



Article by EVA SEIDNER

Ghost Story

From the time I first became a reader (as opposed to learning to read), I have loved ghost stories. Like many a happy, secure child, I liked nothing more than to be frightened out of my wits. Edgar Allan Poe's tormented narrators would whisper their secrets into my ten year old ear, while I luxuriated, tucked up under a feather duvet, beside a rain-streaked window. My fretful mother would tiptoe around me, tentatively offering pared apples or hot chocolate, and wondering why her daughter wouldn't read "nice" books, about nurses, or horses, or flight attendants.

Today, still a devotee, I am surprised at how many adult readers enjoy ghost stories, but lie about their 'habit', or apologise for it. Generations of teachers have taught us that ghost stories are not serious literature. How can they be? They're escapist and popular and formulaic – merely cheap, vicarious thrills.

But there is nothing vicarious about a really good ghost story. Like our most disturbing dreams, ghost stories are about us and *of* us, carrying messages from ourselves *to* ourselves. At their scariest, they are literally wake-up calls, in the dead of night.

Ghosts have haunted the Eastern and Western literary traditions since ancient times. And most of us are familiar with Shakespeare's troubled spectres, who cannot rest until they have caused a wrong to be avenged, or until some piece of unfinished terrestrial business has been concluded.

But the kind of narrative we think of today, when we refer to the ghost story, has its beginnings in the Romanticism of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Horace Walpole, *The Castle of Otranto*, Mrs. Anne Radcliffe, *The Mysteries of Udolpho*, Matthew "Monk" Lewis, *The Monk* and Mary Shelly, *Frankenstein* were among the first English writers to produce what came to be called Gothic Romances, so named because of their Gothic architectural backdrops. Often set in crumbling medieval castles and monasteries, these tales were steeped in supernatural effects: ghost-infested underground mazes, suddenly animated suits of armour, speaking mirrors, and haunted portraits. Jane Austen poked fun at these extravagant effects in *Northanger Abbey*, in which her heroine, who reads nothing but such tales, mistakenly assumes that the isolated country house in which she is a guest is haunted. J.K. Rowling, in

our own day, continues with wit and affection to recreate the Gothic setting in the Hogwarts School of her Harry Potter books.

Ghost stories are an offshoot of this Gothic tradition.

By the late nineteenth century everyone, including those in the most fashionable salons of 'polite' society, was avidly reading ghost stories. They even became a part of the family rituals surrounding Christmas, as did Charles Dickens' Christmas Books, the most famous being *A Christmas Carole*. When I was an undergraduate at the University of Toronto, Robertson Davies annually told his own ghostly (usually hilarious) Christmas tales around the fire at Massey College. These are gathered in the collection *High Spirits*.

Victorian times were the first to formally divide literature into "highbrow" and "lowbrow" categories. This initiated an unfortunate "class" system which even today scares many potential readers away from so-called "serious" or "difficult" books. But even the most "highbrow" Victorian writers tried their hands at the ghost story: Walter Scott, the Brontes, Dickens, his friend and colleague Wilkie Collins, and in America, Hawthorne, Poe, Henry James, and many others.

One of my favourites among the British Victorians is M.R. (Montague Rhodes) James, a Medievalist scholar and don at Eton, whose life seems almost impossibly uneventful, but whose stories can still make my skin crawl. Once, as I was chewing my nails while feverishly re-reading James' *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, a friend of mine wryly observed, "Ah, I see you are curdled up with a good book."

Of the many themes and settings offered up by the ghost story, I have two particular favourites: The Haunted House and The Ghostly Double. The first is

most effective when the house works as a metaphor for the self – reflecting a person's character and conscious and subconscious lives. And the second, the theme of meeting yourself as a separate physical being, is the most unsettling premise for a story I can imagine.

Emily Dickinson had both these ideas in mind when she wrote a poem which begins:

*One need not be a Chamber –
to be Haunted –
One need not be a House –
the Mind has Corridors surpassing
Material Place..*

In this poem, a person being pursued by someone, or something (perhaps his own demons) rushes into a room and bolts the door. He has borrowed a gun ("Revolver") and for the moment feels safe. But inside his refuge, as he is about to find out, is a "superior Spectre – or More". The real enemy is within. As Dickinson concludes: "Ourself behind Ourself concealed" should worry us most.

The notion that we don't really know ourselves, or what we are capable of doing, is also behind one of the most famous ghost stories ever written. Henry James' *The Turn of The Screw*.

It is the story, told in her own voice, of a governess who is hired to look after two precocious children, Flora and Miles, in a lonely English country house. She is specifically instructed by their unwilling guardian, a bachelor uncle eager to return to his carefree life on the Continent, never to contact or pester him about the children.

Once in charge, the governess begins to see the ghosts of the previous governess, Miss Jessel, and her lover Peter Quint. The narrator is convinced that they are morally depraved, demon spirits bent on contaminating the children with their

own “evil”, and so stealing their innocent souls. The governess, a spinster, passionately dedicates herself to saving ‘the innocents’, who deny conversing with or even seeing the ghosts, despite her desperate accusations. In the end, Flora is taken away to London, driven almost to madness by her fear of the governess, in whose arms Miles dies, though his soul is “saved”.

In the 104 years since James’ story first appeared in print, readers have argued about the “reality” of the ghosts. Do they exist objectively, (in which case the children are lying, and their souls already lost); or, does the governess, a sexually-repressed spinster, obsessed with the bachelor uncle, imagine them, fantasize them into being, causing the children to suffer, and Miles to die, needlessly?

James deliberately does not help us answer this crucial question. He is brilliantly and maddeningly vague in all his descriptions of the spectres. His strategy, which he explains in his own preface to the story, is to “let the reader imagine the Evil, let him imagine it for himself,” leaving the author “freed from weak specifications”. In other words, the Darkness comes from us.

The house and grounds themselves also seem to reflect us, as complex and at least partly unknowable human beings. Freudian critics point to the three levels of the traditional “haunted house”, an architectural model which James, over his long career, used over and over again. The upper storey they identify as the Superego, the civilized and spiritually enlightened expression of the human psyche. The main or middle floor is the Ego, our everyday waking, socially functioning self. And the foul, murky basement is the uncivilized Id, where the “bodies” are buried. When we look back to the castle turrets and mouldering dungeons of the early Gothic

romances, this model works well.

There are many variations on the Haunted House which also work as external expressions of a troubled mind and soul. Stephen King, a famously (and wrongfully) labeled “lowbrow” popular writer, has given us superb examples of a haunted hotel in *The Shining* and a haunted car in *Christine*. In the latter book, the repressed and oppressed teenage anti-hero, Arnie (known among his high school bullies as “Pizzaface”), gets the ‘girl’ of his dreams – a long, sleek, perfect car that systematically kills his tormentors and ultimately destroys him. The anguish and rage of the teenage outcast take form in a single ferocious metaphor. The car *is* Arnie, as he would like to be: vengeful, beautiful and indestructible.

This whirlwind tour of the ghost story has touched down on only a few of many possible places. But it has made, I hope, one essential point: Ghost stories, at their best, are serious writing. Like all authentic art, a great ghost story starts something. It sets up a dialogue in our heads and causes us to ask questions of ourselves, about ourselves. It lets us take nothing for granted, and forces us to look at once familiar things in a new way.

The world of the ghostly tale is the world of possibilities, the Great Good Place of “What if?”

What if the drowned passengers do not forgive the boatman? What if I switch on the light in my library tonight, to find myself staring back at me from my own chair? What if the antique choker you love to wear is still dear to someone long dead?

As time goes by, our experience of books, like everything else, changes. These days I like my ghostly effects to be subtle and suggestive of multiple meanings. It is not so important to have the ghosts horribly, palpably ‘there’. The stories I most enjoy now are likely to involve a ‘ghost of a chance’, a buried memory, or a long-

hidden secret or regret which haunts the characters.


The essential ingredient is, as it has always been, that captivating sense of the ‘Past’ which continues to cast its spell over me. “The Masque of the Red Death” has been jostled aside on my bookshelves by the stories of Alice Munro “especially the collection *Open Secrets* and *The love of a Good Woman*), A.S. Byatt and William Trevor.

So it came as a wonderful surprise three years ago, to find my 10-year-old daughter, Emily, “curdled up” one rainy day with the *Selected Works of Edgar Allan Poe*. She was reading “The Raven” over and over, repeating aloud the singsong, quintessentially Gothic verses.

*Once upon a midnight dreary
While I pondered weak and weary
Over many a quaint and curious
Volume of forgotten lore . . .*

She loved it so much, and repeated it so often, that she committed the whole poem to memory, where it still resides. Happily, Poe has proven to be just the beginning.

Ghost stories are doing for Emily what they did for me so long ago – they are opening to her the world of writing, and so, of the imagination and human experience.

And I have regained my beloved old ritual. At the first far-off rumble of thunder, my daughter and I take up our books and our duvets. We settle into our places at the rain-streaked window. 

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