

Ghost Stories

Ruth Heholt, ruth.heholt@falmouth.ac.uk

Falmouth University

Falmouth, UK

Definition

A ghost story is a short story that contains some sort of encounter with a ghost. Although the ghost is most usually apprehended visually, it can be sensed in other ways: heard, intuited or felt. Ghost stories tend to be brief and somewhat formulaic. A sub-section of ghost stories do not involve an actual ghost, but can portray encounters which can be described as supernatural and involve things like prescience or second sight. Most ghost stories involve an element of fear. Because of its traditional domestic location, its function as one of few paid employments for women, and the way it often featured crimes committed against them, the Victorian ghost story ought perhaps to always be viewed as the province of women. The ghost story by Victorian women becomes an entity in its own right: a space where retribution, vengeance and an often vitriolic (and justified) exposé of the position of women in patriarchal nineteenth-century society is played out again and again. Subversive and yet secretive, women's ghost stories rise up like the wraiths and apparitions that populate the tales – haunting Victorian society.

Keywords

Ghosts, short stories, atmosphere, fear, supernatural, subversion, empowerment

Introduction

Perhaps the most famous ghost story writer is the towering figure of **Charles Dickens**. Despite this, the Victorian ghost story ought perhaps to always be viewed as the province of women. Women's place in Victorian times was supposed to be in the **domestic space**, and the classic setting for the ghost story is the home: the haunted house. The traditional place for the convivial, communal sharing of ghost stories is round the fire at Christmastime. The

home is also where women were writing. Employment possibilities for Victorian women were limited, and writing offered one of the most accessible and respectable occupations. Women could make money from writing and many of the more prominent women ghost story writers supported families of many children by penning and selling their tales. Magazines, [periodicals](#) and the popular press all bristled with short stories, and the ghost story was the most popular of all types of tales.

Spiritualism

Each generation and each global location have ghost stories. From the hungry ancestral ghosts of China to the haunting of the internet web-spaces of today, the dead, it seems, do not want to leave. Ghosts are revenants: returning beings, and the ghost story itself always seems to offer a return. The original “round the fire” was the communal space where oral tales of darkness and terror were told and retold – never quite word for word, morphing and altering as the teller and the times changed. The Victorian ghost story has its roots in these oral traditions, as well as the [Gothic novels](#) of the late 1700s. William Hughes quotes Katy Jordan who argues that “Each century generates ghosts which are in tune with the social attitudes of the times” (2001), and over the years the type of ghost and the type of ghost story necessary for its time modified and altered. In 1848, the (once very popular) author [Catherine Crowe](#) published one of the most successful book of ghost stories in the Victorian era: *The Night Side of Nature: or of Ghosts and Ghost Seers*. This book was an almost instant success and generated much debate. From the point of view of someone reading today, it is a strange and somewhat difficult read. There is much speculation about the nature of spirits, the soul and the afterlife, interspersed with what seem to be disjointed snippets of ghost-sightings and instances of second sight, dreams and warnings. Crowe wanted to present these “real-life” experiences to the scientific community to investigate – and her intention was to break down the bastions of male-dominated science.

In the same year that saw the publication of *The Night Side*, in America the Fox sisters were hearing rapping. These supposed communications from spirits led to the rise of spiritualism in American and later, in Europe. This hugely popular semi-religious movement coincided with the rise of the ghost story. Andrew Smith suggests that “The culture of [spiritualism](#) played an important part in shaping a language of spectrality which in turn informed literary representations of ghosts” (2010). Spiritualism offered an arena for

feminine empowerment as female mediums led séances and communed with the dead. As spiritualism offered a place for women, so did the ghost story.

Domestic Crime and Gendered Repression

One of the main reasons for the popularity of the female-authored ghost story is that it has the potential to subvert Victorian society's repressive patriarchal regimes which were designed to keep women, children and servants "in their place." As Melissa Edmundson says, Victorian women, "adapted the ghost story to bring greater attention to issues involving gender, class, sexuality, race and economic concerns" (2018). The ghost story, by its very nature, uncovers what is hidden; brings to light that which is invisible; re-covers that which has been erased. In this way it became the ideal genre to shed light on domestic crimes, violence and repression. Murdered women and children litter the pages of ghost stories by women and the domestic abuses that lead to their deaths are exposed by their return. Vanessa D. Dickerson argues that, "Victorian women were at some more profound level the real ghosts in the Victorian noon-tide" (1996). Women were ghostly and barely visible in Victorian society. Yet ghost stories written by women gave women a voice and made sure that, through this popular genre, society listened.

Many stories highlighted the treatment of women by men. "The Shadow in the Corner" by [Mary Elizabeth Braddon](#), (1879), tells the tale of a young servant girl driven to suicide by her arrogant, patronizing patriarchal employer as he lies to save face. In "John Charrington's Wedding" by [E. Nesbit](#), (an author better known for her charming children's tales), a bride is abducted by her dead bridegroom who refuses to let her go. In "Man Size in Marble" in the same volume, (1891), another woman is seemingly raped and murdered because her husband will not heed her terror and premonition of doom. In [Rhoda Broughton](#)'s tale "The Man with the Nose" (1872), another woman's fear is ignored by her husband with appalling consequences. However, in other tales as Jennifer Uglow asserts, "passionate women wreak vengeance on false, weak men, selfish betrayers of women's trust" (1988). A dead wife solicits embraces from her terrified, shrieking, husband after his betrayal of her love in Nesbit's "From the Dead" (1891). A student who has abandoned his lover is danced to death in her "Cold Embrace" (Braddon 1860). In the tales many rational unbelieving men are done to death or driven into madness by their encounters with that which they have denied. "Oh, my God! I have seen it" cries the dying young man Ralph after he

insists on inhabiting a room known to be haunted (Broughton 1868), and he is not the only one whose masculinity is undone by a ghostly encounter. Uglow points out that “the experience of seeing a ghost pushes men into conventional female roles: timid, nervous helpless” (1988). Men do not come out well in ghost stories penned by women. The ghost story, it seems, is emphatically a woman’s place.

Summary

“Ghosts saturated Victorian men”: so asserted Nina Auerbach in 2004. Yet it was women who wrote the most powerful tales. Ghost stories offered women a unique take on Victorian society and different ways of exploring, examining and sometimes subverting their position and the expectations put upon them. The domestic sphere, the behaviour of men, the consequences of convention and the possibilities offered by another type of life were all open subjects in women’s writing about ghosts. In an era when fiction writing was often seen as frivolous and women’s writing in particular castigated as “silly,” the seemingly lightweight and popular genre of the ghost story opened up new worlds and new possibilities for the women that wrote them as well as the women who read these tales of death, retribution, vengeance and (sometimes) justice.

Cross References: Braddon, Mary Elizabeth; Broughton, Rhoda; Crowe, Catherine; Gothic Fiction; Nesbit, Edith; Sensation Fiction

References

Auerbach, Nina. (2004). Ghost of Ghosts. *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 32(1), 277-84.

Braddon, Mary Elizabeth. (1879/2018). The Shadow in the Corner. In Melissa Edmundson, *Avenging Angels: Ghost Stories by Victorian Women Writers* (pp. 47-66). Brighton: Victorian Secrets Press.

---. The Cold Embrace. (1860/1992). In Richard Dalby (Ed.), *The Virago Gook of Victorian Ghost Stories* (pp. 44-51). London: Virago Press.

Broughton, Rhoda. (1872/1995). “The Man with the Nose”. In Rhoda Broughton’s *Ghost Stories and Other Tales of Mystery and Suspense*. Lincolnshire: Paul Watkins Publishing.

---. (1872/1995). "The Truth the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth". In Rhoda Broughton's *Ghost Stories and Other Tales of Mystery and Suspense*. Lincolnshire: Paul Watkins Publishing.

Cox, Michael and R. A. Gilbert. (1991). Introduction. In Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert (Eds.). *Victorian Ghost Stories* (pp. ix-xx). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Dickerson, Vanessa D. (1996). *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural*. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press.

Edmundson, Melissa. 2018. *Avenging Angels: Ghost Stories by Victorian Women Writers*. Brighton: Victorian Secrets Press.

Hughes, William. (2001). Review of *The Haunted Landscape: Folklore, Ghosts and Legends of Wiltshire* by Katy Jordan. *Gothic Studies* 3(1), 120.

Nesbit, Edith. (1891/1992). "John Charrington's Wedding". In Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert (Eds.), *Victorian Ghost Stories: An Anthology* (pp. 360-366). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

---. (1891/2006). "Man Size in Marble". <http://gutenberg.net.au/ebooks06/0602511h.html>. Accessed 20.08.19.

Owen, Alex. (1989). *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Smith, Andrew. (2010). *The Ghost Story: 1840-1920: A Cultural History*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Uglow, Jennifer. (1992). Introduction. In Richard Dalby (Ed.), *The Virago Gook of Victorian Ghost Stories* (pp. ix-xvii). London: Virago Press.