



Mid-term Critical Analysis of Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House*

Sophia Achillea-Hughes

This critique will analyse *A Haunted House* by Virginia Woolf, part of a collection of short stories first published in 1921. Paying close attention to Woolf's linguistic choices and experimental narrative style, I will argue that this text works to unravel the reader's expectations of a conventional ghost story.

The story opens with the indefinite phrase 'Whatever hour'. This, considered alongside the narrator's use of the past progressive tense — 'there was a door shutting' — indicates that it is not set within a specific time frame; the haunting is an ongoing occurrence. This sentence is also interesting because it potentially implicates the reader — 'Whatever hour *you* woke' (my emphasis added). Although appearing to address us directly, the narrator could of course also be referring to the living couple. The ambiguity of this address therefore immediately allies us with these characters, a device which Woolf continues to use throughout the text.

The 'you' identified here is then seemingly differentiated from the subject of the following sentence: 'From room to room they went'. However, only the dash added at the end of this sentence confirms it is the 'ghostly couple' always searching the house. Before this, we might assume it is the living couple 'opening here [or] lifting there' in order to discover the ghosts' whereabouts. Thus, in just this short opening paragraph, Woolf's style of narration works to blur the boundaries between her characters, as well as between the living couple and the reader. As a result of this, we are encouraged to question whether the ghosts are real, or perhaps a figment of our mutual imaginations.

Such uncertainties are undermined, however, when the point of view shifts directly to the ghosts themselves. Reported to us through direct — "Here we left it," she said. And he added, "Oh, but here too!" — this fragmentary conversation reveals the ghosts' intention; they are searching for something they left behind. But the mystery of this search is enhanced by deictic words such as 'here' and 'it'. Purposefully ambiguous, these words illustrate that both the narrator and Woolf desire to conceal what the ghosts are looking for. This therefore maintains our suspense, whilst also further allying us with the living couple; our perspective is as limited and uncertain as theirs. Throughout the text, then, the narrator remains an unauthoritative and unidentified voice; perhaps suggesting even they occupy a 'haunted' space.

As the story continues the perspective becomes increasingly more difficult to follow. The reader is forced to divide their attention between the ghosts, the living couple, and even for a brief time our unidentified narrator. In the third paragraph they are depicted both as reader — 'one might say, and so read on a page or two' — and writer — 'stopping the pencil on the margin'. This, according to Christine Reynier, highlights the 'story of the creative process' itself, thereby drawing attention to the text as a work of fiction.¹ However, I would

¹ Christine Reynier, *Virginia Woolf's Ethics of the Short Story* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 105

argue that by placing her narrator inside the story, Woolf cleverly blurs those boundaries between fiction and reality, a device which is particularly pertinent to the supernatural genre. It leaves the reader to question whether the ghosts are a reality, or perhaps just a trick of the creative imagination.

Within the same paragraph the narrator goes on to describe the 'empty' house, noting only 'the wood pigeons bubbling with content and the hum of the threshing machine [...] from the farm'. Ironically then, in spite of the ghosts' elusive presence, they do not incite a deathly silence within the house. In fact, by using onomatopoeic words such as 'bubbling' and 'hum', Woolf shows instead how they bring the house to life. This idea, considered alongside the sibilant refrain 'Safe, safe, safe', works to reassure the reader that the ghosts are not threatening, an obvious deviation from the conventional ghost story in which they are supposed to instil fear.

The perspective then shifts abruptly to the female character of the living couple: "What did I come in here for? What did I want to find?" These anaphoric interrogatives underline her own self-doubt; she is questioning her search for the ghosts because she, like the narrator, has nothing to prove they exist — 'My hands were empty'. Interrupting her thoughts briefly is a fragment of the ghosts' conversation — "Perhaps it's upstairs then?" — though they drift out of focus again immediately after. In the same way the ghosts move 'From room to room', then, Woolf's style of narration moves swiftly from one character's train of thought to the next. This serves two purposes: it highlights the ephemerality of the ghosts, whilst ensuring we are always aware of the competing presences within the house: the 'ghostly couple' searching for their treasure and the living couple following close behind.

In the subsequent paragraph the female character draws our attention to the idea that seeing is believing: 'Not that one could ever see them. The window panes reflected apples, reflected roses: all the leaves were green in the glass'. For her, the mirrored images of the garden are a stark reminder of reality, of the visible, physical surroundings, rather than what she imagines to be there. This therefore adds to her uncertainties about the ghosts. However, in much of Woolf's writing, windows are intended to highlight the 'distance between [the] subject and object of vision'.² Here then, the reflection is not meant to make her question the ghosts, but simply reinforce the barrier that separates her from them: the barrier between life and death. Alternatively, one could say that the windows only reflect a version of reality, contributing to the text's dream-like quality.

From this point it is as if the woman is trying to convince her own mind, as well as the reader's, of the ghosts' presence within the house: 'if the door was open, spread about the floor, hung upon the walls, pendant from the ceiling...'. This brief interior monologue effectively pulls the reader into the story, allowing us to follow the character's train of thought, and her conviction that the ghost is there. However, the dash and clipped interrogative (' — what?') interrupts this, indicating once again that she is self-doubtful. Throughout the text, then, this character is caught between alternating moments of certainty and uncertainty, highlighted by Woolf's contrasting use of light and dark.

We can identify this contrast in the following paragraph when the light and the woman's understanding of 'the buried treasure' both fade. However, crucially within the text, light is not only metaphorical of certainty, or understanding, but also more importantly of love. This becomes apparent here from the connection between death and darkness; for the male ghost, the death of his love was equivalent to the death of light itself — 'sealing all the windows; the rooms were darkened'. Within this paragraph glass is also an important motif, once again becoming a symbol of separation. We are told how 'the beam [...] always burnt behind the glass', and is therefore constantly out of reach for the man. The fact he goes

² Savina Stevanato, *Visuality and Spatiality in Virginia Woolf's Fiction* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2012), p. 117

travelling — ‘went North, went East, saw the stars turned in the Southern sky’ — but still returns to the houses emphasises how important it was to them as a couple. Thus, in this somewhat poetic paragraph Woolf allows her reader an insight into the ghosts’ past, encouraging sympathy rather than fear.

Moving back to the present time the narrator then describes the natural environment of the house as the ‘ghostly couple’ continue to wander through it. The consistent use of personification — ‘The wind roars’, ‘Trees stoop and bend’, ‘Moonbeams splash and spill’ — allows a clear paradox to emerge within the text; in spite of the ghosts’ intrinsic connection to death, their presence seems only to reanimate the house. The broken conversation that follows between the ghosts only allows the reader fragments of their thoughts: ““Here we slept,” she says. And he adds, “Kisses without number.” “Waking in the morning —” “Silver between the trees —””. Consequently, the mystery of the ghosts’ ‘buried treasure’ is prolonged — suspense being perhaps the only convention of the traditional ghost story which Woolf adheres to strictly. However, this fragmentary conversation could also represent the living couple’s drift in and out of consciousness. Whichever way we choose to interpret it, Reynier argues this distinct lack of information makes the reader empathetic towards the living couple; we become just as impatient to know what the ghosts are looking for.³ Thus, Woolf’s narrative works mostly to unite the reader and the living couple. Aside from our awareness of the ghosts’ past, we see, hear and feel everything as the living couple do.

The contrast between light and dark is used once again in the concluding paragraph: ‘Stooping, their light lifts the lids upon my eyes’. Of course, as with the rest of the text we cannot be entirely sure whose perspective this is from. Although it appears to be the living female character’s perspective, one could argue the ‘I’ at the end of the story represents hers and the narrator’s simultaneous moment of realisation. While the light here literally awakens the woman, it also symbolises her revelation about the treasure — ‘The light in the heart’. As the narrative comes to an end, the writing builds to an almost audible crescendo: ““Safe, safe, safe,” the heart of the house beats proudly...“Safe! safe! safe!” the pulse of the house beats wildly’. The shift in adverbs from ‘proudly’ to ‘wildly’ emphasises this as a climactic moment: the moment everyone (including the narrator, the living couple, and the reader) realises that the treasure is not a concrete, material object at all; it is, in fact, a symbol of love. Indeed, the story’s conclusion allows us to see that the ghosts were only ever looking to remind themselves of the love they shared within this space. Thus, Woolf subverts our expectations of *A Haunted House* entirely; here the house is haunted not by the ghosts themselves, but by the memories they made there.

Analysis of this text therefore reveals that *A Haunted House* is neither a conventional ghost story, nor a conventional love story; Woolf manages to permeate the boundary between the genres. When looking at its title, the reader presupposes that this is going to be an explicitly scary narrative. However, through her experimental narrative style and poetic devices, Woolf completely undermines this expectation. She allows the reader an insight into the thoughts and feelings of the ghosts themselves; those characters that are usually denied a voice. And, by the end of the text the reader is less concerned with the ghosts themselves, and more concerned with the meaning of what they are looking for. Woolf achieves a similar effect on the reader in *A Mark on the Wall* where the reader becomes preoccupied by the narrator’s wandering thoughts, rather than what the mark actually is. In both of these examples, then, Woolf uses the pretext of something simple or conventional to actually address a much larger idea. Thus, in *A Haunted House* Woolf uses the pretext of the ‘ghost story’ to write implicitly about the importance of love.

³ Reynier, p.107

Bibliography

Primary sources

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