

“Every Word of it is True”: The Cultural Significance of the Victorian Ghost Story

by

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ABSTRACT: The implication of belief, that association between the veridical ghost tale and the fictional ghost tale—an association resulting from the onslaught of reason and science, and consequently spiritual doubt—remains largely responsible for the fictional ghost tale's critical demise. A rise in the spiritualist movement produces a specific literature that coincides with the rise in interest in its fictional counterpart. Both the veridical ghost tale and the fictional ghost tale reach their heights in popularity at precisely the same time; not coincidental, but well planned by talented writers who viewed the preoccupation with ghosts as a platform from which a variety of contemporary issues could be candidly dealt. The Victorian literary ghost figure simultaneously, and ingeniously, fills a spiritual void, satisfies a consumer need for entertainment, and provides an opportunity for cultural commentary. The voice of the Victorian ghost, and the subsequent understanding of its haunted are of distinct cultural significance.

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*But it is a venture to do as you would have me.
Pen, ink, and paper are cold vehicles for the marvellous, and a “reader” decidedly a
more critical animal than a “listener”.*

Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu

Introduction

“Well, what is a ghost?”

“A ghost is nothing – an airy nothing manufactured by your own disordered senses of your own over-excited brain.”

“I beg to observe that I never saw a ghost in my life.”

“I am glad to hear it. It does you credit.”

Lanoe Falconer, *Cecilia de Noël*

To admit to believing in ghosts has been, for centuries, considered something of an intellectual indiscretion. In fact, when one of the most famous ghost-writers of all time, M. R. James, was asked if he believed in ghosts he diplomatically skirted the question: “I am prepared to consider evidence and accept it if it satisfies me” (*Collected Ghost Stories* ix). Given his position as Provost, first of King’s College and then of Eton, his reticence is understandable. As Michael Cox points out, James never discussed publicly “what exactly constituted evidence for the supernatural, or on what side of the argument for the existence of ghosts he felt the balance of probability tipped,” because to have done so would have compromised his “public position” (Cox xv).

The implication of belief, the true cause of James’s “magisterial avoidance of the issue,” is one reason that tales belonging to the ghost story genre have been so unfairly neglected in academic scholarship (Cox and Gilbert, *English Ghost Stories* xi). The inherent association between the veridical ghost tale, that is, a real ghostly experience, and the fictional ghost tale has largely been responsible for the genre’s critical demise. Julia Briggs inadvertently identifies another and perhaps more pertinent reason why relatively few academic theses are dedicated to this particular literary genre in her preface

to *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story*: “Many of the most effective ghost stories are quite reasonably concerned with entertaining, rather than making a serious contribution to literature” (8). But as close scrutiny of the Victorian ghost story genre demonstrates, such an assumption is overly simplistic.

The fact that many of the most effective Victorian ghost stories are entertaining need not impede any serious study of what is arguably the most fascinating of all literary genres, nor should the perennial question of whether or not one believes or disbelieves in ghosts. In order to dispel the traditional notion of the Victorian ghost story as inferior literature, it is necessary to redefine the cultural profile of the Victorian ghost. By positioning the Victorian ghost as a valuable participant in Victorian public discourse, and by re-evaluating its voice as a source of insight, understanding and ultimately power, it is possible to elevate the ghost story to a position of cultural significance.

As early as 1917, Dorothy Scarborough concluded that, whether “eloquently silent” or “terrifyingly fluent,” Victorian ghosts do in fact communicate (97). But few scholars have followed Scarborough’s lead in addressing the importance of this ability. Much is revealed through the voice of the dead. The voice of the Victorian ghost is undeniably influential, and it is important to note that several major authors, whose reputations as serious social novelists were well established, often chose to contribute to the ghost story repertoire. Such authors include, for example, George Eliot, Elizabeth Gaskell, Margaret Oliphant, Sir Walter Scott, Robert Louis Stevenson, and of course, Charles Dickens. The ghost story genre gave these writers license not only to experiment, but in many cases to offer a more provocative cultural commentary than

would normally be deemed acceptable in their more conventional works. What a ghost has to say often challenges complex gender and class assumptions inherent in Victorian society. The most famous ghost story of all, Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, is a case in point—there can be no doubt that the lesson intended for Scrooge regarding the evils of material greed was directed towards the entire Victorian middle class. And Margaret Oliphant's "The Open Door," for instance, presents for discussion rules of parental respectability and responsibility. Such issues were of importance to the very cornerstone of Victorian society—the family. Another example, Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story," addresses the cultural dilemma of premarital sex and illegitimacy—two prevalent women's issues of the day. The Victorian middle class, for whom the ghost story was written, was often wise to fear the ghost in the closet.

The Victorian ghost story is an invaluable source for both the cultural historian and the literary critic. It is my intention in this thesis to position the ghost story as a prevalent and skilful narrative of cultural significance within the context of Victorian progress. The first chapter outlines the relevant historical and cultural conditions of the era in which the ghost story reached its height of popularity, in order to highlight the significance of the genre's contribution to Victorian literature. This section of the thesis explores one of the reactions to the unprecedented progress characteristic of the Victorian period by following the debate between the spiritualist and the sceptic in the pages of the periodical press. The second chapter discusses the literary conventions peculiar to the Victorian ghost story, including those specific generic requirements concerning setting,

plot and character. This chapter pays particular attention to the “prosaic detail of modernity” necessary in establishing a “credible context for supernatural violation” in the ghost story, to the identification of the most prevalent ghost types, and to the element of persuasion required of every story (Cox and Gilbert, *Victorian Ghost Stories* xvi-xvii). The third chapter examines the most alluring ghost type—the perpetually tragic ghost—in the context of two prevalent themes in the Victorian ghost story, cultural injustice and forgiveness. Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story” serves as an excellent example in which to consider the theme of forgiveness on a personal, individual and cultural level. The fourth chapter scrutinises an equally compelling ghost type—the perpetually doomed ghost—in relation to the theme of alienation in Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol*. This chapter investigates the relationship between alienation and unrealistic cultural expectations and the ways in which the figure of the ghost links the two. The final and concluding chapter introduces *Cecilia de Noël*, a Victorian ghost story unique in that it incorporates within its fictional frame the historical debate between the sceptic and the believer.

In her fascinating examination of the supernatural, Victorian writer Catherine Crowe makes a particularly interesting and relevant observation: “The contemptuous scepticism of the last age is yielding to a more humble spirit of inquiry; and there is a large class of persons among the most enlightened of the present, who are beginning to believe that much which they had been taught to reject as fable, has been, in reality, ill-understood truth” (16). This thesis is an investigation into that very possibility.

**“If it be True...If it be Otherwise”: Victorian Spiritualism, The
Periodical Press and a Debate Over Ghosts**

“Man of the worldly mind!” replied the Ghost, “do you believe in me or not?”
Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

To believe or not to believe in ghosts is a question of both literary and historical relevance. The Victorian ghost story works very much on the premise of possibility and is born at a point in history when anything seemed possible. Victorians lived their daily lives in an economic, political, and cultural climate distinguished by rapid and innovative change. Improvement, advancement, discovery, and invention in science, industrial technology, transportation, communication, sanitation, medicine and health care were all intended to pave the way to a better life. Yet even though their world was altered right before their very eyes, Victorians remained sceptical—they did not know what to believe or believe in. In citing the onslaughts of reason and science, new economic demands, unfamiliar social patterns and simple indifference as possible explanations for the gradual fading of Victorian faith, Janet Oppenheim draws attention to the fact that Victorians themselves “were fully aware that the place of religion in the cultural fabric of their times was scarcely secure” (Oppenheim 1). This realisation, Oppenheim suggests, led thousands of Victorian men and women, in an effort to counter their feelings of insecurity, away from traditional contemporary churches and toward spiritualism and psychical research.

The spiritualist, as described by Oppenheim, had an accepting frame of mind, believed firmly in human survival after death, in the possible activity of disembodied human spirits and in the reality of communication with the dead (3). This is not to suggest that only the spiritualist had an exclusive right to believe in ghosts or that anyone remaining true to the well-established religious organisations of the day could not believe in ghosts; it is merely to suggest that the influence of the spiritualist movement could hardly go unnoticed. In a time of, what was for many, incomprehensible change and consequently crisis, spiritualism offered both a reassuring and interesting alternative to “normal” Christian doctrine and contemporary scientific argument. Briggs captures the essence of spiritualism within its proper historical context when she points to the Victorian ghost as “comforting proof that there *was* something beyond. Man was not, as he had come to fear, alone in a universe infinitely older, larger, wilder and less anthropocentric than he had previously supposed” (24).

Spiritualism was frequently viewed as a compromise between the opposing philosophies of science and religion, and was likewise accredited with having solved what Oppenheim refers to as the “most agonizing of Victorian problems: how to synthesize modern scientific knowledge and time-honored religious traditions concerning man, God, and the universe” (59). Writing in 1880, John Stephen Farmer, the first editor of the most successful spiritualist weekly, *Light*, identified the movement’s sense of compromise as its greatest asset. If there was a common creed to which the majority of spiritualists did adhere, it was to Farmer’s belief that “standing midway between the opposing schools [of faith and science], [spiritualism] gives to the one a scientific basis

for the divine things of old, whilst it restores to the other the much needed evidence of its expressed faith in the duality and continuity of life” (Farmer v-vi). Advocates of spiritualism may have been overly optimistic in their claims, however, for as Dickerson points out spiritualism remained from its very inception “the despair of science” and the “proverbial thorn” in the side of the religious establishment (21).

The scientific establishment quite clearly wished to distance itself from the pseudosciences, including spiritualism, mesmerism and phrenology. At the centre of the controversy was the scientific method with its possibility of reducing to scientific law all that might be explained. The method, “hailed, almost reverently, as the surest means of attaining the truth,” set a new standard of credibility. The scientist who employed the method was able to satisfy the Victorian craving for proof and received, for doing so, “unprecedented public admiration” (Oppenheim 200). Spiritualists were quick to recognize the advantage of associating themselves with the scientific community: “Deeply as numberless spiritualists in Britain cherished spiritualism for the religious comfort that it offered, they tended to emphasize the purportedly scientific foundations of their beliefs when they urged the claims of spiritualism to public attention and respect” (Oppenheim 199). There was, however, little sympathy in the scientific community for the spiritualist approach. A pseudoscience whose roots were grounded in folklore and magic and whose main premise defied scientific rationale was seen by non-spiritualists as detrimental to true scientific progress. The scientific community was vocal in its disapproval. Distinguished scientist T. H. Huxley spoke blatantly: “The only good that I can see in a demonstration of the truth of ‘Spiritualism’ is to furnish an additional

argument against suicide. Better live a crossing-sweeper than die and be made to talk twaddle by a 'medium' hired at a guinea a *séance*" (Huxley 1:420). Another pre-eminent man of science, Charles Darwin, reiterated Huxley's views more diplomatically. Regarding the act of conjuring spirits Darwin believed that "an enormous weight of evidence would be requisite to make one believe in anything beyond mere trickery" (Darwin 2:365).

The scientific community was not the only one to be disrupted by spiritualism. The church, itself in a state of uncertainty, was to an even greater extent concerned about the direction this "new religion" was taking. Most disturbing to the spiritualist was the initial reaction from the clerical community that quickly aligned spiritualism with the devil. The satanic interpretation of spiritualism arose from how clerics understood spiritual manifestations. They associated such manifestations with spirits or devils "personifying who or what they please in order to undermine Christianity and ruin men's souls" (Davies 322). Such criticism was met with a variety of defences easily summarized in William Howitt's frank concession that "undoubtedly the devil takes care to have a finger in this matter, as he does in everything on earth" (Howitt qtd. in Barkas 154). As the spiritualist movement gathered momentum, its threat to Christianity was perceived in terms of the "sheer impiety" of its practices (Aytoun 633). Such reactions were historically predictable:

The Catholic priest of the Middle Ages, like the Protestant minister of the Reformation, had keenly felt the rivalry of the village wizard as an alternative purveyor of magical remedies, and the church had for centuries unsuccessfully

attempted to monopolize all access routes to the spirit world. What was involved was not merely the salvation of souls, but the very foundation of ecclesiastical authority and power. (Oppenheim 65)

Most threatening to the church's foundation of power was the practice through which spiritualism attracted followers—the séance. The séance was considered offensive to the traditional solemnity of the church, largely because it appeared to be more effective, but ultimately because it decreased the assumed power of the church. Dickerson explains: “While the church called for patience that would by and by net good Christians the Kingdom of God and a reunion with loved ones, séances where individuals could supposedly communicate through mediums with the dead offered more direct and immediately gratifying contact with the other side” (22).

There is no doubt that spiritualism's success rested on its evidential strengths. Spiritualists were boastful in this regard. Spiritualism could supply “sure and certain and *palpable* evidence that to every human being God gives a soul which he ordains shall not perish when the body dies,” claimed *Art Journal* editor and British spiritualist, Samuel Carter Hall (6). London wine merchant and spiritualist Newton Crosland insisted that “the miracles of Spiritualism, acted out in our presence, furnish us exactly with the demonstration we require to overwhelm the reasoning of the unbeliever” and Thomas Shorter, co-editor of the *Spiritual Magazine* throughout the 1860s, was convinced that spiritualism demonstrated immortality “as it can be demonstrated in no other way” (Crosland 9-10; Shorter qtd. in Oppenheim 64). The séance was clearly instrumental in the struggle for power between spiritualists and the clergy; the séance could supply what

the church could not—proof. The Victorian desire for proof regarding life after death was immediately satisfied and in a manner more congruent with the scientific method than with the traditional pageantry of the church. Direct access and instant gratification through a procedure purportedly supported by scientific theory were spiritualism's greatest selling features, and from the cleric's perspective, a rather intimidating and unfair advantage.

Ghostly possibility was both a controversial and intriguing subject. The debate over the ghost's existence remained a popular Victorian preoccupation, and nowhere was this preoccupation more fervently addressed than in the periodical press. Newspapers and magazines played a crucial role in answering, for the Victorian reading public, whether or not ghostly existence was a reasonable consideration. The subject was more than adequately covered from both sides of the debate. For the spiritualist, there was a plethora of print dedicated to the wide range of beliefs held by the movement; for the sceptic, an equally incredible, and often more engaging, range of rebuttal. The dozens of newspapers and magazines that constituted the British spiritualist press were as varied as the movement itself in doctrine and approach. Some journals were directed towards a national readership while others focussed on local news and events. Some were in the form of propaganda renouncing the close-mindedness of the sceptic while others furthered the spiritualist platform in a more tactful or positive manner. Most included information about lectures and public meetings, notifications of séances and advertisements submitted by individual mediums. Common to all journals was individual testimony relating personal spiritualist experience through which readers were introduced

to “indubitable proof of spirit identity” (Oppenheim 44). Of the dozens of journals dedicated to the spiritualist movement throughout the latter half of the Victorian period, five in particular enjoyed considerable success: *The Spiritual Magazine*, published monthly between 1860 and 1877, whose “spiritualism was firmly grounded in the Christian faith” and whose goal was “to present spiritualism as a thoroughly respectable and plausible phenomenon”; *Medium and Daybreak*, the weekly paper having the largest circulation of all spiritualist papers, published from 1870 until 1895; *The Spiritualist Newspaper*, a weekly associated with its editor William Henry Harrison’s investigative, analytic and scientific approach to spiritualism, subtitled *A Record of the Progress of the Science and Ethics of Spiritualism*, published from 1869 until 1882; *Light*, a weekly first published in 1881 with the support of the British National Association of Spiritualists; and *Two Worlds*, the first weekly to be published in Manchester, thus breaking London’s spiritualist publication monopoly, and appealing in particular to the non-Christian, “progressive” spiritualist working class, published in 1887 (Oppenheim 44-47). Interestingly, both *Light* and *Two Worlds* continue to be published today.

Investigation into “human survival after death,” into the “possible activity of disembodied human spirits” and into “the reality of communication with the dead” was not restricted to the spiritualist press. Such topics were of interest to a large majority of the Victorian reading public and editors of such periodicals as *Bentley’s Magazine*, *Blackwood’s Magazine*, *The Cornhill Magazine*, the *Daily Chronicle*, the *Examiner*, *Fraser’s Magazine*, the *Morning Advertiser*, *The Saturday Review*, *Temple Bar*, *The Times*, *Household Words* and *All the Year Round* were quick to respond to what appeared

to be the curiosity of the day. The manner in which these periodicals addressed the subject of ghosts differed considerably from the manner in which the same subject was treated by the spiritualist press. While spiritualist periodicals campaigned on behalf of those already converted, the mainstream press sided with those who were sceptical and the agenda resulting from the relationship was clearly to expose the “shady and ridiculous side of spiritualism” (Oppenheim 48). Articles and letters appearing throughout mainstream pages “reported the world of séances and spirits in a tone of condescension, repeatedly questioning the judgement and critical faculties—not to mention the honesty—of spiritualists in general” (Oppenheim 48).

It was in the mainstream press that spiritualists were publicly scorned, ridiculed, and accused of willingly participating in “criminally deceptive” activities (Oppenheim 48). Once again, the séance was the major cause of concern, and the majority of criticism directed towards the practice consisted of accusations of fraud and/or insanity. “The Ghost of the Cock Lane Ghost,” published in *Household Words* in November 1852, for example, relates the experience of two reporters, Brown and Thompson, who reply to an advertisement in *The Times*, in which a showman known as Mr. Stone “begged leave to inform the nobility and gentry that he has just returned from the United States, accompanied by Mrs. M. B. Hayden for the purpose of Demonstrating the wonderful Phenomena known in that country as Spiritual Manifestations, and which have created the most intense excitement in all classes of society” (Morley 217). The two men’s investigation was intended to determine whether or not ghosts were real, and to prove

whether the séance was a true paranormal experience or one produced by fraudulent means:

If it be true, as the believers in the “spirit knockings” tell us, that the spirits of beloved friends whom we have lost speak to us by a noise of rapping, then our most solemn feelings and our tenderest emotions are awakened by the act of positive communion with the dead. *If it be otherwise*—if that which is the holiest ground within the human heart be through such exhibitions dug into for gold by coarse impostors—if the simple questioner who with trembling nerves believes that she is brought into the presence of an angel mother with whom it is a foretaste of Heaven to converse—if she be played upon by cheats who laugh under their sleeves at her credulity and turn her money in their pockets,—then such cheating is no matter for amusement. That is an impiety and wickedness far exceeding the measure of an ordinary fraud. (Morley 217; emphasis added)

When Brown and Thompson recall their séance experience with Mrs. Hayden, in which Thompson’s dead mother is incorrectly identified, Brown’s live mother is presumed dead, Thompson’s sister who was alive and well, appears from beyond the grave—apparently after having been there for two years—and the answer to the Brown’s question “How many children shall I have?” runs into the thousands, the verdict is rendered: *otherwise*.

Articles running along the same vein are numerous, often humorous, and not surprisingly, frequently authored by Charles Dickens. Dickens was known for having “something of a hankering” after ghosts. In fact, according to his friend and biographer

John Forster, “such was [Dickens’s] interest generally in things supernatural, that, but for the strong restraining power of his common sense, he [himself] might have fallen into the follies of Spiritualism” (427). Dickens’s journalistic perspectives concerning the ghost are often overshadowed by his fictional endeavours concerning the same. But as Louise Henson points out, “Dickens participated in wide-ranging and sometimes fierce debates about the nature and authenticity of ghostly phenomena,” and it was in his capacity as investigative journalist that he was particularly adept at “influencing the public mind on matters supernatural” (44). In “The Spirit Business,” for instance, Dickens makes some fairly honest observations on the latest in manifestation fashion while perusing two numbers of the *Spiritual Telegraph*, a newspaper published in New York. He cites an individual case in which a medium records her hand involuntarily writing “meaning sentences without any intention, or knowing what they were to be.” When a pencil and paper were lying on a table the pencil “came into” her hand and an “unseen iron grasp compressed the tendons of [her] arm” which was “flung violently forward on the paper.” When the same person inquires of her readers—“Is this Insanity?”—Dickens takes the liberty of replying, “we rather think it is” (219). Dickens’s assessment of another manifestation recorded in the pages of the *Spiritual Telegraph* is similarly forthright. Having been supposedly “unconscious for thirty minutes” and “under the influence of spirits,” a séance participant claims to have “had a vision of stalks and leaves, ‘a large species of fruit, somewhat resembling a pine-apple,’ and ‘a nebulous column, somewhat resembling the milky way,’ which nothing but spirits could account for, and from which nothing but soda-water, or time, is likely to have recovered him.” Dickens’s

interpretation of the event: “We believe this kind of manifestation is usually followed by a severe headache next morning, attended by some degree of thirst” (219).

Not all articles written for the mainstream press are as satiric as those written by Dickens, but articles such as “Stranger Than Fiction,” in which author Robert Bell defends his séance experiences as genuine, were exceedingly rare. Unfortunately for the spiritualist, the majority of the mainstream press shared the opinion of Abraham Hayward, author of “Spiritualism, as related to Religion and Science,” published in *Fraser’s Magazine*, who dismissed spiritualism as the “popular delusion” of the day, and described its mediums as unremarkable, both intellectually and morally.¹

As negatively as spiritualism is portrayed, the extreme enthusiasm with which its members initiated interest did provide the mainstream press a legitimate opportunity to investigate further the phenomenon of the ghost, in both its veridical and fictional context. It is no coincidence that the period in which the fictional ghost story reaches its height in popularity concurs with the rise of spiritualism. What was real for the spiritualist became subject matter for the fictional ghost-writer. There can be no doubt that veridical and fictional ghost stories did influence each other, that each lent to the other a certain degree of credibility, and that the success of each was largely based on the possibility of actuality. In fact, much of the appeal of the ghost story lies in the possibility of actuality and the ultimate success of a ghost story often rests entirely on this very premise. Dickens argued this thesis in 1848 when reviewing, for the *Examiner*, one of the most popular and successful books on the ghost, Catherine Crowe’s *The Night Side of Nature; Or Ghosts and Ghost Seers*. Although Dickens was unable to

deny the book's popularity, his review rendered the book incredible.² At the heart of his criticism was Dickens's concern regarding the authenticity of the tales Crowe relates. His initial objection revolves around Crowe's intention to equate ghost stories with proof of "the immortality of what we call the soul" (Crowe 16). According to Dickens, Crowe's intention is compromised by the method she employs to communicate her views to her readers:

Mrs. Crowe, without enforcing any particular theory or construction of her own, but apparently with an implicit belief in everything she narrates, and a purpose of communicating the same belief to her readers, shrinks neither from dreams, presentiments, warnings, wraiths, witches, doubles, apparitions, troubled spirits, haunted houses, spectral lights, apparitions attached to certain families, nor even from the tricky spirit, Robin Goodfellow himself; but calls credible witnesses into court on behalf of each and all, and accumulates testimony on testimony until the Jury's hair stands on end, and going to bed becomes uncomfortable. (131)

Although the accumulation of "testimony on testimony" is testimony itself to the popularity and widespread belief in the subject, Dickens dismisses Crowe's evidence as hearsay. Her beliefs, which she admits are guided only by "experience, observation, and intuition," lack, in Dickens's opinion, the reasonable degree of proof expected by the Victorian reading public (Crowe 16). It was not Dickens's intention to "settle what can or cannot be, after death,"—he claimed to be neither so "bold" nor so "arrogant" in such a matter—but rather to draw attention to the fact that ghosts are elusive, that "their alleged appearances have been, in all ages, marvellous, exceptional, and resting on

imperfect grounds of proof,” that they are often “delusions superinduced by a well-understood, and by no means uncommon disease,” that “they are often asserted to be seen...in that imperfect [and unreliable] state of perception between sleeping and waking,” and that by this definition Crowe’s ghosts were no exception (Storey 116; Dickens 132).

After identifying “an excited imagination” and “coincidence” as reasonable explanations behind some of the ghost sightings Crowe presents, Dickens selects the case of “The Ghostly Soldier” to validate his theory “that it is the peculiarity of almost all ghost stories, as contradistinguished from all other kinds of narratives purporting to be true, to depend, *as* ghost stories, on some one little link in the chain of evidence, and that supposing that link to be destructible, the whole supernatural character is gone” (132). “The Ghostly Soldier” relates a strange occurrence in the household of a Colonel M. One evening, Mrs. M., alone with her twelve-year-old son and her maid, Ann, noticed a soldier, “who was walking backwards and forwards in the drying ground, behind the house, where some linen was hanging on the lines.” Worried his intention may be to steal the linen, Mrs. M. instructed Ann to bring it in from the outside. As the frightened girl hastily pulled in the wash, the soldier continued to walk, as before, “taking no notice of her whatever.” When the Colonel, who had been dining out, returned home, his wife lost no time in drawing his attention to the man outside, saying she was at a loss as to why he was there; “whereupon, Ann added, jestingly, ‘I think it’s a ghost, for my part!’” The Colonel immediately intervened and

calling a large dog that was lying in the room, and accompanied by the little boy, who begged to be permitted to go also, he stepped out and approached the stranger; when, to his surprise, the dog, which was an animal of high courage, instantly flew back, and sprung through the glass door, which the Colonel had closed behind him, shivering the panes all around.

The Colonel, meantime, advanced and challenged the man repeatedly, without obtaining any answer or notice whatever; till, at length, getting irritated, he raised a weapon with which he had armed himself, telling him he ‘must speak, or take the consequences,’ when just as he was preparing to strike, lo! there was nobody there! The soldier had disappeared, and the child sunk senseless to the ground. Colonel M. lifted the boy in his arms, and as he brought him into the house, he said to the girl, ‘You are right, Ann. It *was* a ghost!’ (Crowe 199-200; qtd. in Dickens 133)

Dickens immediately pinpoints the “one little link” on which the story’s generic identification teeters, and then proceeds to decompose the story’s supernatural character:

There is something vaguely terrible in the opening of this story. But, take away the dog, or the implied occasion of the dog’s terror, and, as a ghost story, the whole tumbles down like a house of cards. That a soldier, having a pistol presented at him, with a warning that he was going to be shot, should be disposed to retreat, is strictly in accordance with the military tactics of flesh and blood. That he was likely to have had the means of retreating quickly, in a yard behind a house where clothes lines were hanging, and, possibly, where some large piece of

linen, not easily removable by one girl in a hurry, was still left drying, is highly probable. Nobody appears to have wondered how he got in. That a child should be alarmed, and swoon, when he supposed a man was going to be shot dead before his eyes is the likeliest thing in the world. That this soldier may have known of some secret affecting Colonel M., which Colonel M. may have desired to treat with him about, and to hush up, is as least more probable than the apparition which disappeared when it was going to be fired at—exactly the time, of all others, when it could have given a singularly awful proof of its supernatural nature, by remaining. (133)

Dickens systematically dissects the course of events and in so doing negates any possibility of actuality. The tale is rendered, whether as veridical *or* fictional, unsuccessful. Crowe's account, in Dickens's opinion, simply fails to satisfy the requirements of a "good" ghost story.

Dickens's review of *The Night Side of Nature* is historically significant for several reasons. It simultaneously exposes the inherent association between the veridical and fictional ghost story and accredits the periodical press as the essential segue between the two, it serves as a very early introduction to ghost story technique and theory, and it suggests that, above all, the one element required in relating any and all ghost tales, be they veridical or fictional, is skill.

To believe or not to believe in ghosts remained a contentious question to the very end of the Victorian period. Nothing a Victorian spiritualist claimed was ever enough to convince a Victorian sceptic of the ghost's existence. But the debate between the two has

still proven valuable. Although it offers no resolution to the question of belief, it does capture the dilemma of an age. It exposes a society spiritually dissatisfied and confused, and reflects its attempt to “synthesize modern scientific knowledge and time-honored religious traditions;” indeed a daunting task (Oppenheim 59). And more importantly, at least from this perspective, it provides an introduction to what was then a new literary genre. It was after all the enthusiastic spiritualist who sparked an interest in literature’s most intriguing subject, the ghost.

Notes

¹ Authors associated with the mainstream press use the term “popular delusion” repeatedly. “Doubtfully Divine Missions,” another article which defines spiritualism as popular delusion, refers to “some of the religious impostures which have run their course and been exploded in times past” as “a warning to the credulous who have not yet wholly surrendered their reason and their common sense to this egregious folly.” Unsigned Review. “Doubtfully Divine Missions.” *All The Year Round*. May (1866): 404-08. And when addressing those Christians who were yet inclined to yield to spiritualism—“this frightful delusion—which, after all, their common sense should disdain,” the author of “Spiritual Manifestations” suggests “we can afford to smile at the folly of their belief, but we cannot excuse the impiety of their practice.” Aytoun, William Edmonstoune. “Spiritual Manifestations.” *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*. May (1853): 629-46.

² In her introduction to the latest edition of Crowe’s *The Night Side of Nature*, Gillian Bennett draws attention to the book’s immense popularity: it “was an instant success, never out of print for at least fifty years, and constantly mined for information by collectors of supernatural stories.”

The Victorian Ghost Story

“...but there is a fashion in ghosts as in other things...If you study the reports of societies that hunt the supernatural, you will find that the latest thing in ghosts is very quiet and common place. Rattling chains and blue lights, and even fancy dress, have quite gone out. And the people who see the ghosts are not even startled at first sight; they think it is a visitor, or a man come to wind the clocks. In fact, the chic thing for a ghost in these days is to be mistaken for a living person.”

Lanoe Falconer, *Cecilia de Noël*

Sir George Atherley, the speaker of the lines quoted above and resident sceptic in Lanoe Falconer’s *Cecilia de Noël*, is quite right. Rattling chains, blue lights, and fancy dress belong to the ghost of the literary past. The Victorian ghost, or “Modern ghost,” as Dorothy Scarborough refers to it, has a look all its own quite distinguishable from any other, as does the story to which it belongs (81-129). The Victorian ghost story is far too often, and often incorrectly, associated with its predecessor, the Gothic novel. While the two genres do share a supernatural element, similarities are, in actuality, few. The difference between the Victorian ghost story and the Gothic novel manifests itself most noticeably in what Robert D. Hume recognises as the first significant component of the Gothic novel—its setting, removed in space or time from “everyday standards of factual probability”—and in what Valdine Clemens quite correctly identifies as the “primary impulse” of the Gothic tradition—the “arousal of fear” (Hume 286; Clemens 1).

An “everyday” setting is essential to the Victorian ghost story, particularly to those stories written in the second half of the period. The traditional historical setting of

the Gothic is replaced with the “prosaic detail of modernity” in order to “establish a credible context for supernatural violation” (Cox and Gilbert, *VGS* xvi-xvii). The shift was necessary, according to M. R. James, to furnish every tale of the ghostly type with the possibility of actuality (*Casting the Runes* 339). While scholars often view this shift as a fundamental reshaping of the Gothic tradition, it is a shift more logically related to the sensation novel.¹ In his introduction to *The Woman in White*, Matthew Sweet defines the “sensation” novel as “an enormously influential branch of Victorian fiction that fused the apprehensive thrills of Gothic literature with the psychological realism of the domestic novel” (xiii). Perhaps the single most important word in Sweet’s definition is “realism,” for it is directly applicable to the ghost story. In the ghost story, the forbidding castles of the Gothic period are exchanged for the realistic Victorian household into which readers are invited to explore the ghostly possibilities inherent in everyday life. The ghost story’s careful attention to domestic detail reveals a great deal about Victorians themselves. Readers are introduced to what Victorians ate, what they drank, how they dressed, the homes they lived in, and the gardens they kept. And as Cox and Gilbert point out, the ghost story also introduces the reader to a number of “apparently settled social structures: marriage, the law, landed and aristocratic society, the Church, the universities, the colonial experience,” any one of which “could provide an ordered microcosm into which the supernatural could intrude” (*VGS* xvii).

One of the finest examples in which to scrutinise the everyday detail inherent in the ghost story is Rhoda Broughton’s “The Truth, the Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth,” published in *Temple Bar* in February 1868. A ghost story with exhaustive

descriptive detail, it unfolds through a series of letters between Mrs. Elizabeth (Bessy) De Wynt and Mrs. Cecilia Montresor. Bessy, being the helpful friend that she is, finds for Cecilia a “house for the season,” or more specifically a “palace at the cost of a hovel,” located in West London (340; 341). The inexpensive rent remains a mystery until Cecilia learns the house is haunted. The first victim to fall to the mysterious “it” is Sarah, the housemaid, who is rendered completely insane by the experience. Cecilia stays in the house until her friend Ralph, who volunteers to exorcise the mysterious “it,” falls down dead in the process.

The letters exchanged between the two young women are valuable for what they reveal about Victorian society in 1868. The first letter immediately informs readers that on May 5 there were “from fifty to one hundred” house agents to which Bessy could make an appeal for proper lodging (340). We learn that three windows to a drawing room is a “must” for a particular class of occupants and that in West London at this particular time very little intermediate housing exists between “what was suited to the means of a duke, and what was suited to the needs of a chimney-sweep” (340). The letter continues to reveal the intimate details of the two drawing rooms that Bessy does indeed rent on Cecilia’s behalf. Bessy describes in detail “a thousand of the important little trivialities that make up the sum of a woman’s life,” including the white curtains, the mirrors—“of which there [were] about a dozen and a half”—the Persian mats, the chairs, lounges, peacock fans, Japanese screens and a “family of china pugs, with blue ribbons round their necks, which ought of themselves to have added fifty pounds a year to the rent” (340-41). Mysteriously reasonable for the time and place was the rent of “three

hundred pounds a year” (341). In Cecilia’s reply, readers are introduced to the cultural etiquette familiar to a woman in her position. We learn that the “wealth of red hair” Florence Watson had last year is now “black as the raven’s wing,” a change considered in at least one woman’s opinion as inappropriate (342). We learn that the clean shaven look for men appears to be out of fashion, that “dresses are gored to as *indecent* an extent as ever,” that “short skirts are rampant,” and that an unaccompanied woman on the streets of West London, even if in a brougham, “does not look *good*” (342). Readers are made aware of Cecilia’s middle-class status when they are introduced to the domestic arrangements of her household: she has in her employ a personal maid, a housemaid, a butler and a cook.

The domestic particulars do eventually give way to the more serious matter at hand, and it is in the ghost story proper that readers become aware of just how far removed from the Gothic tradition the tale really is. The distance becomes particularly obvious in the setting. “The tyranny of the dark, the autocratic rule of twelve or one o’clock as the arbitrary hour for apparitions” is removed, as is the “sullen scenery” associated with the Gothic (Scarborough 104). It is significant that the setting is intentionally illuminated at precisely the point at which each victim is haunted. The first sighting takes place in broad daylight, the second during the evening in a room prepared “nearly as light as day,” and both in a modest, but well-appointed urban dwelling (347). The story is also separated from the Gothic by its content. The final letters between Bessy and Cecilia take on a more serious tone and readers witness the two women debate over a popular issue of the day—spiritualism. We learn that Cecilia is a believer in

ghosts, that Bessy is sceptical, and that both are aware of the period's most famous ghost—"The Cock Lane Ghost."² As the two women become further rooted in the context of their own time they are even further removed from Gothic convention. Neither in setting nor in content does Broughton's work bear any resemblance to the gothic tradition.

In the context of the everyday, the Victorian ghost story also moves further away from the Gothic *premise* on which scholars have all too often assumed it works. In her exploration of the psychological and political implications of Gothic literature, *The Return of the Repressed: Gothic Horror from The Castle of Ortranto to Alien*, Valdine Clemens argues that it is "through the evocation of intense creature-terror that Gothic stories achieve their critical ends of admonishing, foretelling, and instructing," and that the "Gothic tale is generally most effective when it is most affective" (1-3). The ghost story, like the Gothic tale, is indeed "most *effective* when it is most *affective*," but the fear associated with the ghost story is of a different kind than that associated with the Gothic tale. It is not the "primordial" fear so prevalent and naturally evoked in the Gothic tradition, but is a fear complicated by the complex and intimate relationship shared between the ghost and those it haunts. The "primary impulse" of the ghost story, then, is not simply the "arousal of fear," but the awakening of a system of emotions initiated by fright, and ranging from anger and agony, to sorrow and pity, to an often-bittersweet empathy. To conclude, for example, that Scrooge—the most famous of those haunted—is driven to change only by fear would be to account for only a partial transformation in his character and would explain only a small portion of what actually

takes place in Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* (1843). When Scrooge admits to the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come that the lesson intended is learned—"I am not the man I was"—he does so not out of fear, but out of a newfound understanding of the familiar (115). Scrooge is changed not because he is frightened into becoming someone else; he is changed because the pity bestowed upon him by all three spirits is finally instilled in his own heart. The spirits achieve "their critical ends of admonishing, foretelling, and instructing" not simply by arousing fear, but by establishing a relationship based on emotional experiences.

The fear of the unknown or inexplicable, common to the Gothic tale, is transformed into the reinterpretation of the familiar. So distinct is the reshaping of the Gothic tradition—the shift in setting, the reinvention of content and the recasting of a theoretical premise—that the tradition is essentially dissolved and a new form given birth, one worthy of its own generic identification—the *Victorian Ghost Story*.

The vast and varied repertoire claiming Victorian Ghost Story status is not so ubiquitous as to defy definition. While a precise definition varies from one aficionado to the next, Montague Summers, in his introduction to *Victorian Ghost Stories*, provides one on which there is consensus: "There is nothing more difficult to achieve than a first-class ghost story" (xvii). A sentiment shared by virtually all practitioners, Summers's declaration consistently prefaces academic definitions of the genre. What is a ghost story? The majority of anthologists rely first and foremost upon the definition of the ghost. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a ghost as "the soul of a deceased person, spoken of as appearing in a visible form, or otherwise manifesting its presence to the

living” (*OED* 493). A degree of ambiguity within the definition has left some scholars dissatisfied with its lack of specificity. But if the definition of the ghost is problematic, so too is the broad criteria used as a basis for inclusion in an anthologist’s collection. Criteria range from the insistence that the “ghostly protagonist must act with a deliberate intent...more often than not with the intention of frightening or unsettling the reader,” to the simple assumption that “each ghost, whether human or animal phantom or reanimated corpse, must unquestionably be dead” (Cox and Gilbert, *EGS* ix; xvi). The one definition upon which anthologists and scholars alike consistently rely is that of M. R. James’s: “The ghost story is, at its best, only a particular sort of short story” (*Casting the Runes* 339). If taken literally, James’s definition is as precise as is necessary. The Victorian ghost story is governed by a technical structure unique to itself. It is intrinsically defined by its length, its characteristic ghost types and most importantly, by its rhetorical claim to actuality.

In 1919, I. A. Ireland published a work entitled “A Climax for a Ghost Story”:

“How *eerie!*” said the girl advancing cautiously. “And what a heavy door!” She touched it as she spoke and it suddenly swung to with a click.
 “Good Lord!” said the man, “I don’t believe there’s a handle inside. Why, you’ve locked us both in!”
 “Not both of us. Only one of us,” said the girl, and before his eyes she passed straight through the door and vanished. (377)³

Whether or not these few lines constitute the world’s shortest ghost story, or whether they were intended as a strict demonstration of climax provokes further debate; whether they serve as an excellent example of the frame within which a ghost story best works does not. In order to be successful a ghost story *must* be short. Two reasons account for this restriction. The first addresses the fact that the fictional ghost story is a descendent of an

oral tradition. As Peter Penzoldt points out, veridical ghost stories are short: “they contain nothing but the account of the apparition. For the listeners that is all that matters” (16). The necessity for the restriction in length placed upon the fictional story becomes obvious when Penzoldt’s assertion is viewed in light of M. R. James’s claim that “some degree of actuality is the charm of the best ghost stories” (*Casting the Runes* 339). The most efficient way for the fictional ghost story to reach James’s point of actuality, the point at which a reader might reasonably consider the tale before him/her as *real*, is to mimic as closely as possible the oral tradition from which it descends.

Sir Walter Scott was the first to expound the second and more significant reason ghost stories must be short in an article written for the *Foreign Quarterly Review* in July 1827. Scott, who is accredited with having created the prototype for the Victorian ghost story, in “Wandering Willie’s Tale” and “The Tapestry Chamber,” suggests that the very nature of the fictitious supernatural requires “considerable delicacy” in its management (62).⁴ The interest excited by supernatural content, according to Scott, is “of a character which it is extremely difficult to sustain, and of which a very small proportion may be said to be better than the whole” (62). Such interest, in his point of view, is subject to exhaustion. Scott further argues that because the supernatural “loses its effect by being brought much into view,” and because “the first touch of the supernatural is always the most effective,” subsequent experience weakens rather than strengthens the interest excited. The supernatural story must be “brief,” and the appearance of the ghost “rare” and “indistinct” (63). It was when Scott first put his theory into practice that the Victorian ghost story, as a distinct form, emerged.

“Wandering Willie’s Tale,” written in 1824, is Scott’s most successful venture into what did become recognised, by 1850, as a new literary genre. The tale belongs to a category of Victorian ghost stories that may be identified as *episodic* tales. The episodic ghost tale refers to a short ghostly tale situated within another complete and larger work. While short in length and episodic in nature, these tales prove no less effective than other self-contained, or *individual*, ghost stories. In fact, because they are thematically linked segments of a whole, they are arguably even more effective. Scott’s “Wandering Willie’s Tale,” inset into his novel *Redgauntlet*, Dickens’s “The Ghost’s Walk,” inset into his novel *Bleak House* (1853), and the disturbing but effective ghostly episode in Emily Brontë’s *Wuthering Heights* (1847), effectively demonstrate the thematic advantage to the episodic format.

In “Wandering Willie’s Tale,” blind fiddler Willie Steenson details his grandfather Steenie’s adventure into Hell in order to claim a receipt for rent he paid to the evil Sir Robert Redgauntlet just minutes before his death. While in Hell Steenie comes face to face with a wide variety of ghosts, ranging from Sir Robert’s faithful servant Dougal MacCallum to the violent and blood-thirsty warriors of Scotland’s religious and political past. The recently signed and dated receipt Steenie produces for the new laird is accepted as proof of his disturbing supernatural experience. The complex issues of loyalty and friendship, as well as the unsettling consequences of religious and political strife brought to the surface in Willie’s tale, both recall and foreshadow major concerns of the novel proper.

Charles Dickens's *Bleak House* is a text haunted by the ghost of Chesney Wold. The footstep of the deceased Lady Dedlock heard upon the terrace of Chesney Wold animates the warning "pride will have a fall," and in so doing reinforces a major theme of the novel proper. Mrs. Rouncewell, the elderly housekeeper and unofficial historian of Chesney Wold, relates how conflicting political loyalties interfered, with dire consequences, in the relationship between Sir Morbury Dedlock and his wife. Aristocratic pride led to Lady Dedlock's death, but not before she vowed to haunt the terrace of Chesney Wold: "I will die here, where I have walked. And I will walk here, though I am in my grave. I will walk here, until the pride of this house is humbled. And when calamity, or when disgrace is coming to it, let the Dedlocks listen for my step!" (113). Disgrace does befall the present Dedlocks and they become acutely aware of *the ghost's walk* when a suspicion of murder falls upon the beautiful wife of Sir Leicester. Although the accusation proves false, the current Lady Dedlock's secret past, involving a relationship with a member of a lower class from which was born an illegitimate daughter, is revealed. It is when the aristocratic world of Chesney Wold is suddenly and embarrassingly associated with a world of poverty, Tom-all-Alone's, that the significance of the supernatural inset is realised. The present Lady Dedlock shares her predecessor's fate. The malicious attempt made to "reduce her pride to subservience" is fatal—she is found, like her predecessor, lying dead upon a cold pavement (Johnson 765).

One of the shortest and most memorable of all ghostly episodes is Catherine Linton's return to *Wuthering Heights*. The melancholy cries of the shivering ghost-child reverberate throughout the story in its entirety, and conversely, the themes of rejection

that permeate the entire novel culminate in this one scene of denied access. A particularly striking resemblance between the inset and its frame is located in the manner in which the ghost attempts to gain admittance. Much of the novel is concerned with transgressing boundaries, both literally and figuratively, and the violent scene effectively intensifies this preoccupation. The window in the ghostly scene is representative of a variety of boundaries intentionally placed throughout the main novel. As Pauline Nestor points out, “these boundaries are frequently guarded and just as frequently breached. So, while one character after another seeks to control his world by locking others in or out, the novel documents the failure of every such attempt” (xx). The window upon which the ghost scratches to gain admittance is the very window the ghost’s namesake will use to escape the evil clutches of her captor Heathcliff.

“Wandering Willie’s Tale” has the distinction of being both the first episodic ghost tale and the first *individual* ghost story. Two years after its appearance in *Redgauntlet*, it was republished as a self-contained story in the Gothic anthology, *Legends of Terror*. While the episodic format maintained its thematic advantage for a variety of authors throughout the nineteenth century, it was the individual ghost story “perfected in the middle decades...through the medium of magazines” that truly defined what was then considered a new literary genre (Cox and Gilbert, *VGS* xi). The credit for having “consolidated the modern taste and appreciation for the supernatural [short] story” belongs to Charles Dickens alone (Ellis 1002). Dickens was the first to realise the generic potential of the individual ghost story, and the publishing history of *Household Words* between 1850 and 1859, and *All The Year Round* between 1859 and Dickens’s

death in 1870, attests to this fact. Although Dickens did employ the episodic format in his novels as early as 1837 in *The Pickwick Papers* and as late as 1853 in *Bleak House*, it was his revival of a Christmas tradition that led to the popularization of the individual ghost story. Beginning with the very first Christmas issue of *Household Words*, Dickens re-introduced the custom of sharing a ghostly story round the fire on Christmas Eve. The association between ghosts and seasonal festivities, be they Christian or pagan, had long existed and although it is difficult to judge “how far the telling of ghost stories round the Christmas fire was a traditional part of the celebrations before Dickens popularized it as such,” there is no doubt that it was under his influence that the tradition was re-established and continued (Briggs 41).

The first Christmas issue of *Household Words* (December 21, 1850) proved so successful that the following year Dickens produced a special edition known as the “Extra Number for Christmas” (Glancy 59). The Christmas Number soon became a tradition itself and it was within its pages that “the images of ‘Winter Stories—Ghost Stories...round the Christmas fire’” became firmly embedded “in the national consciousness” (Cox and Gilbert, *VGS* xiii).⁵ It was also in the special Christmas Numbers that some of the finest Victorian ghost stories made their debut, including Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story” (*HW* 1852), Wilkie Collins’s “The Dream Woman” (*HW* 1855), Amelia B. Edwards’s “The Phantom Coach” and “The Engineer” (*ATYR* 1864; 1866), Rosa Mulholland’s “Not to be Taken at Bed-Time” (*ATYR* 1865), J. S. Le Fanu’s “Green Tea,” “The White Cat of Drumgunniol,” and “Madam Crowl’s Ghost” (*ATYR* 1869; 1870), as well as Dickens’s own famous contributions “To be Taken

with a Grain of Salt” (*ATYR* 1865) and “No. 1 Branch Line: The Signalman” (*ATYR* 1866). The popularity of the Christmas Numbers initiated the publication of a wide range of ghostly tales year round in a variety of periodicals such as *Cornhill Magazine*, *Temple Bar*, *The Argosy*, and *Belgravia*. The periodical and the individual ghost story were well suited to each other. Although the method of periodical publication did to a great extent dictate story length, authors working in the genre were well aware of the importance of strictly adhering to Sir Walter Scott’s principles of technique when writing their contributions. The most successful ghost stories were those restricted in length so as not to exhaust the interest excited by their unique content and at the same time fit neatly into the space allowed by the method of publication. Whether episodic or individual, the ghost story’s length is a crucial point of consideration upon which generic identification rests.⁶

But a ghost story is not defined by length alone. Its most distinguishing mark of identification is its ghost and in this respect the Victorian ghost story is again unique. Scarborough describes the ghost as “the most enduring figure” in literature because although “he changes with the styles in fiction...he never goes out of fashion” (81). A ghost of the Victorian era has a style distinctly its own, particularly when it comes to its appearance. Scarborough, who refers to the Victorian ghost as a “modern” ghost, suggests there is a “plausibility, a corporeality” about such an apparition that “shows [its] advance over the diaphanous phantoms of the past” (86). The misty Gothic ghost “through which the sword could plunge without resistance” is replaced with a more clearly defined and recognisable form (Scarborough 87). Scarborough suggests that the

Victorian ghost is “more convincing in [its] reality” because of a “strengthening of ghostly tissue, a stiffening of supernatural muscle” which makes the ghost particular to this period “more healthy, more active, more alive” than those before it (91). Simply, the Victorian ghost assumes a more definite form, or as in some examples, a more specific association to its pre-death configuration. The strong resemblance to the personality before death, a characteristic shared by ghosts of all periods, is intensified by the Victorian preoccupation with particularity: “Peculiarities of appearance are carried over with distressing faithfulness to detail, each freckle, each wrinkle, each gray hair showing with the clearness of a photographic proof” (Scarborough 91). Although the Victorian ghost develops within its own historical parameter—it matures and becomes more sophisticated over time—this attention to detail is obvious in the earliest specimens. The ghost of Mr. Marley, for example, is more closely related in appearance to his vapoury Gothic or Shakespearian ancestors because “his body [is] transparent”—“Scrooge, observing him, and looking through his waistcoat, could see the two buttons on his coat behind” (Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* 51). But even this nebulous apparition’s resemblance is marked by precise detail: “The same face: the *very* same” (51). Mr. Marley is sporting “ghostly spectacles” turned up *as usual* on his “ghostly forehead,” and he is “in his pigtail,” his “*usual* waistcoat, tights and boots; the tassels on the latter bristling” (48-51). Mr. Marley’s usualness is strikingly effective but most impressive is the fact that Scrooge is able to count two more buttons than he would have been able in the fiction of just a few years earlier.

A ghost of the Victorian era is also distinct in its ability to disturb. While the ethereal ghost of the past is content enough to frighten the guilty and console the innocent, the Victorian ghost chooses to communicate with the living for a greater variety of reasons and in a wider range of ways. It can do so because it is less restricted in both form and ability than the ghost of the past. It need not rely upon a complete physical frame, for instance, but can haunt just as successfully with its head alone, as in Wilkie Collins's "The Haunted Hotel" (1878), or it can produce astonishing effects with just its hands, as in Sir Quiller-Couch's "A Pair of Hands" (1898), Mary Elizabeth Braddon's "The Cold Embrace" (1862), or in Collins's "Mrs. Zant and the Ghost" (1887). The sense of touch as a channel of communication between the dead and the living is novel to the Victorian ghost story. Collins directs his reader's attention to this fact in his preface to "Mrs. Zant and the Ghost":

The course of this narrative describes the return of a disembodied spirit to earth, and leads the reader on new and strange ground. Not in the obscurity of midnight, but the searching light of day, did the supernatural influence assert itself. Neither revealed by a vision, nor announced by a voice, it reached mortal knowledge through the sense which is least easily self-deceived, the sense that feels. (3)

The convention is not only novel but also effective for as Scarborough suggests, "seeing a supernatural visitant is terrible, hearing him is direful, smelling him is loathsome, but having him touch you is the climax of horror" or, in the case of Mrs. Zant, the apex of relief. Although the sense of smell is used less often in ghost fiction, it can be, when

employed intelligently, equally effective. The intolerably disgusting stench that lingers in Room Thirteen of Collins's "The Haunted Hotel" is a case in point.

The addition of two extra senses, that of touch and scent, to the Victorian ghost's repertoire of haunting methods allows it to infiltrate more easily and express itself more articulately than any of its predecessors. The ghost of the Victorian era is subjected to a stylistic make-over to which it adapts extremely well. It is a master in the art of disguise and deception to the point that percipients often mistake it for a living human being, as is the case in Mrs. Henry Wood's "Reality or Delusion?" (1868) or in the anecdotal introduction to Jerome K. Jerome's "A Ghost Story" (1892). The broadening of the Victorian ghost's ability to intrude and disturb, coupled with its placement in a new domestic setting, led L. P. Hartley to the conclusion that "besides being able to do a great many things that human beings can't do, they [ghosts] can now do a great many things that human beings can do. Immaterial as they are or should be, they have been able to avail themselves of the benefits of our materialistic civilisation,"—an achievement Scarborough views as an "unsportsmanlike advantage" over the mere mortal (Hartley viii; Scarborough 86).

The Victorian ghost is more adaptable and more effectively unpredictable than any of its ancestors and it finds membership in a genre that is able to boast of a wider variety of specimens. Scarborough's pioneering work in ghost classification is particularly useful in tracing the ghost's literary evolution, but it is restricted in its limitation to two ghost types, the revenge ghost and the warning ghost. The nineteenth century was an especially progressive period for the fictional ghost and it is necessary to

add to Scarborough's classifications two other ghost types—the perpetually doomed ghost and the perpetually tragic ghost. Like revenge and warning ghosts, these ghosts are more complex, more sophisticated, than their ancestors. Classification becomes, throughout the Victorian period, an arduous task because of the numerous new variations that evolve from each ghost type. According to Scarborough, the various ghost types and their more complicated variations fall into one of two distinct categories constructed “with reference to the reality of their appearance” (82). The first category includes “the purely subjective spectres, evoked by the psychic state of the percipients,” and the second includes “the objective ghosts, independent of the mental state of the witnesses, appearing to persons who are not mentally prepared to see them” (Scarborough 82). The subjective ghost is an expected ghost. As Scarborough notes, “the mind rendered morbid by grief or remorse is readily prepared to see the spirits of the dead return in love or with reproach” (84). The mental state of the percipient assists in defining both the ghost's reality and its nature; the subjective ghost has the opportunity to be either benevolent or malevolent. The objective ghost shares the same opportunity, but imposes its reality on a wider audience: “The objective spirits are those that...[appear] not only to those mentally prepared to see them but to others not thinking of such manifestations and even sceptical of their possibility.” The objective ghost exhibits a “more definite visibility,” and thus a greater potential to impress (Scarborough 85).

While Scarborough's categorisation of objective and subjective ghosts is useful, it is again too restrictive. A ghost may fit into either of the two categories and frequently fits into both. Mrs. Zant of Collins's “Mrs. Zant and the Ghost” (also published as “The

Ghost's Touch"), and Ralph Gordon, the second of two witnesses to fall victim to the mysterious "it" in Broughton's "The Truth, The Whole Truth, and Nothing but the Truth," are percipients of two very different subjective ghosts. Mrs. Zant's experience exemplifies one of the most common associations between the living and the subjective ghost. Ghost classification in this particular instance is immediate and unequivocal because of the way in which Mrs. Zant is dressed. The way in which she is dressed—"in the deep mourning of a widow"—anticipates what ghost type is expected by both Mrs. Zant, the percipient in the story, and by the reader (8). Mrs. Zant's ghost is, in fact, the benevolent ghost of her recently deceased husband who comes to her in the form of a gentle and loving caress. It is because Mrs. Zant is mourning that she is mentally prepared to interpret "the touch" as belonging to her lost love.

A more unusual approach to presenting a subjective ghost is evident in Ralph Gordon's unfortunate experience with his malevolent "it". Upon hearing of Mrs. Cecilia Montresor's mysteriously haunted room, Ralph requests an opportunity to rid it of its spirits:

"Let me come here tonight and sleep in that room; *do*, Mrs. Montresor," he said, looking very eager and excited. "With the gas lit and a poker, I'll engage to exorcise every demon that shows his ugly nose; even if I should find—*Seven white ghostisses— Sitting on seven white postisses.*" (Broughton 347)

Ralph's humorous claim to scepticism is negated by the very fact that he does carry out his intention of attempting to exorcise the mysterious "it". There is no doubt when he prepares to spend the night in the haunted room that he *will* see the ghost. Regardless of

what he might claim in front of his audience of young impressionable women, his mind is prepared to do so. Ralph spends only a little over an hour in the haunted room before he rings the bell previously established as a summons for assistance. Although Mrs. Montresor and her entourage rush to his rescue, they are in time only to hear Ralph groan “Oh, my God! I have seen it!” before he falls down dead. Ralph’s sudden demise provokes several questions, of which one is particularly relevant: Had he *not expected* to see the ghost, would he have left the haunted room alive?

Mr. Marley serves again as a perfect example of the objective ghost. “Seven years dead,” he appears to the one man least prepared to see him—Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge. It is in keeping with Scrooge’s personality that he is both unlikely to keep the remembrance of Mr. Marley’s death or to believe in ghosts. In fact, “though he looked the phantom through and through, and saw it standing before him,” Scrooge remains “incredulous” (Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* 51). He even admits to his scepticism in front of the ghost itself. But the element of surprise inherent in the haunting of an objective ghost is too impressive for even the scoffing old Ebenezer, for Mr. Marley soon has him falling to his knees and begging for mercy.

An equally effective objective ghost appears to Mr. Fettes and Dr. Wolfe (Toddy) Macfarlane of Robert Louis Stevenson’s “The Body-Snatcher” (1884). Fettes, a bright medical student, is taken under the wings of a famous anatomist and his assistant Wolfe Macfarlane. The anatomist is forever requiring cadavers for research and employs Fettes to receive stolen corpses. Having recognized one of the corpses as a recent and healthy female friend, Fettes realizes that some of the cadavers are in fact murdered for the

purpose. Confronting Macfarlane, he is instructed to remain silent and to perform his receiving duty without question. Fettes is not surprised when a particularly offensive adversary of Macfarlane's—Mr. Gray—is delivered as a cadaver. Fettes suspects murder but maintains his silence. One stormy night several weeks later, Macfarlane and Fettes set out to exhume a freshly buried corpse of an old woman. But the corpse has a disturbing presence and upon inspecting it, Fettes and Macfarlane are horrified to find not the dead woman, but "the body of the dead and long-dissected Gray" (101). The ghost of Mr. Gray is easily identified as objective by the very nature of the work in which the two protagonists are involved; inherent in the cadaver trade is an imperviousness to spiritual manifestation. Carefully emphasised throughout the story is the indifference with which Dr. Macfarlane carries out his duty of cadaver collection. It is because Dr. Macfarlane's own conscience forbids any expectation of the returning dead that Gray's sudden appearance is so particularly effective.

It is difficult to arrive at a definite conclusion as to which category of ghost is most prevalent in Victorian fiction because specimens may over the course of a story exchange one category for another, as Catherine Linton does, for example, in *Wuthering Heights*. The ghost of Catherine Linton is initially classified as an objective ghost because she first appears to a complete stranger, Mr. Lockwood who, unfamiliar with the bleak Yorkshire Moors, is forced one stormy night to seek shelter at the Heights. When Catherine makes another appearance, it is before Heathcliff, who earlier in the novel admits to praying but one prayer in which he repeatedly asks the dead Cathy to haunt him (Bronte 167). Catherine, the objective ghost of Mr. Lockwood, becomes Cathy, the

subjective ghost of Mr. Heathcliff, who is mentally prepared to receive her in “any form” (167).

The Victorian ghost is not only identified with reference to the reality of its appearance but is further distinguished by its individual characteristics. Of the four ghost types, the revenge ghost is the most easily recognisable. The revenge ghost is most often subjective, is less frequently objective, but is always malevolent. There are numerous examples of ghostly revenge from which one can extract this particular ghost type. Mr. Gray of “The Body-Snatcher” is, for instance, the product of a subtle but effective case of revenge. A more menacing and fatal manifestation is the product of an equally effective but more obvious case of revenge related in Jerome K. Jerome’s “A Ghost Story.”⁷ It is immediately apparent that relevant to the story, which begins with “a great wrong done by one man unto another man,” is not the wrong itself but the revenge the wronged man seeks (141). The narrator relates the “point to point race” between the man who has committed the wrong and the man who is wronged. The man responsible for the wrong flees, “having the advantage of a day’s start” over the wronged man who follows: “The course was the whole world, and the stakes were the first man’s life” (141). It is in a cathedral that the two men finally meet face to face, but “just as the man who had been wronged stood beside the man who had wronged him, full of gladness that his opportunity had come, there burst from the cathedral tower a sudden clash of bells, and the man whose opportunity had come broke his heart and fell back dead” (143). Over the several years that pass the “survivor of the tragedy,” the man who committed the wrong, becomes a “useful citizen, and a noted man of science” (144). It is of course no

coincidence that the human skeleton he purchases as one of the many objects necessary to his research bears a striking resemblance to the man whom he had wronged. The “mocking smile” upon the wronged man’s face at the moment of his death is permanently fixed upon the face of the skeleton (143). The scientist is haunted by the skeleton and is eventually found dead in his laboratory with the “livid marks of bony fingers round his throat” (147). The revenge ghost does not rest until it has rectified the wrong for which it seeks revenge. As Scarborough correctly notes, it is the “impelling motive” inspiring the revenge ghost that renders it, regardless of its form, so effectively disturbing (115).

The warning ghost is also very popular in Victorian ghost fiction. The warning ghost can be subjective, objective or both, and is unique in that it is most often benevolent but may become malevolent in its capacity as protector. Its identification in such a case is dependent upon percipient perspective. Collins’s “Mrs Zant and the Ghost” serves again as a pertinent example. The ghost of Mrs. Zant’s husband first presents itself as the benevolent protector. As its percipient, Mrs. Zant receives the manifestation as such and interprets its touch as a warning specifically intended for her safety. It is significant too that the ghost of Mr. Zant is of a particular variety of warning ghost. It is in Mr. Zant’s warning that the identification of the person responsible for his death—in this case his brother John Zant—is revealed; the warning spirit who returns to identify the guilty is a common ghostly convention. As the story unfolds, the reader is led to believe that John Zant murdered his brother with the intention of marrying his widow. Collins further complicates Mr. Zant’s ghost type by substituting the gentle protective caresses intended for his widow with the violent restraining hold intended for

his murderer. As John Zant attempts to embrace Mrs. Zant, the ghost's wife, his arms are suddenly turned rigid and remain outstretched. The invisible grip that had seized him refuses to let go: "What has got me?" the wretch screamed. "Who is holding my hands? Oh, the cold of it! The cold of it!" (82). A "paralytic stroke" leaves John Zant a "helpless man" (84). In his capacity as benevolent protector, the ghost of Mr. Zant is forced to act malevolently. The two percipients of the ghost's touch reveal in their experiences a unique duality in the ghost's nature. The protective and loving ghost of Mrs. Zant is from the murderer's perspective a ghost successful in attaining its revenge.

The warning ghost who returns to identify those responsible for its demise is only one of a variety of warning ghost types. Other variations include the ghost who warns of an impending danger, such as the dead brother in Amelia B. Edwards "The New Pass" (1870), who saves the lives of a brother, his best friend and their guide while hiking in the Swiss Alps by instructing them to "go back" instead of through a "new pass" which inevitably proves structurally unsound (81), or the more problematic warning ghost in Charles Dickens's "No. 1 Branch Line: The Signalman" (1866), who warns an unassuming signalman of two tragedies before it warns him of his own death. Mr. Marley, who warns Scrooge of "yet a chance and hope of escaping" his same fate, represents still another variety of warning ghost dedicated to provoking change (Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* 56). In this respect Mr. Marley is an exception, for although he demonstrates the capacity of a warning ghost he functions primarily and most famously as another significant ghost type—the perpetually doomed ghost.

The perpetually doomed ghost, like other ghost types, may be subjective, objective or both, but is severely restricted in its ability. The perpetually doomed ghost cannot seek revenge and does not possess the ability to protect its percipient beyond presenting “a chance and hope of escaping” a similar fate. The doomed ghost exists in a state of perpetual punishment externally imposed by—in the words of Mr. Marley—“other ministers” from “other regions” that prevent its freedom to move beyond the status it is first granted after death (Dickens, *A Christmas Carol* 55). “Fettered,” the term used by Scrooge to describe Mr. Marley, is applicable to virtually all perpetually doomed ghosts. Each is bound by a chain “forged in life” of his or her “own free will” (54). Punishment varies from one doomed ghost to the next. Mr. Marley, for example, is sentenced to the “incessant torture of remorse” (55). He is doomed to “witness what [he] cannot share, but might have shared on earth,” and is continually reminded that comfort is reserved for “other kinds of men” (54-55). Bram Stoker’s merciless judge, a “judge who was held in great terror on account of his harsh sentences and his hostility to prisoners” in life (33), is himself sentenced to the role of hangman in death, in the story “The Judge’s House” (1891). The judge is bound forever evil and vindictive by his own judicial rancour. As a malevolent and fatal ghost who haunts his own home in the form of a rat, he is feared and hated to an even greater extent in death than he was in life.

Of the four prevalent ghost types in Victorian ghost fiction, the most intriguing is the perpetually tragic ghost. It too may be subjective, objective or both. It does not return to seek revenge, nor does it return to warn. It is inhibited from moving beyond its state of existence by itself—its own sorrow, its own jealousy, its own sense of

uselessness or loss prevents any desire to do so. The restrictions placed upon its ability are internally self-imposed. This ghost type is doomed to a self-imposed lingering that renders it perpetually pitiful. Interestingly, this ghost type most often manifests itself in the form of a child or youth and exhibits, more often than not, attributes aligned more closely with the feminine gender. The perpetually tragic ghost is verbally articulate. Its communication with the living is both clear and distinct and is usually delivered in a weeping or lamenting voice. Its cry is agonizingly sorrowful in its sound so as to orientate its listener to the mourning of a lost soul. The perpetually tragic ghost represents, quite simply, the extremity of grief. Examples of the perpetually tragic ghost are numerous and range from the infamous Cathy of *Wuthering Heights* (1847), to the ghostly mother and child duo in Elizabeth Gaskell's "The Old Nurse's Story" (1852), to the poor lost Willie who searches for his mother in Margaret Oliphant's "The Open Door" (1881), to the young boy who dies every morning on the road to London in Richard Middleton's "On the Brighton Road" (1912).

One of the most poignantly moving examples of a perpetually tragic ghost is found in Louisa Baldwin's "Many Waters Cannot Quench Love" (1895). Esther Maitland, the eldest daughter of a very large farming family, is separated from her fiancé, Michael Winn, when her parents decide to move from their farm just outside of London to Australia. Although it is agreed that her sweetheart should follow and marry her in a year's time, Esther is said to have done "nothing but mourn, same as if she was leaving him altogether" (257). The seemingly inevitable tragedy strikes and Esther and her lover, "divided by thousands of miles, both [perish] by drowning at the same time—Michael

Winn in the little river at home, and Esther Maitland in the depths of a distant ocean” (262). Esther is rendered an agonizingly mournful presence when she returns to her home in search of her lost love. Unable to find him, and perhaps unable to forgive herself for leaving him, she is doomed to weep perpetually upon the farmhouse stairs. When her only percipient, Mr. John Horton, the farmhouse’s newest tenant, first sees her, he “involuntarily presents” the “cutlass” he grabbed for protection. Sheer desperation drives Esther to plunge “on the point of the cutlass,” but her own “impalpable form” anticipates the failure of such an attempt (260). While Mr. Horton is left to ponder the reality of his experience, the reader is left to speculate just how long the ghost of Esther Maitland will linger.

The last but perhaps the most significant of the three elements of definition to a ghost story is its rhetorical claim of actuality. A degree of actuality is indeed the “charm” of the best ghost stories, as M. R. James suggests, but it also constitutes the considerably more substantial theoretical premise upon which a good ghost story works. The Victorian ghost story is routinely prefaced by or concluded with an oath insisting upon its truthfulness. Broughton’s “The Truth, the Whole Truth and Nothing but The Truth” is a blatant example. In a one-line epilogue, physically distinguished from its epistolary frame, Broughton claims for her story its right to actuality: “This is a true story.” Similar examples are numerous. Accompanying the declaration of truth is often a certification of the narrator’s reliability. Amelia B. Edwards’s “The New Pass” serves as a particularly thorough example in this regard. Francis Legrice, a barrister by profession, introduces himself as a person “less given to [looking] upon life from a romantic or

imaginative point of view” who is “supposed to push [his] habit of incredulity to the verge of universal scepticism” (74). Leatrice relates his experience not “in the shape of a story,” but simply as “a plain statement of facts” (74). Before he does, however, he makes the following pledge:

I admit that I believe in very little that I do not hear and see for myself. But for these things that I am going to relate, I can vouch; and in so far as mine is a personal narrative, I am responsible for its truth. (74)

In the case of a non-personal narrative, certification of reliability lies with the *second-hand* narrator. The second-hand narrator in Baldwin’s “Many Waters Cannot Quench Love” vouches for the truthfulness of his old friend, and protagonist of the story, John Horton:

If Horton told you a fact, you might be certain that it had occurred in the precise manner he stated. If he told it you a hundred times, he would not vary it in the repetition. This literal and conscientious habit of mind, made his testimony of value, and when he told me a fact that I should have disbelieved from any other man, from my friend I was obliged to accept it as truth. (255)

“This is a true story.” “I am responsible for its truth.” An understanding of why it is necessary for the author of a ghost story to make such claims is crucial to an understanding of the truths he or she relates. The rhetorical claim to actuality is essential to making the Victorian ghost story a “testimony of value.”

The Victorian ghost story works on a similar premise as Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Coleridge implies in *Biographia Literaria*

(Book XIV) that in writing of the supernatural for *Lyrical Ballads* it was necessary to infuse “a semblance of truth sufficient to procure for these shadows of the imagination that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment” (490). For Coleridge such suspension “constitutes poetic faith” (490). Two important assumptions are inherent in Coleridge’s theory. First, the theory works on the premise that we *voluntarily* allow ourselves into the shadows of imagination *just* for the experience of it. That is, we allow ourselves to get caught up in the action of the story to the point where we forget it is *only* a story. Second, that prerequisite to the success of the willing of suspension of disbelief is a believable fictional environment. If the fictional environment is believable, a willing suspension of disbelief occurs automatically or *involuntarily*. This is very often the case in a ghost story. It is not necessary in a good ghost story to make the claim “This is a true story,” but authors do so repeatedly. They do so, first, to enhance or fortify the “semblance of truth” required for the experience of suspension. As Scarborough explains, the experience of suspension is dependent upon belief: “The reader, as well as the writer, must put himself in the mental attitude of acceptance of the supernatural else the effect is lacking, for the ghostly thrill is incommunicable to those beyond the pale of at least temporary credulity” (84). The claim “This is a true story” encourages a mental attitude of acceptance. It is for the reader a rhetorical guarantee of truth.

The second and more important reason behind its claim to actuality renders the ghost story a testimony of value. The claim is, quite simply, an invitation to further consideration. By stating unequivocally that what he has to relate is the truth, the author of a ghost story encourages an understanding beyond the experience of suspension of

disbelief. The suspension is no longer “just for the thrill it.” The author invites us to consider, while we are exercising our willing suspension of disbelief, the ramifications of what we are experiencing. If for the moment we believe what we read is true, what we learn from what we read is also true. This specific type of authorial intention is best exemplified in the very first Victorian ghost story. In “Wandering Willie’s Tale,” the receipt that Steenie brings back from hell is not only a receipt for the rent he paid, it is proof of his actual supernatural experience. Briggs compares Steenie’s token with Coleridge’s “paradisal flower”: “If a man could pass through Paradise in a dream, and have a flower presented to him as a pledge that his soul had really been there, and if he found that flower in his hand when he awoke—Aye! and what then?” (Coleridge *Anima Poetae* 282; qtd in Briggs 37). *What then* becomes the question we ask ourselves when Mrs. Henry Wood insists: “THIS IS a ghost story. Every word of it is true.”

Notes

¹ Allan Pritchard addresses the radical nature of the shift from the traditional remote rural setting to a contemporary urban setting as a fundamental reshaping of the Gothic tradition in “The Urban Gothic of *Bleak House*.” *Nineteenth-Century Literature*. 45.4 (March 1991): 432-452.

² Details of the Cock Lane Ghost may be found in Henry Morley’s “The Ghost of the Cock Lane Ghost.” *Household Words*. 6.139 (20 Nov. 1852): 217-23.

³ “A Climax for a Ghost Story” first appeared in *Visitations* (1919). It has since been reprinted in a variety of anthologies, most recently, in *The Treasury of the Fantastic: Romanticism to Early Twentieth Century Literature*. Eds. David Sandner and Jacob Weisman. North Atlantic Books, Frog Ltd., 2001.

⁴ “Wandering Willie’s Tale” was first published as a ghostly *episode* in Scott’s novel *Redgauntlet* in 1824. It was republished as a ghost story *proper* in a collection of supernatural tales, *Legends of Terror*, in 1826. “The Tapestry Chamber” was first published in *The Keepsake* in 1829. Both tales have since been reprinted in a variety of anthologies.

⁵ Dickens, Charles. “A Christmas Tree.” *Household Words*. The Christmas Number. 2.39 (21 Dec. 1850): 289-95.

⁶ The Victorian ghost story genre is entirely comprised of short stories. While the Victorian ghost novel does exist, it is short—rather like a novelette as compared to the average Victorian novel—it is exceedingly uncommon, and is, in M. R. James’s opinion, usually unsuccessful (James 339).

⁷ “A Ghost Story” has been most recently published under the title “The Man of Science.” Cox, Michael and R. A. Gilbert, eds. *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories*. 1991. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003.

3

“Wilt Thou never forgive!”: Truth, Tragedy and Unforgiveness in “The Old Nurse’s Story”

‘Let me in – let me in! ... I’m come home.’

Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights*

In a letter regarding the controversy surrounding the publication of her novel *Ruth*, Elizabeth Gaskell confirms her belief that story telling is an art intended to expose “unpalatable truths” (Martin 32). Aware “of the great difference of opinion there would be about the book before it was published,” Gaskell identifies her subject, the suffering of an unwed mother, as the obvious point of contention. If there was to be any debate, she was certain it would be over “whether [her] subject was a fit one for fiction.” Although upon publication the book met with much disapproval, Gaskell was ultimately satisfied with how it made people react: “it has made them talk and think a little on a subject which is so painful that it requires all one’s bravery not to hide one’s head like an ostrich and try by doing so to forget that the evil exists” (Chapple and Pollard 227). For Gaskell, fiction was intended as controversial and she was aware that the truths revealed in many of the stories she told were likely to be at odds with what her contemporary reader wished to hear. In her preface to *Mary Barton*, for example, Gaskell offers an apology for the “agreement or disagreement” arising from her discussion of the “Political Economy, or theories of trade” responsible for the anguish experienced by “the poor uneducated factory-workers of Manchester” (3-4). It is significant that in claiming to “have tried to

write truthfully,” Gaskell refrains from passing judgement on whether the “bitter complaints” made by one class, of the injustices inflicted by another, were “well-founded or no,”—“it [was] not for [her] to judge” (3-4). For Gaskell, to disturb the reader’s thoughts was enough.

The ghost story lends itself particularly well to a thesis such as Gaskell’s for it is, as Nickianne Moody points out, “particularly concerned with injustice,” and the reader of a ghost story is “invested with the responsibility to judge the actions of the past and the outcome of nameless crimes”(78). The theme of injustice, often in the context of a gender or class bias, is prevalent in the nineteenth-century ghost story, particularly in those stories written by women. The very nature of the ghost story, the fact that it exists itself on “the margins of respectable literary activity,” provides for the exploration of “marginal states and experiences” (Frye 168-69). The ghost story allowed the Victorian female writer to redress comfortably pertinent issues of injustice and “exact retribution” by challenging well-established or culturally “preferred interpretations of events and hierarchies of knowledge” (Moody 78). Although several Victorian female writers working within the ghost story genre were successful in their attempts at exposing unattractive truths, setting a precedent in this regard is Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story.” Critics such as Carol Martin, Alan Shelston, and Clare Stewart share the opinion that “The Old Nurse’s Story” challenges “contemporary patriarchal ideology” and its associated notions of gender and class by specifically addressing the female experience (Stewart 112). Ideals of motherhood and family, and expressions of vulnerability, pride and independence within the context of feminine experience, are

scrutinised to certify what is for these critics Gaskell's "own profound discontent with the condition of women in a patriarchal society" (Martin 33).

There can be no doubt that the horrific circumstance which Maude Furnivall and her little daughter find themselves in is a result of the biased rules of an "old patriarchal social order" (Martin 33), but to focus on the unpalatable cultural injustice inherent in the story's tragedy from this perspective alone is to neglect the story's equally compelling element of forgiveness. In "The Old Nurse's Story," forgiveness, a concern both inherent and prevalent in ghost stories that grapple with issues of injustice, is intrinsically linked to the unattractive truths revealed through the story's tragic incidents. Maude Furnivall's inability to forgive is carefully poised for examination on a personal, individual, and broader cultural level. Her inability to forgive casts her as a specific ghost type, a perpetually tragic ghost, and her existence is best explained within this context.

Although the injustice of female repression, a theme so often isolated by literary scholars, is substantiated by the story's structure, it is the answer to the question "Wilt Thou never forgive," posed by the living Miss Grace Furnivall to her dead sister Maude, that on a personal level most effectively conveys what is for the author a cultural concern. Gaskell is always careful to present "both sides of the story," a habit dictated by her belief in fairness, and she is particularly diligent in doing so in this case. Maude Furnivall's predicament is as much the result of her own inability to forgive as it is a result of an old patriarchal social order's bias, and it is this element of unforgiveness that so poignantly elicits a well-deserved sympathy.

“The Old Nurse’s Story” is a tale of unrelenting tragedy. Hester, an old family nurse, relates to the children in her present care a story concerning their mother, Rosamond. Upon the death of both her parents, four-year-old Rosamond is sent by her guardians to her mother’s ancestral home at the foot of the Cumberland Fells. Hester, who is just eighteen herself, is left in charge of Rosamond’s care and accompanies the little girl to their new home. Only a few servants, an old spinster, Miss Grace Furnivall, and her maid and companion, Mrs. Stark, occupy the manor. As winter draws near, Hester is frightened by mysterious music that stems from an apparently supernatural cause: the long dead Lord Furnivall’s dilapidated organ booms to life, particularly on stormy evenings. Hester’s supernatural experience intensifies when a mysterious ghost-child who, reminiscent of the young Cathy in *Wuthering Heights*, pleads at the windows to be let in and lures little Rosamond onto the frozen moors. Hester’s sole duty from this point is to keep Rosamond from being seduced by the little ghost. The climax of the story is a ghostly re-enactment of the crime that led to the little girl’s death. A cruel and proud father, Lord Furnivall, drives his eldest daughter, Maude, and the little daughter she had carefully concealed from him from his house into a bitter winter night. The little girl dies from exposure, both literally and figuratively. It is Grace Furnivall, Maude’s sister and rival for the love of the little girl’s father, who, for reasons of jealousy and pride, informs Lord Furnivall of the child’s existence. Having successfully animated the old saying “Pride will have a fall,” the story ends with a reminder that “What is done in youth can never be undone in age!” (17; 20).

A true understanding of “The Old Nurse’s Story” is enhanced by an informed appreciation of the generic principles governing it. Crucial to an accurate analysis of the story is an understanding of how Maude, a particular ghost type, functions. Misidentification of her ghost type leads to a misinterpretation of the story. Although scholars do arrive at reasonable literary interpretations of what occurs in “The Old Nurse’s Story,” their arguments often lack fundamental evidence supplied by the story’s generic structure. Carol Martin’s and Vanessa Dickerson’s perspectives regarding the motive behind the ghost child’s seduction of Rosamond, for instance, lead to two very different conclusions, neither of which is supported by the text. Implied in Martin’s suggestion that the “phantom child-victim seeks to re-enact Grace Furnivall’s betrayal of her sister by luring the innocent Rosamond out to become another victim,” is revenge (35). The story of ghostly revenge, however, works on the premise that revenge must, whether fatal or not, be achieved in a single episode. That the ghostly manifestations of Maude and her daughter are not of the revenge type is supported by the fact that their haunting takes place over a period of years. Grace Furnivall’s remark “I am afraid we shall have a terrible winter,” delivered “in a strange kind of meaning way,” is the first indication that the supernatural intrusions are expected (14). Servants account for the “sounds and sights that could do [them] no harm,” but that “they had all had to get used to in their turns” (17). The fact that the haunting is only indirectly aimed at the person responsible for the initial crime, Miss Grace Furnivall, is also problematic in Martin’s perspective. And the fact that the scene leading to the little girl’s demise is repeated again before both the cast and the audience not only supports a very different

interpretation but invites the possibility that the mother and child, having been cast out into the cold yet again, will yet again return. Although Martin makes several very valid and interesting points throughout her argument, her conclusion that renders the phantom child as both “pitiful” and “pitiless” intimates revenge for which there is little textual support (35).

Nor is there sufficient evidence to suggest, as Dickerson does, that the “phantom child leads Rosamond to the ghost of Maude so that that spectral woman will stop her weeping and hungering for a live child about which she can wrap her arms” (117). The fact that Maude loved her own daughter “to distraction,” the fact that she risked being exposed to a cruel and unforgiving father just to keep her daughter near, and the fact that she had a reputation of being both loyal and passionate—“for where she loved, she loved; and where she hated, she hated”—undermines this interpretation (18). If anything, the “very proud and grand” smile Maude exhibits once Rosamond is within her reach supports the idea that Maude experiences a momentary lapse in which she exhibits behaviour more closely aligned with the revenge ghost type (16). In using the word “hungering” to describe Maude’s state, Dickerson herself unintentionally supports this line of reasoning. Maude has much to weep for, but to suggest that she is weeping for a live child is to speculate too far beyond the textual boundary. Dickerson’s perspective weakens the eternal bond between Maude and her own daughter and in so doing negates the reason for either’s existence.

The ghost of Maude Furnivall exhibits characteristics that clearly belong to one particular ghost type, the perpetually tragic ghost. Maude does not return to seek

revenge, nor does she return to warn. She alone inhibits herself from moving beyond her state of existence; her own pride, her own jealousy, and her own sense of loss and sorrow prevent her from doing so. Because the restrictions placed on her abilities are self-imposed, she is doomed to a condition of pitiful lingering, a fate her daughter shares by association. Both Maude and her daughter are most easily recognised as tragic ghosts by their mournful weeping. Each represents, quite simply, the extremity of grief, a grief that Maude perpetuates by her own inability to forgive her father, her sister or herself.

Maude's affiliation with the perpetually tragic ghost type dictates her answer to the question "Wilt Thou never forgive." While her answer—an unequivocal "never"—renders her a ghost eternal, it also begs the question of "why not," which automatically draws attention to the nature of the injustice she suffers. The injustice in this case clearly revolves around culturally imposed respectability. According to her father, Lord Furnivall, Maude has "disgraced herself" and this alone is reason enough for him to turn her and her child "out of doors" (18). Lord Furnivall's behaviour may be explained, Laura Kranzler suggests, as a result of his own identification "in terms of the typical constructs of masculinity—that is, in terms of aggression, selfishness, greed or even...of a moral self-righteousness in the name of the Old Testament" (xxi). Although Lord Furnivall is indeed the furthest thing from a good husband or father—"he was a fierce dour old man, and had broken his poor wife's heart with his cruelty"—and although "such a proud man was never seen or heard of," his behaviour may be explained from a broader perspective (17). Lord Furnivall embodies the entire patriarchal society of which he is a part. He is the very expression of contemporary cultural attitudes and

values. In Lord Furnivall's cultural eyes, Maude's child is illegitimate, Maude herself promiscuous. He drives her from his house because her behaviour falls outside the norm of respectable femininity.

Maude's decision to keep her marriage to the child's father a secret not only challenges the aristocratic notion that marriage takes place only with parental approval, but also challenges culturally preferred notions of morality and respectability. Prescribed rules of respectability recognised motherhood as a cultural norm only within the context of marriage. Single motherhood, conversely, was rendered deviant. As Lynda Nead points out, the 1851 census, designed to demonstrate the "Civil or Conjugal Condition of the People," confirms this assessment: "Beginning with marriage partners and ending with unmarried mothers, this structure established a clear hierarchy of civil/sexual behaviour. Marriage and the family were produced as the norm and all other categories were defined in terms of their deviation from this norm" (35). Nead also points out that the notion of respectability, as pertaining to women, was defined "in terms of dependency" (28). Dependence was considered normal and independence unnatural because "it signified boldness and sexual deviancy" (28). The association between independence and sexual deviancy left the unmarried mother, who is inherently independent, open to criticism. She was often likened to the adulteress or prostitute, and was expected to have been, as this category of Victorian women was, aware that the boundaries between "the permissible and the forbidden" were "incontrovertible ... [that] there could be no movement from one category to another, [that] a fall from virtue was final" (49). In presenting herself to her father as an unwed mother, Maude subjects

herself to cultural condemnation. As she turns to leave her father's door "with a fierce and proud defiance," she defies not only Lord Furnivall but also the culture that condones his casting her out into the cold (19). In keeping with the generic conventions of a ghost story, it is only fitting that Maude returns with the same proud defiance, especially if it prevents her from truly passing on. The pride that figuratively frees Maude in life figuratively imprisons her in death, and although her refusal to forgive exposes the callous nature of the culturally motivated injustice she suffers, it keeps her a ghost forever.

Maude's inability to forgive on a more intimate individual level is also responsible for her eternal ghostly status. She carries to her grave an inextinguishable jealousy of her sister Grace. The two sisters fall in love with the same man and critics have argued that while "the Furnivall sisters are not blameless," they are still "victims," because they are "destroyed by the deceit of [the] man," an "unscrupulous musician who makes love to them both and deceives them both, turning, in the process, one sister against the other" (Martin 34-35). The text however suggests that the two sisters are worthy opponents. They are described as "haughty" and "like" their father with respect to being "eaten up with pride" (17). Noteworthy too is that the single most important event in their tit-for-tat race for the musician's affections is his disappearance; Maude and Grace are accused of leading "him such a life with their jealousy and their passions, that he grew weary, and went away, and never was heard of again" (18). As unscrupulous as the musician might have been, the two sisters, according to the narrator, can hardly be excused as victims. In fact it is after the musician's departure that the

sisters' true colours begin to show. His departure is particularly problematic for Maude because, although she "had always meant to have her marriage [to him] acknowledged," she "was left now a deserted wife" and mother (18). Maude's jealousy of the attentions her husband paid to her sister, apparently intended as a "way of blinding her" from their own secret relationship, is not at all curbed by his disappearance (18). The intensity of Maude's jealousy heightens — she becomes "as haughty and passionate as ever," and grows "fiercer and fiercer" — to the point where she insists on claiming one last triumph over her sister by revealing the truth (18). Maude's insensitive taunting naturally anticipates both Grace's revenge and her own consequent downfall. Again, in keeping with the conventions of a ghost story, Maude could hardly expect to pass away unscathed by her jealous tendencies. Inherent in her jealousy is an inability to forgive, a trait that remains unchanged by death. The story's moral is not intended for Grace alone, but for Maude as well, and could just as easily read "What is done in youth can never be undone in *death!*"

Maude's ghostly predicament is complicated by her own vices. How is it then, that a ghost who is doomed by her own pride, jealousy, and unwillingness to forgive, elicits such a seemingly well-deserved sympathy? Maude cannot forgive herself, and it is because she cannot forgive herself that she elicits, from those familiar with her tragic tale, a sincere compassion. Maude's unattractive pride and jealousy are forgiven by those "invested with the responsibility to judge the actions of the past," because in her inability to forgive herself lies a deep and very genuine sorrow (Moody 78). The re-enactment of the tragedy leading to her daughter's death is essential to an understanding of Maude's

sorrow. It becomes clear in this scene that Maude is aware that she alone is responsible for what her daughter suffers, that she is guilty of subjecting her daughter to a punishment clearly intended for herself. Her sorrow is visible in a moment that comes a moment too late. The “fierce and proud defiance” which she directs toward her father as she leaves Furnivall Manor is momentarily interrupted—“but then she quailed” (19). It is in this moment that Maude’s proud and jealous nature succumbs to the realisation that more important than herself is her child—“her little child” (19). Because her realisation comes a moment too late, however, it is a moment for which she will forever be regretful. Although she throws “up her arms wildly and piteously to save her child” from her father’s “uplifted crutch,” she is too late, and her daughter receives its painful blow (19-20). The horrific scene of abuse is followed by “a dead stillness” which gives way to the “moans and wailing” heard “dying away on the hill-side” (18). The moans belong to Maude and Maude alone, and the degree to which her sorrow is heartfelt is exemplified by the emotional state in which she is found “sitting, all crazy and smiling, under the holly-trees, nursing a dead child” (18). In death, Maude becomes her own relentless judge, and the heroine of her own tragedy.

Forgiveness is a theme that may be traced throughout many of Gaskell’s literary works, including her more prominent social problem novels, *Mary Barton* and *North and South*. But of particular relevance is her novel *Ruth*, in which a young orphan who is apprenticed to a dressmaker is seduced and then abandoned by a wealthy gentleman. Although she and her illegitimate son are shunned by society, Ruth refuses to marry her

seducer when the opportunity to do so arises. The novel traces Ruth's trials as an unwed mother, but strays from convention with the introduction of a nonconformist minister, Thurston Benson, who offers Ruth refuge. Benson's understanding view of Ruth's situation undermines the culturally preferred attitude towards fallen women. He is clearly intended as a lesson in compassion, and anticipates the reconciliatory ending. Ruth of course dies after nursing her seducer on his sick bed, but her death leads to an apotheosis in which the man responsible for publicly exposing and condemning her adopts her son. It is through this act of adoption that Ruth is finally redeemed, that she is finally forgiven. Alan Shelston points to what was unique in Gaskell's approach to the fallen woman: "What was new about *Ruth* was not only that it confronted the issue head-on, but that in doing so...it presented the reader with a woman whose psychology as well as whose situation demanded more than conventional sympathy and understanding" (x). Maude Furnivall too demands more than conventional sympathy and understanding, perhaps even more so since she is unlike the gentle and faultless yet fallen Ruth. For Maude there is no hopeful ending; the conventions of the ghost story do not allow for one. But nor does Gaskell intend one. "The Old Nurse's Story" is her chance to demonstrate what will be if forgiveness is denied. "The Old Nurse's Story" is about the inability to forgive. It is a story about a woman who cannot forgive herself because her father cannot forgive her because the cultural rules of respectability to which he adheres are unforgiving. The consequence of this unrelenting tragedy is unrelenting misery. Lord Furnivall and the patriarchal society that he represents are doomed to repeat their crime, Miss Grace is doomed to eternal guilt, and Maude is doomed to an eternal sorrow

that prevents her from moving beyond her state of existence. Maude Furnivall does demand more than conventional sympathy and understanding, but it is readily granted because she is unforgiven and alone.

“Quite Alone in the World”: Cultural Alienation in *A Christmas Carol*

“The school is not quite deserted,” said the Ghost. “A solitary child, neglected by his friends, is left there still.”

Scrooge said he knew it. And he sobbed.

Charles Dickens, *A Christmas Carol*

Aloneness is a trait that virtually all ghost types share, but how responsible a ghost is for his or her own state of alienation is often debatable. Maude Furnivall, for instance, must accept full responsibility for her perpetually lone condition. She is alienated by her own vices in life, and by her own sorrows in death. Her state of unforgiveness is particularly tragic because it is internally self-imposed, but it is because she remains a ghost eternal in spite of herself that she so poignantly elicits a sincere compassion from those aware of her circumstance. The question as to whether or not a ghost upon whom a state of unforgiveness is externally imposed can elicit a similar or the same sympathy is both intriguing and pertinent to an understanding of how different ghost types “achieve their critical ends of admonishing, foretelling, and instructing” (Clemens 3).

The perpetually tragic ghost and the perpetually doomed ghost share a state of unforgiveness and its associated sense of alienation. The difference between the two ghost types pivots on whether or not this state is internally or externally imposed. The predicaments in which Maude Furnivall and Mr. Jacob Marley find themselves, for example, illustrate the difference between their ghost types. The possibility of

forgiveness exists for Maude Furnivall, and because she chooses not to explore it she is rendered a perpetually tragic ghost. In Mr. Marley's case, however, forgiveness is denied. Marley is a perpetually doomed ghost, and cannot change his predicament no matter what he does or what he wishes for. Unlike Maude, who is alone responsible for her after-death condition, Marley has no control over his fate. According to Marley, the responsibility of managing all matters regarding life after death rests with an external force. This is evident when he is asked to speak of comfort but cannot. The privilege to do so comes, says Marley, "from other regions...and is conveyed by other ministers, to other kinds of men" (55). Conversely, his own punishment then must come from another region and must be conveyed by another kind of minister. Although Marley's after-death circumstance differs from Maude Furnivall's, they experience a similar isolation resulting from the same cause; they are both unforgiven. Forgiveness is a central theme of both their stories. Central also are the cultural rules of respectability by which both Maude and Marley are judged and condemned. The two stories also share a common literary technique by which their cultural criticism is delivered and through which a specific response is elicited. Ghostly re-enactment, in both stories, reinforces each ghost's sense of alienation and focuses attention on the issue of forgiveness.

One may be tempted at this point to suggest that here the similarities stop, that although Maude Furnivall and her little daughter are directly responsible for the reaction they evoke, Marley is not; that *A Christmas Carol* is not really about Mr. Marley, but about Mr. Scrooge. The hundreds of film adaptations, theatre productions, and commercial advertisements support this very idea. The title "Mr. Marley" simply does

not adorn any film venture, theatre production or radio show, nor does it endorse any kind of associated product. And it does appear that the main ghost in *A Christmas Carol*, which is after all a ghost story, seems to have vanished from cultural and literary consideration. But this is only because few critics take into consideration the conventions of the genre in which the story is written, except to excuse the supernatural occurrences as typical. Critics instead devote much attention to Scrooge and his conversion, a move that automatically relegates Marley to a minor introductory role.¹ It is a mistake, however, to underestimate Marley's role in *A Christmas Carol*, because he is very much responsible for the reaction the story evokes. Mr. Marley is a perpetually doomed ghost with a capacity to warn, characteristics significant to his accomplishment. He alone is responsible for our understanding of an overwhelming sense of alienation, he alone is responsible for identifying the profoundly imbalanced cultural rules of respectability that cause his own demise, and he alone is responsible for the forgiveness Scrooge receives long before his conversion is complete. Marley imposes upon Scrooge his own ghostly predicament; he forces Scrooge to share, temporarily, his state of doom. Scrooge experiences first hand a ghostly existence. "There is no doubt that Marley [is] dead" (39). But so too is Scrooge.

Scrooge was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever that *A Christmas Carol* could just as easily begin in this way. Scrooge is Marley and Marley is Scrooge. The two are evidently interchangeable. At least, the text certainly entertains such an argument. Scrooge's intimate connection with Marley serves as his own introduction. He is introduced as Marley's "sole executor, his sole administrator, his sole assign, his

sole residuary legatee, his sole friend and sole mourner” (39). The association between the word *sole* and its homophone *soul* is blatant, a notion encouraged further by Scrooge himself: “The firm was known as Scrooge and Marley. Sometimes people new to the business called Scrooge Scrooge, and sometime Marley, but he answered to both names: it was all the same to him” (40). The identical nature of the two men is even assumed, albeit wrongly, by the door-to-door canvassers requesting a donation for the poor: “We have no doubt [Marley’s] liberality is well represented by his surviving partner” (44). Having witnessed the transaction in which the canvassers leave empty-handed, the narrator confirms the two men’s sameness. Marley’s liberality “certainly was” well represented by his surviving partner—“for they had been two kindred spirits” (44). Indeed Scrooge thinks so as well, for he recognizes in both Marley and himself “good [men] of business” (56). Scrooge and Marley live in the same house, they exhibit the same “chilling influence” (51), and they each bear a “ponderous chain” (54). The two men share much in common, and are indeed very much alike. If it is the intention in *A Christmas Carol* to have Scrooge escape the same fate as Mr. Marley by way of example, Scrooge has no choice but to share in Marley’s experiences. More than reasonable, then, is the assumption that since they shared the same vices in life, they should share, in death, the same punishment. The fact that they do is the mechanism by which Scrooge experiences his conversion, Marley consequently elicits a well-deserved sympathy, and Dickens unveils an “unpalatable truth.”

Scrooge was dead: to begin with. At least most critics agree that, metaphorically speaking, he was. Arthur P. Patterson, for example, suggests, “Scrooge’s memory is

dead,” that his “senses are dead” (173-74). The narrator’s own introductory description of Scrooge, however, suggests not so much a metaphorical deadness, but a physical deadness. Scrooge’s defining qualities are more in line with that of a corpse than a living human being:

The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shrivelled his cheek, stiffened his gait; made his eyes red, his thin lips blue...He carried his own low temperatures always about with him...External heat and cold had little influence on Scrooge. No warmth could warm, nor wintry weather chill him. (40)

Scrooge’s sub-zero temperature, his stiffness, his red eyes, blue lips—indicating a lack of circulation—coupled with the fact that it does not matter what the external temperature is because he cannot feel it, hardly describes a composite of living flesh and blood. In fact, Scrooge’s “thin blue lips” seem peculiarly similar to Marley’s transparency. The “chilling influence” of Marley’s “death-cold” eyes is reminiscent of Scrooge’s frozen state as is Marley’s imperviousness to the “hot vapour” which rises about him (51-2). Scrooge’s physical description nicely anticipates his ghostly function. And Scrooge does function as a ghost.

Critics have long argued that Scrooge’s conversion is brought about through memories of past experience. “Memory, not moralism, is the motive for Scrooge’s charitable impulses,” argues Patterson (173). Harry Stone suggests that Dickens’s own “wounding experiences, or rather the *Carol* version of them, help turn Scrooge...into a lonely, isolated man intent on insulating himself from harm and hurt,” and that it is “through memory” that Scrooge recovers his “humanness” (16). Natalie Shainess,

arguing along the same line, claims *A Christmas Carol* “is a story of character disorder and alienation” caused by “early wounds” and that “Dickens recognized that character and emotional and psychological problems are built on the foundations of past experience” (352). Although Scrooge’s conversion is intrinsically linked to his past, it is not brought about by the memory of past experience alone, but by his experience within three different states of being—the past, the present and the future—and by his experience of these states as a perpetually doomed ghost. The conventions of the genre in which the story is written dictate all reasonable explanations for Scrooge’s experience, and consequently his conversion. Scrooge “dies” three times in one night. He temporarily shares Marley’s state of doom. His conversion is brought about by his first-hand experience of Marley’s, now his own, ghostly predicament. Scrooge’s state of doom, his distaste for his own predicament, his dislike for what it feels like to be a ghost, are what drive him to change. It is important to note that his experience and his consequent conversion can only take place because he himself assumes a supernatural persona. Live human beings cannot fly into the night and observe ghosts of the past, wraiths of the present, and who knows what of the future. Ghosts, on the other hand, “can do anything they like” (119). Except, of course, if they are doomed as Marley and Scrooge, or Scrooge and Marley, are.

Marley defines, more accurately than any scholar can, what it is to be a perpetually doomed ghost. “It is required of every man,” declares Marley, “that the spirit within him should walk abroad among his fellow-men, and travel far and wide; and if that spirit goes not forth in life, it is condemned to do so after death. It is doomed to wander

through the world...and witness what it cannot share, but might have shared on earth, and turned to happiness!" (54). This is, of course, precisely Scrooge's fate for one night. He temporarily assumes the persona of a doomed ghost. And wander the world he does. He is not, as the majority of literary criticism would have one believe, restricted to only what is familiar to him. The Ghost of Christmas Present introduces Scrooge to the "bleak and desert moor...a place where Miners live, who labour in the bowels of the earth," but who were this one night raising their voices in a Christmas Song (92). Scrooge tarries not long in this place but speeds toward "a solitary lighthouse" perched "upon a dismal reef of sunken rocks, some league or so from shore," where two men "joining their horny hands over the rough table at which they sat...wished each other Merry Christmas" (93). From here Scrooge is swept off to a "black and heaving sea" where he witnesses a ship's crew among which every man was "[humming] a Christmas tune, or [having] a Christmas thought, or [speaking] below his breath to his companion of some bygone Christmas Day, with homeward hopes belonging to it" (93). This scene is particularly significant for it is here that Scrooge's ghostly status is reinforced. He and the Ghost of Christmas Present are "far away...from any shore." When they land upon the ship "they [stand] beside the helmsman at the wheel, the look-out in the bow, the officers who had the watch; dark, ghostly figures in their several stations" (93). Scrooge demonstrates his identity as a ghost in assuming his position beside the watchmen. He further distinguishes himself as doomed while watching, for unlike his companions he is unable to hum a merry tune.

Scrooge is alienated by the experience, but as he begins to contemplate "what a solemn thing it was to move on through the lonely darkness over an unknown abyss,

whose depths were secrets as profound as Death,” he is whisked off to his nephew’s home where his feeling of alienation, which he has so far contemplated only mentally, pierces straight through his heart (93). Scrooge lands in a “bright, dry, gleaming room” filled with laughter just in time to share in his nephew’s Christmas frivolities (93). The game of “How, When, and Where” attracts Scrooge’s attention, and he is soon seen playing along with the twenty people there: “for, wholly forgetting in the interest he had in what was going on, that his voice made no sound in their ears, he sometimes came out with his guess quite loud, and very often guessed right, too” (97). But Scrooge’s right answers are really of no use. Regardless of how loud he speaks, no one can hear him. Still, when the time comes to leave, Scrooge begs “like a boy to be allowed to stay until the guests departed...One half hour, Spirit, only one!” (98). The guests play another game, the humour of which is of course at Scrooge’s expense. The scene in which Scrooge is finally forced to leave elicits both an understanding of his condition and a sense of pity. As his nephew and guests nevertheless drink to his health, Scrooge wishes to return the honour. He “had imperceptibly become so gay and light of heart, that he would have pledged the unconscious company in return, and thanked them in an inaudible speech, if the Ghost had given him time” (98). Time at this point is irrelevant. Although Scrooge is aware of his limitations, although he realises that his nephew will not know his appreciation, he still feels the need to try to offer it. But like the right answers, his gratitude would be pointless. He is doomed to witness what he cannot share. Scrooge knows that “the misery with [all doomed ghosts] was, clearly, that they sought to interfere, for good, in human matters, and had lost the power forever” (59). Here, in this

scene, Scrooge experiences that misery. Even if he was allowed the time to do so, his efforts of reconciling with his nephew by way of a toast would be disallowed. His lesson lies in his own state of doom and it is the sense of alienation resulting from this state that elicits from the reader a response of compassion.

Why is it we forgive Scrooge and Marley or Marley and Scrooge? Scrooge's conversion is only complete when he asks his nephew "Will you let me in, Fred?"—a question appropriately reinterpreted in the story's most famous film adaptation as "Can you *forgive* a pigheaded old fool?"² Scrooge is forgiven, but he is forgiven long before his conversion is complete. In fact, he is forgiven long before we watch his nephew and niece laugh at his expense. It is much earlier, when he sits alone in his childhood schoolhouse, that we first feel sorry for Scrooge and begin to wonder if his punishment is unfairly imposed. The scene is particularly disturbing because of Scrooge's inability to intervene. When the Ghost of Christmas Past warns Scrooge "the school is not quite deserted," that "a solitary child, neglected by his friends, is left there still," Scrooge sobs (64). He can do little other than "pity his former self, 'Poor boy,'" and cry again (66). The sorrow of his distant past triggers the sorrow of his immediate past in the form of a wish, which in his present state, can never be realised. Scrooge wishes he had "given something" to the lone boy singing a Christmas carol at his door just a few short hours before his ghostly experience (66). The next scene has the same effect upon Scrooge. Having witnessed the kindness of his old boss Fezziwig, Scrooge wishes he could say a few kind words to his own clerk Bob Cratchit. But Scrooge does not have the ability to turn back time, nor can he intervene in what is or what will be. He can only watch, a fate

he likens to torture. By the time he is forced to face his only love, Belle, he begs to be shown “No more!” and we have an understanding of why the ghost of Mr. Scrooge, doomed as he may be, elicits from us a sincere sympathy (74).

Scrooge is alienated long before he is a ghost, and his own cultural environment may be held responsible for his pitiful state. He represents the extreme of a middle-class philosophy that places the associated practices of respectability and work at the top of a list of cultural priorities. Ironically, Scrooge is condemned for succeeding by a culture that advocates material advancement. And herein lies Dickens’s “unpalatable truth.” Victorian cultural priorities are confused. If Scrooge is guilty of any crime, it is of exceeding unreasonable middle-class expectations. Scrooge is a member of a society deeply immersed in business, where “what counts is tangible results—profits, larger plants or firms, personal advancement, professional and social” (Houghton 111). Victorians were recognised, according to John Stuart Mill, as “men of business and *industriels*” (445). Such a reputation could only have been achieved through hard work, and as Geoffrey Best points out, “work...was a cult for the respectable classes” (94). Work and respectability were intimately connected. Work was the vehicle through which one could achieve independence, the obvious sign of respectability. As Best points out, “respectability and independence ran together, because, for the mid and for the early Victorians, divinity and economics ran together” (279). Houghton attributes the association between hard work and moral discipline, “the prerequisites for business efficiency,” to the predominating philosophy of Puritanism (126). Citing a lesson inherited by Carlyle from his father, “that man was created to work, not to speculate, or

feel, or dream” (126), Houghton concludes that “except for ‘God,’ the most popular word in the Victorian vocabulary must have been ‘work’” (242). Respectable masculinity was also defined in terms of work: “of all the qualifications for full masculine status...the importance of dignified, independent work was endlessly proclaimed” (Tosh 79).

Carlyle’s lesson is surely the lesson instilled in Scrooge at a very early age. Scrooge’s ghostly re-enactment of his own lifetime supports such a notion. We first see Scrooge working at his lessons, next, apprenticed to Fezziwig, and finally, working out the relationship between poverty and wealth in an attempt to justify, before his only love, his reasons for waiting to marry.

Scrooge seems to have done everything right. He excels at his lessons, he works hard at his apprenticeship, and unsure of whether he is yet respectable, he waits to marry. He adheres to middle-class rules of respectability and meets middle-class expectations and yet is threatened with eternal doom for his behaviour. Why? Scrooge is Marley. He is a perpetually doomed ghost with a *capacity to warn*. Scrooge himself is our intended lesson. He is the embodiment of inhumane middle-class expectations, and it is with these inhumane middle-class expectations that Dickens finds fault. Scrooge, according to Dickens, has been taught to be greedy. His temporary ghostly demise is necessary to teach him what matters, and what matters is a lesson intended for us all. Scrooge learns from his nephew, the Cratchits, the miners, the lighthouse keepers, the mariners and numerous other members of the lower middle and working classes, that material success without compassion is not success at all, a lesson he had the opportunity of learning earlier from Fezziwig, a man of business who understood the importance of kindness.

“Marley was dead: to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that.” And there is no doubt that we should feel as sorry for him as we do for Scrooge. After all, the only difference between the two ghosts is that for one of them forgiveness is not an option. And in the ghostly re-enactment of his own lifetime Scrooge does elicit compassion for both himself and the ghost of Mr. Marley, compassion not unlike that which Maude Furnivall elicits for herself, even if it is acquired from a different perspective. One could go so far as to argue that Marley elicits even more sympathy because he is, for some reason, denied Scrooge’s opportunity to change. We never know why the same opportunity is not extended to Marley, why he is to remain doomed, but then knowing too much would defeat the purpose of a ghost story. “The spirit feeds on mystery,” and the successful ghost story works on an understanding of this premise (Scarborough 2). But perhaps a more substantial assessment lies in the fact that *A Christmas Carol* is a successful ghost story that became from the start what Paul Davis refers to as a “culture-text,” that is, a story “retold, adapted, and revised” for over a century to serve the cultural flavour of the month (109). Inherent in this idea of a culture-text, a text that has survived in various forms for so long, is surely some component of eternity. And in this case the most obvious such component is Mr. Marley. Marley is an eternally doomed ghost who reflects particular cultural circumstances, in a specific historical period, that lend themselves well to translation over time. He embodies not just the culture of which he is a part, but also the expectations that culture wrongly, at least in Dickens’s opinion, covets. He stands as an eternal reminder that such cultural expectations can breed isolation and loneliness. But although Marley fulfils such a

significant role, he is still a ghost, and for him there can be no happy ending. Our lesson lies in his doom. He must remain forever unforgiven and “quite alone in this world.”

Notes

¹ Elliot L. Gilbert claims “it is impossible to get into a serious discussion of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol* without sooner or later having to confront “the Scrooge problem.” Several critics including Edmund Wilson, Humphry House, Edgar Johnson and Joseph Gold, Gilbert points out, have addressed Scrooge’s conversion. The trend has continued in the most recent criticism.

² *A Christmas Carol*. Renown Pictures Corporation, 1951. Alastair Sim plays Scrooge.

Conclusion

“Men who look on nature and their fellow men, and cry that all is dark and gloomy, are in the right; but the sombre colours are reflections from their own jaundiced eyes and hearts. The real hues are delicate, and need a clearer vision.”

Charles Dickens, *Oliver Twist*

The Victorian question as to whether the ghost was real, is an issue of cultural significance. In a society that craved proof for both that which was explainable and that which was not, the ghost mattered. Nowhere does this become more evident than in Lanoe Falconer’s *Cecilia de Noël*, a remarkable work of fiction in which the Victorian cultural dilemma regarding the ghost’s existence is explicitly addressed.

The story’s structure is both unique and clever. It recounts the experience of several different guests during their visits to Weald Manor, the haunted home of Sir George and Lady Atherley. The haunted house serves “as the occasion” for exploring, from a variety of both religious and non-religious perspectives, the truth behind ghostly phenomena (March-Phillipps 129). Each perspective, offered in an individual chapter appropriately referred to as a “gospel,” details the speaker’s personal spiritual ideology as well as, in the case of a percipient, his or her impression of the ghost. Evelyn March-Phillipps suggests that the interest the story elicits “does not lie in the ghost but in the effect it produces on one after another of the people it visits” (129). While it is true that the ghost whom all percipients describe as a lost soul does not actually make an

appearance until the very end of the story, when it does finally appear, its effect is overwhelmingly powerful.

Cecilia de Noël captures the very essence of Victorian doubt. It is a clear illustration of the Victorian debate between science and religion. Sir George Atherley and a young doctor called upon to examine the condition of one of the ghost's percipients present the scientific side to the argument. Atherley's claim that "There is no revelation but that of science" is a sentiment echoed in turn by the young doctor (185). Atherley, an atheist, insists that because of its factual orientation, science is able to satisfy completely "all reasonable desires," even if its approach is a little less inviting than other contemporary options:

[Science] is the gospel of fact, not of fancy: of things as they actually are, you know, instead of as A dreamt they were, or B decided they ought to be, or C would like to have them. So this gospel is apt to look a little dull beside the highly coloured romances the churches have accustomed us to—as a modern plate-glass window might, compared with a stained-glass oriel in a mediaeval cathedral. There is no doubt which is the prettier of the two. The question is, do you want pretty colour or do you want clear daylight? (185)

Atherley "prefers the daylight and the glass"—that is, science—because it offers "precision, accuracy [and] reliability" (185). The young doctor's reply to the question of whether or not he believes in ghosts is given from a medical-scientific point of view:

I do [believe in ghosts], just as I believe in all symptoms. When my patient tells me he hear bells ringing in his ear, or feels the ground swaying under his feet, I

believe him implicitly, although I know nothing of the kind is actually taking place. The ghost, so far, belongs to the same class as the other experience, that it is a symptom. (201)

As to other “supernatural manifestations” and “miracles,” the doctor is unconvinced and argues that so too should be “any one else who has outgrown his childhood” (201).

Interestingly, neither of these two sceptics has actually seen the ghost.

Only those guests who hold some sort of religious conviction are actual percipients. The first of these is Aunt Eleanour, a gentle Evangelical affectionately known for her anti-Popery stance (205). She is the eldest of the ghost’s percipients and interprets the ghost’s “dreadful look” as sin itself. She believes the ghost to be a “lost soul,” a reminder that for the wicked there is eternal punishment (212). Her advice to those wishing to avoid a similar fate is simply that “You have only to believe” (213). Canon Vernade turns to the Education Act to support his view that ghosts do not exist. In what amounts to a well-delivered sermon, the self-confident Canon criticises all classes of society, both the “lower orders” and “their social superiors,” for so enthusiastically embracing the “uncivilised hankering after marvels and magic” suddenly so prevalent in Victorian society (221). It is Canon Vernade’s opinion that education—the study of science, natural philosophy, and the universe—would surely counteract the impression made by contemporary religious “charlatans” (221). The Canon’s personal convictions are shaken, however, by the ghost’s appearance. Mr. Austyn, the High Church priest, at first acknowledges that the “supernatural offers no difficulty to a Christian whose religion is founded on, and bound up with, the supernatural” (230). Difficulty arises however

when the creed by which he has always lived, his belief in “Life Everlasting,” is shaken by his ghostly encounter (232). He interprets the lost soul’s punishment as an “eternal separation from the Divine Being,” and encourages a belief in “the teaching of the Church,” and in a “God, a Sovereign, a Lawgiver, a Judge” (232). And Mrs. Molyneux, a spiritualist, with true spiritualist enthusiasm, claims that the particular advantage to her religion is that it has “nothing to do with God” (236). When asked why one should bother with any religion at all, Mrs. Molyneux touts spiritualism’s ability “to satisfy the universal craving after an ideal; the yearning for something beyond the sordid realities of animal existence and of daily life” (238).

With all parties to the debate present—“the scientist, the sceptic, the evangelical, the sleek, self-confident cleric, the ascetic young ritualist ...[and] the faddist,” one might reasonably expect some sort of resolution to the question as to whether or not the ghost exists (March-Phillipps 132). Instead we are left, as Clare Stewart points out, with the impression that the opinions offered by the guests are “dogmatic, silly, or harsh, even though their status (members of the clergy, for example), could establish expectations to the contrary” (118). March-Phillipps accounts for this incongruity by pointing to the selfish nature of the debaters: “no one, neither priest, nor layman, nor woman, is inspired with any spark of pity for a kindred spirit doomed to everlasting woe. In each case the visionary only thinks of his or her own soul and of guarding or rescuing it” (132). However, it is not until the very end of the story that this becomes apparent.

The end of the story prompted one reviewer for *The Times* to claim Falconer had “never written anything more powerful than when she makes Cecilia describe what

passed in the haunted room in the silent watches of that terrible night” (“Recent Novels” 14). Another reviewer writes, “If the last chapter does not take the reader by the throat, I am inclined to pity him” (qtd. in March-Phillips 134). The ending to *Cecilia de Noël* is indeed extraordinary. Cecilia, who up to this point, and like the ghost itself, has existed only by reputation, carefully details her experience with the dreaded lost soul. Her gospel, or spiritual creed, evolves from her experience and is both poignant and compelling. She begins her tale by admitting she is bothered by the fact that “not one of those who saw [the ghost], not even Aunt Eleanour, who is so kind and thoughtful, had had one pitying thought for it” (250). She ponders whether “this poor spirit had come by any chance to ask for something; if it were in pain and longed for relief, or sinful and longed for forgiveness” (251). Cecilia’s attitude at this point suddenly renders the debate with which the majority of the story is concerned pointless. As the ghost and Cecilia communicate, the question of its existence fades to what really matters—why the ghost haunts. Having described a “loneliness which no one in this world can even imagine,” the ghost arouses Cecilia’s sense of compassion. Cecilia tries to isolate the cause of the ghost’s predicament and asks, “Why did you not turn for help to God?” When the ghost returns with the question “What is God?” Cecilia is overwhelmed with pity and caresses it in her arms (253). As Cecilia holds the ghost close to her heart its icy coldness seems “to grow less chill.” When it again speaks it simply declares, “It is enough; now I know what God is!” (253). As the ghost abandons its “great empty darkness” (252), we understand what Cecilia seems to have understood all along—that the ghost is a window

onto the human conscience and that the “reflections” it offers are “from [our] own...eyes and hearts” (Dickens, *Oliver Twist* 254).

Writing in the years directly following the Victorian period, Dorothy Scarborough evaluates the evolution of the question of belief in the supernatural and in so doing makes a valid observation: “Much of our material of the weird has been rationalized, yet without losing its effect of wonder for us in fact or fiction. If now we study a science where once men believed blindly in a Black Art, is the result really less mysterious?” (5). While the debate between the Victorian sceptic and the Victorian believer suggests not, even more important is the wonder the ghost still holds over us. The question of why the ghost haunts Victorian literature has not yet exhausted “its effect of wonder,” but instead continues to lend itself to further investigation. Why does the ghost haunt Victorian literature? It is in part because it is a figure of experimentation. Victorian authors were intrigued by its adaptability, its newfound corporeality, and the ease with which it could infiltrate the everyday. And the ghost haunts in part because it exists itself on “the margins of respectable literary activity,” and provides for the exploration of “marginal states and experiences” (Frye 168-69). The Victorian ghost haunts to expose the “unpalatable truths” authors like Gaskell and Dickens and Falconer wished their own culture to take into consideration. Marley haunts to challenge Victorian cultural expectations, Maude haunts to challenge rules of sexual respectability, and the nameless spirit in *Cecilia de Noël* to remind the Victorian public of the ghost’s possibility and its need to be understood. That each is able to speak freely on a variety of cultural issues

without fear of reprimand is a unique and significant ability. The rhetoric of the ghost has all too often been associated with issues of revenge, of fear or of hate. The Victorian ghost offers an original discourse created in terms of forgiveness, compassion, and love. It begs us to contemplate that what it has to say is worthy of consideration, to believe that “every word is true.”

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