anthology film from 1945, in which a ventriloquist finds that his dummy begins to talk through him...

'Sweet William's Ghost' and other ghost stories

1 Song. When we think of the ghost story, it is probably the short story that comes to mind, or great ghost story novels such as *The Woman in Black*. There is a long tradition of ghost songs, however. The brevity of song, and the immediacy of performance, can produce a particularly intense experience. One of the most innovative and sustained engagements with the supernatural in popular music comes from the British post-punk band, The Fall, with many of their songs working as ghost stories: 'The Impression of J. Temperance'; 'A Figure Walks'; 'Spectre vs. Rector'.

Sounds: Corresponding with card 20

‘The Beckoning Fair One’

‘The Beckoning Fair One’ might well be the best haunted house story you have never heard of: Algernon Blackwood, one of the finest writers of supernatural stories, called it ‘the most horrible and beautiful ever written’. It is an early example of the psychological ghost story, a tale that could be read as a genuine haunting, or a chronicle of mental ill health. In it, a young man, Paul Oleron, has been writing a book about a very modern woman. His best friend, who is such a woman, thinks it may well be his greatest work yet. To complete the tale, he rents a room in an abandoned building. Over time, he becomes convinced that his new accommodation is haunted by a female ghost. He starts to spend all his time making the space around him beautiful. He neglects his work, his friends, and his health. The ghost grows stronger the more time Oleron spends with her, but, for all that, she always seems to be out of reach. His friend realises something is very wrong, and attempts to save him. Things do not go well...

Is the haunting the result of a malicious ghost? Or is the ghost merely a projection of Oleron’s desires and delusions? The tale does not say, but it is clear that things are not right with the story’s protagonist. The gradual descent into ill health is subtly achieved, an agonisingly slow immersion into a new, deadly, and deathly way of viewing the world.

The ghost is encountered first by being heard, the ‘silky rustle’ of brushed hair, and it is difficult to think of any writer who better capitalises on the uncanny nature of sound within a ghost story. Indeed, all the scenes of haunting within the story are so perfectly realised that ‘The Beckoning Fair One’ is a great place to start if you want to develop your skills as a ghost story writer.

The text is not without its problems, however. Is the violent dramatic denouement really necessary? And could the narrative be accused of perpetuating, in its own way, some of the misogynistic structures and ideas that it so clearly sets out to critique?

Quotation from the text

All at once he started bolt upright in his chair, tense and listening. The silky rustle came again; he was trying to attach it to something ...

The next moment he had leapt to his feet, unnerved and terrified. His chair hung poised for a moment, and then went over, setting the fire-irons clattering as it fell. There was only one noise in the world like that which had caused him to spring thus to his feet ...

The next time it came Oleron felt behind him at the empty air with his hand, and backed slowly until he found himself against the wall.

‘God in Heaven!; The ejaculation broke from Oleron’s lips. The sound had ceased.

The next moment he had given a high cry.

‘What is it? What’s there? *Who’s* there?’

A sound of scuttling caused his knees to bend under him for a moment; but that, he knew, was a mouse. That was not something that his stomach turned sick and his mind reeled to entertain. That other sound, the like of which was not in the world, had now entirely ceased; and again he called ...

He called and continued to call; and then another terror, a terror of the sound of his own voice, seized him. He did not dare to call again. His shaking hand went to his pocket for a match, but he found none. He thought there might be matches on the mantelpiece –

He worked his way to the mantelpiece round a little recess, without for a moment leaving the wall. Then his hand encountered the mantelpiece, and groped along it. A box of matches fell to the hearth. He could just see them in the firelight, but his hand could not pick them up until he had cornered them inside the fender.

Then he rose and struck a light.

The room was as usual. He struck a second match. A candle stood on the table. He lighted it, and the flame sank for a moment and then burned up clear. Again he looked round.

There was nothing.

There was nothing; but there had been something, and might still be something. Formerly, Oleron had smiled at the fantastic thought that, by a merging and interplay of identities between himself and his beautiful room, he might be preparing a ghost for the future; it had not occurred to him *that there might have been a similar merging and coalescence in the past*. Yet with this staggering impossibility he was now face to face. Something did persist in the house; it had a tenant other than himself; and that tenant, whatsoever or whosoever, had appalled Oleron’s soul by producing the sound of a woman brushing her hair.

Life and work

Born in Bradford in 1873, George Oliver Onions became a commercial artist and designer after attending art school. It might be suggested that the implicit criticism of the 'art for art sake' protagonist of 'The Beckoning Fair One' reflects Onions own ideas about the necessity of making a living through artistic creation. Onions produced a number of historical novels, and his supernatural writing often turns on the notion of the past being repeated in some sense (see, for example *The Painted Face*, and the ghost story 'The Rosewood Door'). In 1909, he married fellow writer Berta Ruck, and they were together until his death in 1961.

Sounds in the Ghost Story

Sound is essential to the ghost story, but in a way that separates it from voice, a theme that is addressed on another card. Voice often problematises agency, that is, it makes us question whether there is someone intending to speak the words we hear: if a voice can be disembodied, or attached to something that should not be able to speak, then it loses its sense of naturalism, and becomes eerie and strange. In one sense, sounds in the ghost story do not work in this way.

They often suggest a *hidden agent*. When one hears the sound of hair being brushed, we can suppose that there is, somewhere beyond our sight: a brush; hair; a hand; a person. When we hear a footfall on the stairs above, we assume that there is a presence we are yet to glimpse. That said, sounds can also become detached in an 'eerie' way, as described by the philosopher Mark Fisher. Perhaps what is so disturbing about the tread upon the stair is indeed that there is nothing beyond it, that we encounter in such sounds something of the irrelevance of the human.

There are many different ways sound can enter a ghost story, from the ghostly music of Elizabeth Gaskell's 'The Old Nurse's Song', to the movement of the rocking chair in drama version of *The Woman in Black*.

'The Beckoning Fair One' and other stories

1 Psychological haunting. Onion's text is a great example of psychological horror. This is a tradition that focuses on what the ghost story writer Vernon Lee's celebrates as 'spurious ghosts'. Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*, Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, Edgar Allan Poe's 'William Wilson' are all good places to start an exploration of these subtle tales.

Repetition: Corresponding with card 21

'The Red Lodge'

Originally published in 1928, H.R. Wakefield's 'The Red Lodge' is a classic haunted house narrative. The narrator tells his story as a warning to any who might think to rent a certain, charming Queen Anne house. The narrator, an artist, did just this, setting up with his wife, Mary, and child, Tim, for 3 months. Tim seems anxious about the river at the bottom of the property, although he has never exhibited fear of water previously. There are other strange phenomena, most noticeably patches of green slime that appear over the house. The narrator begins to have disturbing dreams, and soon after Tim screams and loses consciousness, and on waking speaks in terror of a 'green monkey'.

The narrator seeks out a rich neighbour, who had seemed concerned about the house. This gentleman reveals that, many years ago, its owner had bribed his servants to get rid of his own wife by frightening her to death. They succeeded: one night she ran out of the house in terror, and threw herself into the river.

The neighbour suggests it is these malicious servants that haunt the house, while the wife is the 'green monkey' that rises from the water. The murderous husband killed himself in the river soon after, along with the women he had brought into the house in his wife's absence. All subsequent residents either share this fate, or run away. The narrator chooses the latter option.

The narrative is one of repetition. Whoever lives in the house will have the same experiences, and share the same end. What is striking about 'The Red Lodge', however, is the sense in which this repetitious structure is *over-determined*. By that, I simply mean that more things repeat than is strictly necessary. The result is a surprisingly enigmatic text, considering the generally conventional nature of the plot.

Take, for example, the sequence just before the narrator has his first encounter with the spirits. He is already concerned about the house, and seeks to distract himself by thinking about one of his favourite subjects, rhetoric, and the creation of new words.

He thinks of the German 'Jugend-bewegung', and he writes of how much he dislikes this new term: the proto-fascist German youth movement it references, is understood to be: 'Bunk without spunk, sauce without force, Futurism without a past, merely a Transition from one yelping pose to another'. What is wrong with the Jugend-bewegung is, therefore, that it shuns history: a thing of repetition only.

The haunting, too, although seemingly wholly unconnected with contemporary events in Germany, is also repetitious: it does not care for the difference between those who take up residence in the Red Lodge, as all will meet the same fate. What is the connection, then, between the ghostly effects of a husband's instruction to his servants to murder his wife, and the rise of youth movements in Germany in the 1920s? And how is this to be linked to the narrator's own connection between his hatred of the house (which is, we are meant to think, partly a madness brought on by the ghostly servants), and his self-proclaimed 'xenophobia' towards Germany? Such questions are complex, and the text provides no clear answers, but they speak in some way to the atmosphere of oppression and violence in the narrative, and the intrusion of what the psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud described as 'death drive': the never ending repetition of the same.



Quotation from the text:

The Permanent Occupants of The Red Lodge waited till the light was out, but then I felt them come thronging, slipping in one by one, their weapon, fear. It seemed to me they were massed for the attack. A yard away my wife was lying with my son in her arms, so I must fight. I lay back, gripped the sides of the bed and strove with all my might to hold my assailants back. As the hours went by I felt myself beginning to get the upper hand, and a sense of exaltation came to me. But an hour before dawn they made their greatest effort. I knew that they were willing me to creep on my hands and knees to the window and peep through the blind, and that if I did so we were doomed. As I set my teeth and tightened my grip till I felt racked with agony, the sweat poured from me. I felt them come crowding round the bed and thrusting their faces into mine; and a voice in my head kept saying insistently, 'You must crawl to the window and look through the blind.' In my mind's eye I could see myself crawling stealthily across the floor and pulling the blind aside, but would be staring back at me? Just when I felt my resistance breaking, I heard a sweet, sleepy twitter from a tree outside, and saw the blind touched by a faint suggestion of light, and at once those with whom I had been struggling left me and went their way, and, utterly exhausted, I slept.

Life and Works

Herbert Russell Wakefield was born in Kent, and educated at Marlborough College, then Oxford. He fought in The Great War, achieving the rank of Captain, and subsequently worked in publishing. In the 1920s, he began writing and publishing his many ghost stories, and, along with 'The Red Lodge', works such as 'Look Up There' and 'Blind Man's Buff' are often included in anthologies of twentieth century ghost stories. Wakefield also wrote on criminology, and produced detective stories. Only a limited amount of information about his life is available, as he destroyed all his papers and letters shortly before his death.

Repetition in The Ghost Story

Ghost stories either conform to, or play with, genre. They are about rules. That is, after all, the premise of the card game you have been playing. Rules require repetition. Hauntings are also repetitious, at least for the most part. The spectres lack of life is indicated not through an absence of motion or speech (for example), but rather the unchanging nature of their manifestations. Ghosts are doomed not to mature and develop, but walk ever after the same circuit through the same walls.

Some ghost stories subvert this idea, offering humanised ghosts that develop. I am thinking here of Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost*, or the Bruce Willis character in the film *The Sixth Sense*.

The sense in which it is those who encounter ghosts, as much as the ghosts themselves, that end up caught in a cycle of repetition is another popular plot device. See, for example, 'The Beckoning Fair One' by Oliver Onions, or Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black*.

Comparing The Red Lodge to other stories

1 Servants. Servants occupy a strange position within the households that employ them. They are at once absolutely necessary, yet also wholly peripheral. They are tasked with doing the same things day in and day out, and are largely invisible from those who benefit from their labour. Servants are ghostly. Often, servants in the ghost story act as a kind of 'return of the repressed': those overlooked individuals whom the ruling elite require for their comfortable existences return to vision and consciousness, making apparent to those in charge the anger or desire that was never acknowledged in life. Here we might think of the servants in 'The Turn of the Screw' by Henry James. Servants can also be particularly insightful witnesses to a haunting, seeing what those who live 'above stairs' cannot.

Object: Corresponding with card 22

'The Doll'

'The Doll' by Vernon Lee is an example of a wider genre of what could be called 'almost ghost stories'. There is no ghost as such, but there is very much a haunting, and a persistence of life after death. The narrator, after having looked at some of her precious objects with an unnamed other, declares she has had enough of such things, and decides it is time to explain why. Years ago, she had been in holiday in Italy, where, with the help of a guide, she had been indulging her passion for antiques. On one trip to a rather grand property, now in decline, she is startled to see a life-sized doll in the house-keepers room. The narrator is immediately drawn to this object, and finds out about its history. Once, the owner of the house married a young girl. She was unworldly, and the husband was jealous, and kept her hidden. She died in childbirth. The husband had the doll made, dressed in the young woman's old clothes, with a wig made from her hair. Every day he would visit the doll in her boudoir, even when he remarried, later in life. It becomes clear that the narrator, like the husband, has difficulty separating the doll from the woman: she refers to the woman as 'the doll'. She claims to understand the doll's feelings.

Finally, before she leaves Italy, she buys the doll and burns it. In the ashes, the guide she is with finds an old fashioned wedding ring: "'Keep it, signora,'" he says, "'you have put an end to her sorrows"'.

What is uncanny about the tale is the sense that the object is both dead and alive, both the doll and the woman. A conventional ghost would be less complex. The doll is *only ever a doll*, but that only makes the sense that she is alive, and is nothing other than the long dead woman, so haunting and unaccountable. A notion of repetition is also key to the narrative: because the narrator, despite differences in gender, age, nationality, and social standing, has a comparable understanding of the doll as the husband, it would seem that the doll is active in producing this, that the doll, despite her passivity, has some kind of agency.

Quotation from the text:

'Signor Oreste,' I said, 'will you be very kind, and have some faggots – I have seen some beautiful faggots of myrtle and bay in your kitchen – brought out into the vineyard; and may I pluck some of your chrysanthemums?' I added.

We stacked the faggots at the end of the vineyard, and placed the Doll in the midst of them, and the chrysanthemums on her knees. She sat there in her white satin Empire frock, which, in the bright November sunshine, seemed white once more, and sparkling. Her black fixed eyes stared as in wonder on the yellow vines and reddening peach trees, the sparkling dewy grass of the vineyard, upon the blue morning sunshine, the misty blue amphitheatre of mountains all round.

Orestes struck a match and slowly lit a pine cone with it; when the cone was blazing he handed it silently to me. The dry bay and myrtle blazed up crackling, with a fresh resinous odour; the Doll was veiled in flame and smoke. In a few seconds the flame sank, the smouldering faggots crumbled. The Doll was gone. Only, where she had been, there remained in the embers something small and shiny. Orestes raked it out and handed it to me. It was a wedding ring of old-fashioned shape, which had been hidden under the silk mitten. 'Keep it, signora,' said Orestes; 'you have put an end to her sorrows.'



Life and Works

'Vernon Lee' was the pseudonym of Violet Paget, born in France in 1852 to British ex-patriot parents. She is now best remembered for her supremely subtle ghost stories that often resist explicit supernatural interpretations. She was also a musician, and a philosopher of aesthetics, publishing widely in these areas. Paget was a lesbian, and had significant relationships with a number of women during her life. She was also a committed pacifist.

Objects in the Ghost Story

'People become possessed by possessions,' the critic Ruth Robbins declares. In the ghost story, an object is often inherited, or somehow comes into new hands. When this is the case, the individual in question can change. They look different, their interests shift. What comes to light here is what might be termed the *insistence* of the object: individual humans die, and change, but there is something in the object that resists the passing of time. There is also a questioning of free will or intent in this kind of narrative: we may think we are in charge, but it is the object, seemingly exterior and irrelevant to us, that determines what we do and what we think.

Objects appear in many ghost stories, but see, for example, the following by M. R. James: 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad'; 'A View From A Hill'; 'A Warning to the Curious'.

'The Doll' and other stories

1 Holiday. A connection can be made to Guy de Maupassant's 'Who Knows?' in terms of not only the Italian setting and the protagonists' interest in purchasing antiques, but also with the idea of using a holiday as a plot device. It is surprising just how many ghost stories happen within a holiday. On holiday, we are, in a sense, *not quite where we are*. We don't belong to these streets, we are not quite at home on this beach. There is something ghostly about holiday makers. Daphne Du Maurier's subversion of the ghost story, 'Don't Look Now', is also set on an Italian holiday.

Class: Corresponding with card 23

Dark Matter

Set in 1937, *Dark Matter* is a recent novel about a doomed expedition to the Arctic. Jack, a young working class man who has had to abandon an academic career for financial reasons, is persuaded to join three aristocrats' who are just about to embark on a scientific adventure. He will act as their radio operator during a winter's stay on a small island north of Norway. Those he is with meet with a series of accidents, and Jack volunteers to remain on the island, looking after the dogs they have brought, and maintain the environmental measurements that justify the mission. There are strange tales concerning the island, however, and already Jack has seen something unaccountable rise out of the sea...

Dark Matter takes its time, but when, halfway through, Jack is alone on the island, with the long night ahead of him, things get really scary. Paver understands and exploits every potentially unnerving aspect in the environment she has created: lying on a bottom bunk, and thinking about the space above one; not wanting to generate electricity, because the bicycle mechanism is loud, and faces away from the rest of the room; debating how many lights to keep on (too few, and the darkness will be around you, and the world outside will be all too visible, too many, and that world will appear a threatening black void).

Dark Matter is a particular rich narrative, suggesting many possible interpretations. It is a novel about the confinement of the British class system, a meditation on the disturbing implications of contemporary physics, an insightful account of male relationships, an investigation into trauma, and an environmentalist condemnation of the arrogant exploitation of the natural world.

Quotation From the Text

Thirty yards away on the rocks, something moved.

I tried to cry out. My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth.

It crouched on the edge of the rocks. It was streaming wet. It had just hauled itself from the sea. And yet the stillness was absolute. No sound of droplets pattering on snow. No creak of waterproofs as it rose. Slowly. Awkwardly.

It stood. It faced me. Dark, dark against the sea. I saw its arms hanging by its sides. I saw that one shoulder was bigger than the other. I saw its wet round head.

I knew at once that it wasn't some trapper from a nearby camp, or a polar mirage, or that hoary excuse 'a trick of the light'. The mind does not suggest explanations which don't fit the facts, only to reject them a moment later. I knew what it was. I knew, with some ancient part of me, that it wasn't alive

Life and Works

Michelle Paver studied biochemistry at Oxford, and her enthusiasm for science can clearly be seen in *Dark Matter*. Paver subsequently became a solicitor, but finding herself unsatisfied with her work, she began to take her hobby of writing more seriously. Paver eventually decided to step down from her job, but she had already gained her first writing contract when she was still working her notice. Her first success was with the *Chronicles of Ancient Darkness* young adult series of books. *Dark Matter* was her first novel for adults.



Class in other Stories

The adventurers head to the island because, in part, they wish to find a world that has not yet been touched by human society. Inevitably, however, they bring social divisions with them, especially class conflict. Paver's novel is one of the latest in a long line of great works that link ghosts to questions of class. Why is this? Most obviously, perhaps, ghosts are often the result of past wrongs, and the exploitation of one class by another is more often than not central to such historic injustices. Ghosts can also be read simply as relics of the past, persistent elements of a way of life that has otherwise departed. This is, perhaps, why ghostly aristocrats are so popular. To further explore issues of class in the ghost story, you could turn to 'The Turn of the Screw' by Henry James, with its vengeful servants, or *The Woman in Black*, with its vengeful aristocrat. *The Canterville Ghost* by Oscar Wilde, 'The Red Lodge' by H.R. Wakefield, and Hilary Mantel's *Beyond Black* offer very different takes on the relationship between class and haunting. Most recommended in this regard, however, is Kate Summerscale's 2020 book, *The Haunting of Alma Fielding*. This is an investigation into events surrounding a 'real' haunting that occurred in London in 1938. Summerscale looks into the investigation into these events as a way to open up the strangeness of the pre-War years: the rise of fascism; the rise of consumer culture; developments within psychiatry; and how each relate to the struggle of a brilliant working-class woman to attain self-expression, control, and recognition.

Dark Matter and other stories

- 1** Isolation. In common with many ghost stories, the protagonist of *Dark Matter* finds himself isolated, but far from alone. A connection can be made here to Onions' 'The Beckoning Fair One', or even *The Woman in Black*.
- 2** Nature. *Dark Matter* draws on a tradition of ghostly narrative that sees characters encountering nature at its most weird and terrifying. The world is made into something alien and incomprehensible, even as it can seem all too human; the natural world is granted an eerie presence, and when within it, we feel ourselves accompanied, watched, and sometimes judged. If you enjoyed *Dark Matter*, you might like to read Algernon Blackwood's 'The Willows', or Arthur Machen's 'The Terror'. Although neither are ghost stories, both share something of *Dark Matter*'s uncanny qualities.

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