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Independent Essay G3

Words True as Despair

Literary Realism in Three Victorian Ghost Stories



Author: Viktor Jakobsson

Supervisor: Jenny Siméus

Examiner: Anna Greek

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Linnæus University
Sweden



Abstract

This essay is a narratological analysis of the tropes and features of three ghost stories, all from the Victorian era. It examines how each is used for the purposes of literary realism, more precisely to illustrate the socio-historical context of their creation. These narrative aspects consist of perspective, characters, locations and finally ghosts. The end goal of performing this kind of analysis is to prove two points. Firstly, that a narratological examination is possible on such an unconventional subject matter as the ghost story, and secondly, and more importantly, that literary realism can be conveyed by this seemingly non-realist literary genre.

Key words

Ghost Story, Realism, Victorian, Narratology, M.R. James, Edith Nesbit, Amelia Edwards.



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1 Introduction: Horror in an Age of Progress

The Victorian era of British history lasted roughly two thirds of a century, from the late 1830s to the arrival of the 20th century. The reign of Queen Victoria was a turbulent period, marked by change affecting all levels of life (Cox and Gilbert, “Victorian Ghost” ix). It was a time of social transformation, previously unmatched in scale and speed. The “feudal and agrarian past” gave way for the modern ideas of science, industrialization and democracy (ix). The realm of literature was not spared by these powerful forces. Writing became more grounded, both to accurately depict the reality of Victorian life, but also to cater to an audience more rational than ever (Hay 60; Thurston 2). It was against this socio-historical context that the Victorian ghost story emerged. It is a noteworthy juxtaposition how such a progressive era produced some of literature’s most famous tales of horror, from Elizabeth Gaskell's “The Old Nurse's Story” (1852) to Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

Arguably the ghost stories' popularity was a result of these societal advancements. The rapid march of change created a rift between modernity and the old status quo. The world of yesteryear remained recent enough to be remembered, and this disconnect between the old and new created strong social anxieties (Cox and Gilbert, “Victorian Ghost” ix). For the Victorians, the idea of this past returning to sweep away their newly acquired progress



was a great source of fear. By playing on such anxieties, the ghost story created a horrifyingly real experience for the reader (ix). Along with its popularization in publications and strong readership among the emerging middle-class, this cemented the ghost story in Victorian society (xii; Brewster 224).

However, such socio-historical reflections are not immediately apparent in ghost stories of the era. Indeed, due to their supernatural subject matter, they are easily dismissed as fantasy fiction. In this essay however, I will argue how a selection of Victorian ghost stories, consisting of Amelia Edwards' "The Phantom Coach" (1864), Edith Nesbit's "Man-Sized in Marble" (1895) and M. R. James's "Count Magnus" (1905), utilize shared tropes and features to create a literary realist depiction of their socio-historical context. These consist of first-person narrative structures, grounded characters, authentic world descriptions and a metaphorical handling of the supernatural.

Whilst narratology is a well populated field overall, less can be said for such investigation regarding ghost stories. Polish academic Jacek Mydla writes in *Narrating the Ghost: Readings in the Gothic and M. R. James* that narratologist scholars seem "firmly focused on realist fiction" (11). Likewise, whilst each story has previously been subject to analysis, very few touch on narratology and none focus on their use of literary realism. This essay subverts both trends by using the concepts of the field in analyzing the



aforementioned tropes and features' portrayal of realism. To achieve this, I will refer to the theories of two famous narratological scholars; Mieke Bal and Gérard Genette.

As for research focused on the Victorian ghost story and its development, this on the other hand has received ample scholarly attention. A few examples relevant for this essay are the writings of Nick Freeman, who examines these topics in *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* (2015), and "Realism and the Supernatural in Ghost Stories of the Fin de Siècle" (2020). Others include Michael Cox and R.A Gilbert's introductions to *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories* (1992) as well as *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (2003). Sources like these are used alongside the works of Genette and Bal, illustrating how the tropes and features are mirrored in the genre as a whole and their ties to the Victorian context.

When choosing stories for analysis, emphasis was put on finding examples encapsulating the Victorian school of ghost writing, as it peaked between the 1850s and the start of the 20th century (Cox and Gilbert, "Victorian Ghost" xi). The tales were gathered from the aforementioned anthology *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories* and M.R. James's own *Collected Ghost Stories* (1931). The chosen stories are by famous authors of the era, who left their mark on the genre. According to Cox and Gilbert they are "fruits of the Victorian tree" ("Victorian Ghost" x).



Returning to the chosen stories, “The Phantom Coach” tells the tale of how barrister at law Jack Murray gets lost in a snowstorm and unknowingly hitches a ride on a haunted mail coach (Edwards 13-24). “Man-Sized in Marble” follows newlywed Jack and Laura, who, after a move to the countryside, encounter the malevolent spirits of two mediaeval knights (Nesbit 125-36). Finally, “Count Magnus” is about the scholar Mr. Wraxall who travels to Sweden to write the history of count Magnus Gabriel De la Gardie only to be haunted by his ghost (James 54-64).

2 Theory: Realism in an Unlikely Place

“Whatever we do with the dead they will not go away” is how British authors Michael Cox and R.A Gilbert open their introduction to *The Oxford Book of English Ghost Stories* (ix). The ghost has, in all its forms, been a continuous presence in the world of literature. American writer Dorothy Scarborough noted already in 1917 that the literary ghost is “absolutely indestructible” and “as unapologetically at home in twentieth-century fiction as in classical mythology, Christian hagiology, mediaeval legend, or Gothic romance” (81). She continues by stating how it “changes with the styles in fiction” but never goes “out of fashion” (81).

However, the perhaps best-known home for such apparitions is in the pages of the ghost story. Whilst such tales have taken on multiple shapes throughout history, as previously stated, the examples examined here are



from the Victorian period (1837-1901). This was when, as Freeman points out, the ghost story developed into a “distinct genre of short fiction” (93). Despite the essay’s focus on three tales in particular, it is necessary to understand the Victorian socio-historical context. This is important, not only to get a picture of the social reality which the three ghost stories attempted to mirror, but also to grasp the forces behind their various narrative decisions.

Akin to society at large, the ghost story experienced a transition during the Victorian era. The middle of the 19th century saw the rise of the realist novel, a type of literature aiming for a grounded depiction of contemporary society (Hay 58). Cox and Gilbert write that realism of this kind became part of the “cultural and literary fabric of the age” (“Victorian Ghost” x). Thus, it affected all aspects of the literary canon, even genres seemingly far removed like the ghost story. As will be showcased, “The Phantom Coach”, “Man-Sized in Marble” and “Count Magnus” are poignant examples of this development. They illustrate how the genre transitioned away from its fantastical Gothic origins, remodeling itself for this trend of realism (1-3). This is exemplified in the aforementioned components of narrative structure, characters, settings and ghosts. Therefore, this theory section provides an overview of each, explaining not only their narrative functions, but also their ties to the Victorian ghost story genre, as well as the socio-historical context of the era.



As famous Victorian author M.R. James once commented, the ghost story is “only a particular sort of short story” (ptd. in Cox and Gilbert, “English Ghost” ix). Thus, its literary composition is the same as any other narrative. For this reason, when performing a narratological analysis on such stories it is logical to refer to concepts from the wider field of narratology. As mentioned, this essay utilizes the theories of two such literary scholars in particular, both famous for their contributions to the field. These are the French theorist Gérard Genette, and his Dutch colleague Mieke Bal. In their respective works *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* and *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, each cover the basics of narrative structure. Out of these, Genette first laid the groundwork with his ideas on literary perspective, which Bal later partly remodeled and expanded with her own studies on characters and settings. Therefore, to give a complete narratological picture, the ideas of both theorists are referred to when analyzing the tropes and features of Edward’s, Nesbit’s and James’s tales. Moreover, in analyzing such shared aspects of multiple literary works, this essay falls right in line with British author Peter Barry’s description of the narratological analysis in his book *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural theory* (241-42).

2.1 Narrative Perspective

This theory section begins with an overview of narrative perspective, which is an integral aspect to any story. It is through this that the readers experience



all the story's features and thus it is a logical starting point. Genette explains how in any narrative perspective is made up of two parts, a *focalizer* and a *narrator*. The former witnesses the story's events whilst the latter mediates them to the reader (186). Depending on the narrative in question, these roles can be filled either by a single or multiple different actors, each giving a unique effect. In the case of "The Phantom Coach", "Man-Sized in Marble" and "Count Magnus" all are filled by the protagonists, who tell the reader about their own experiences.

This kind of structure where the narrator is part of the story Genette refers to as a homodiegetic or character-bound narration (244-45). Moreover, according to Bal, this inclusion brings a sense of authenticity to the narrative, no matter how unrealistic the tale itself is. She explains that this is a result of the narrator implying to recount "true facts about her or himself" (13-14). On this topic Barry comments that this often is a feature of first-person narratives (235). Additionally, Bal states in such a perspective the narrator uses a narrating "I" which relates the story's events to the reader (13).

According to Genette, this by extension means that the focalizer is similarly character-bound, with the reader being privy only to the protagonist's thoughts and feelings (189). Moreover, Bal comments that this perspective is subject to the inherent biases and limitations of the protagonist's point of view (159).



In this regard, the three ghost stories are no exception, and as the scholar Viola Hallam of the University of York argues, it is similarly a common feature of the genre of the Victorian ghost story as a whole (n.p). She points out that this way the ghost story becomes “a more personable experience and in turn, a more frightening experience for its audiences” (n.p). In this manner, the ghost story utilizes the aforementioned assumed authenticity of the character-bound narrator to ground themselves in palpable reality. This is illustrated by Freeman when describing how through first-person narration, the protagonists often highlight the “implausibility of their story” (“Realism and the Supernatural” 136). He states that this, combined with “convincing characterization”, is able to give even the unlikeliest tale “a patina of authenticity” (136).

Moreover, in keeping with this theme of realism, ghost stories frequently make use of the ambiguity afforded by the limits of the first-person narrative perspective. When they conclude, the readers and the protagonists alike are left uncertain of the events just witnessed. Akin to Bal’s statement, Hallam writes that unlike an omniscient narrator who sees all which transpires in the story-world, the ghost story’s character-bound one cast uncertainty on what transpires outside the protagonist’s vision (159; n.p). In “The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing” Srdjan Smajić writes that the ghost story’s protagonist, unlike the detective of crime-fiction, is caught between



“instinctive faith in the evidence of one's sight” and “the troubling knowledge that vision is often deceptive and unreliable” (1109).

As illustrated above, assigning the roles of focalizer and narrator to the protagonist has wide-reaching effects on the narrative. Moreover, it highlights the central role of the characters in how the ghost stories are told. Thus, after concluding the section on perspective, these are a logical point of continuation. For this reason, the next section is devoted to said characters as well as the story-world depicted to the reader through them.

2.2 Characters and Locations

Bal explains that characters constitute the most integral part of any narrative (105). Similar to other aspects of the story, they are created through the author's description, and depending on these, they are able to function in different manners with respect to the reader (105). Superficially, the characters resemble real people. However, as Bal points out this is an obvious illusion. It is merely the provision of the proper characteristics that will result in the reader thinking this is the case (105). But despite their fictionality, if characters are depicted convincingly enough, they transcend this imaginary status and seem real to the reader. Thus, the audience is able to identify with the given character, or as Bal puts it, “to cry, to laugh, and to search for or with it” (105-06).

This connection can be established in multiple ways, with one poignant example being through what she refers to as the *extra-textual*



situation. This constitutes the impact real-life context has on the fictional narrative (107). Oftentimes characters have their basis in mundane reality, and Bal argues that the reader's knowledge of this non-fictional element shapes their interpretation of them. Audiences are thusly able to get a very different impression of a character depending on their own personal ideologies and social backgrounds (107-08). According to this logic, unsurprisingly, those who find themselves mirrored in fictional characters have an easier time identifying with them.

With this in mind, the protagonists of “The Phantom Coach”, “Man-Sized in Marble” and “Count Magnus” offer few surprises. Their depictions play on the expectation of their mostly middle-class readership. This, however, is not unique to these three tales but is instead an overarching trope of the Victorian ghost story, which itself has its origins in the socio-historical context of the era. By the 1850s, the middle-class had established itself as a powerful force on the social stage. As mentioned earlier, they were the main readership of the ghost story and aided in making it a mainstay of the Victorian era (Cox and Gilbert, “Victorian Ghost” xii; Brewster 224). Thus, it is not surprising how the Victorian ghost story’s protagonists are customarily “middle-class persons” (“English Ghost” xv). Additionally, they are usually portrayed as having professions typical of their social class. In such tales the protagonists are often professionals in different fields of work, such as scholars or people working in law (xv). A notable



such inclusion mentioned by Scott Brewster of the university of Lincoln is the man of science or medicine, who aside from acting as a credible witness to the supernatural, is also illustrated as struggling to account for the ghosts (232-33).

Whilst the protagonists are distinctly middle-class, Victorian ghost stories likewise feature characters from other social groups, albeit in supporting roles. As Brewster writes, people like domestic servants usually have a more intimate and knowledgeable relationship with the ghost. Thus, it is often their task to mediate its existence to the protagonist (236). Such a mix of characters from the Victorian social spectrum is ultimately, like the aforementioned perspective, another way ghost stories tie themselves to reality. According to Simon Hay, diversity of this kind is a staple of Victorian writing, and in keeping with Hungarian Marxist philosopher György Lukács ideas of realism as a depiction of “historical social totality” (57-59).

The characters shift neatly into the concept of setting. Because of the aforementioned character-bound focalization, it is through them that the readers perceive the story-world. Bal explains that, as in any narrative, the reader is privy to this primarily through the character's senses of *sight*, *hearing* and *touch* (125). By utilizing these in tandem, the narrative draws a physical picture of its world, as well as its emotional relationship to the characters. The latter are often the contrasting notions of safety and danger, a relation which differs depending on the tale and is able shift throughout a



single narrative (126). The objects and interiors that fill such spaces similarly influence the reader's perception of them. Some narratives are filled with descriptive details, whilst others are vaguer (126).

Moreover, in describing the locations Bal explains how here too narratives play on the audience's frame of reference (126). Authors effectively immerse readers into their story-worlds by including settings somehow familiar to them. She uses an illustrating example when the city of Dublin is mentioned in a narrative. Readers who recognize the location naturally get a more vivid visualization of it than those who do not (126). Something similar is utilized when describing less-specific locales as well. Then narratives will use more general features associated with the given setting to reach similar results. Bal writes for example that, “[o]ne big city has a number of characteristics in common with every other big city” (127). This, she continues, similarly applies to “the countryside, a village, a street” or even “a house” (127). Like the characters, if the reader recognizes a setting from their daily reality, it results in greater immersion since it directly connects to their own personal experiences.

Mirroring this, the locations featured in the three ghost stories operate on the same logic of familiarity. Similar to the previously discussed features, this aspect also reflects a trend of the Victorian ghost story as a whole. As Brewster explains, their locales operate on an “intimate, domestic scale”, making them far removed from the “castles and catacombs” of previous



times (241). Ghosts frequent everything from “modest middle-class town houses” to “country estates” (241). Echoing Bal’s comments, these spaces are filled with detailed descriptions which give them special character. They include depictions of everything from “details of decor and dress, food and drink, and transport landscapes and architecture” (Cox and Gilbert, “Victorian Ghost” xvii).

No matter the locations, they all share the same real-world connection. On this topic Cox and Gilbert note that “[w]e must feel this imagined world to be in its essentials a reflection of our own” (“English Ghost” x). In such a setting, the readers are rendered “anxious witnesses” when this depiction of everyday reality is violated by the supernatural (x). Indeed, as James observes in *More Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*, a good ghost story should make readers tell themselves “If I’m not very careful, something of this kind may happen to me!” (ix). Bal explains that in horror fiction, authors heighten such sense of terror by making it intrude into familiar locations, in turn breaking the separation between safety and danger (126). These comments act as a neat segue into discussing the final aspect of the three stories, which is the ghost itself.

2.3 The Metaphorical Ghost

The final feature discussed here moves away from the purely narratological concepts. Additionally, it is superficially a departure from the overarching theme of literary realism found in its predecessors, most obviously noticeable



in its blatant ties to the supernatural. As a result, upon a first glance at least, the ghost is in multiple ways an outlier. However, as shall be illustrated here, this assessment is not necessarily accurate. To understand why this is the case, it is essential to also understand the Victorian ghost and its role within the narrative.

As perhaps is obvious judging by the genre's name, these apparitions occupy an essential role within the narrative. The depiction of the Victorian ghost differs in many respects from its predecessors of the early modern period (c.1500-1800). In a shift that had started in the Gothic literature of the late 18th century, the role of the ghost had expanded from a mere "stage device" to the story's indisputable focal point ("The Victorian Gothic" 93-94). Simultaneously, it had also been simplified from a minister of justice and outward manifestation of a person's guilt to an apparition meant only to "frighten and horrify" (Brewster 227). Akin to the previously discussed features, the examples of Edwards', Nesbit's and James's tales are in line with this genre-wide trend. They similarly align with other general characteristics associated with the Victorian ghost. The American author Dorothy Scarborough provides a contemporary account of the ghost in her book *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction*. She explains how ghosts of the era are very different from the "formless wraiths" of the past, which were unable to interact with the surrounding world (87). Instead, the Victorian ghosts, as Scarborough describes them, are "more healthy, more



active, more alive” than anything previous. They similarly possess a “strong resemblance to the personality before death” (91).

The latter feature in particular is tied to another overarching theme of the ghost, that of the past returning. As Freeman argues, the ghost’s implementation into the narrative has “eminently useful symbolic overtones” (“The Victorian Gothic” 95). Along these lines Hay writes that ghosts, despite their superficial differences, all serve as representations of trauma repeating itself again and again (2). Through this metaphorical meaning, despite its ties to fantasy, the ghost is able to represent aspects of the real world. Indeed, as Brewster explains, in the Victorian ghost story, they act as representations of the social anxieties of the era (224). As mentioned earlier, the Victorian period was a time of great social change. This occurred at such a fast rate that the time before still lingered in living memory, in turn creating a deep separation between modernity and the old world (Cox and Gilbert, “Victorian Ghost” ix). Thus, to the progressive Victorians, the return of an archaic past was a terrifying prospect (ix). This would mean the undermining of their safe sense of reality, and a return to a feudal pre-industrialized past. As Scarborough's aforementioned comment hinted at, ghosts are thus beings of the past coming back to haunt the present.

As argued by Hay, even though literature in the 19th century had developed into a proficient tool for depicting its social context, as society grew more complex, this task became harder to accomplish. Thus, describing



the grounded life of the individual was no longer enough to map the societal totality of the day (60-61). Many crucial facets of society were far removed from, or even invisible to, people living in it. As mentioned, social anxieties constitute just such an abstract aspect, and to illustrate these, the ghost is utilized as a metaphorical representation of them. For this reason, like the grounded characters and locales, the ghost is also a reflection of Victorian society. Interpreted thusly, the supernatural is not a force tearing a hole in this sense of realism, but instead an agent promoting it. Indeed, as Hay explains, literary realism need not exactly mirror reality, only to be a representation of the previously mentioned social totality (63).

3 Analysis: Victorian Tropes in Practice

3.1 Horror Through Grounded Eyes

Mirroring the theory section, the analysis opens with the narrative perspective. As mentioned, through this the story's other aspects are presented to the reader, from the characters and settings to the ghosts. Likewise, it is here that each story's commitment to literary realism is first noticeable. As mentioned, their first-person perspectives with character-bound focalizers and narrators all work in tandem to create a narrative which resembles grounded accounts of personal experiences.

This is established in the opening lines of each, where the narrating "I" of the first-person perspective is used to relate the stories' events to the



reader (13). The narrator of “The Phantom Coach” proclaims that “The circumstances I am about to relate to you have truth to recommend them”, whilst “Man-Sized in Marble” starts with the statement that “Although every word of this story is as true as despair, I do not expect people to believe it” (13; 125). In the case of “Count Magnus”, its unnamed narrator states “[b]y what means the papers out of which I have made a connected story came into my hands is the last point which the reader will learn from these pages” (54).

Thus, from the start, each story establishes their narrative structure, and the dual roles of the protagonists. Moreover, it illustrates the double narrators of “Count Magnus”, with one of them being the story’s protagonist Mr. Wraxall, and the other an unnamed external actor who pieces together his written accounts. These openings also establish the overarching theme of authenticity. Returning to Bal’s comments, first-person narration provides a sense of credibility. As she argued, this structure frames the narrative as its narrator's own experiences, giving them the appearance of fact (13-14). Lines like when Edwards’ protagonist proclaims that the story’s events “happened to myself, and my recollection of them is as vivid as if they had taken place only yesterday” underscores Bal’s comments (13). Additionally, this mode of address makes them more personal, like the narrators are speaking directly to the reader. This portrayal transcends the protagonists’ fictionality, making them seem like actual people. As shall be discussed later, this also ties into Bal’s comments about their relatability (105-06).



Further strengthening this documentary theme is the use of framing narratives, with the stories being told to the reader in a temporal location separate from their events. The beginning of “The Phantom Coach” establishes that “[t]wenty years, however, have gone by since that night” (13). “Count Magnus’s” unknown narrator explains that Mr. Wraxall’s journey occurred “some forty years ago” (54). Whilst no such temporal distance is stated in “Man-Sized Marble”, it is alluded to when the protagonist declares that the event’s other witness still lives (125). Moreover, in these the main characters comment on the unbelievability of their narratives. As mentioned, in the first line of Nesbit’s tale Jack acknowledges that his account will not be believed (125). The opening of “The Phantom Coach” conveys something similar, with its protagonist declaring the truthfulness of his recollections which remain “as vivid as if they had taken place only yesterday” (13). James’s tale is no exception, when describing his encounter with Count De la Gardie’s ghost Mr. Wraxall exclaims “[h]eaven is my witness that I am writing only the bare truth” (63). As Freeman commented, this paints the story’s narrator as an “eyewitness to the extraordinary” which gives the tales the aforementioned “patina of authenticity” (“Realism and the Supernatural” 135).

Aside from the opening frame narrative, the stories are told chronologically. This makes the reader experience the narrative events with the characters, engrossing them in their worlds. Similarly, as Cox and Gilbert



pointed out, it makes the audience “anxious witnesses” to the seemingly reality-breaking introduction of the ghost (“English Ghost” x). The sense of normalcy is broken piecemeal, and at first not by any supernatural force. Edwards’ Jack Murray gets put on his terrifying journey by a violent but common blizzard, whilst Mr. Wraxall goes on a visit to Scandinavia, a region reported to be “not widely known to Englishmen” (13; James 55). In “Man-Sized in Marble”, newlywed Jack and Laura are forced, due to economic difficulties, to leave the city for the countryside (125). Besides the aforementioned openings and foreshadowing throughout, there is little to disclose their true genre. As will be discussed later, the supernatural is introduced late in each story and occupies only a miniscule section of the overall narrative.

In creating this palpable sense of realism, the tales also use the limits of the first-person perspective to dramatic effect. As Genette discussed, restricting the reader to the protagonist’s narrow point of view creates a sense of ambiguity surrounding the narrative events (189). The reader is never given much exposition on the reasons for the ghosts returning to haunt the protagonist. Similarly, the framing of each story casts doubt on if these occurred at all. In “Man-Sized in Marble”, neither protagonist nor reader witness the deadly midnight walk of the knights. It is only alluded to, first by Mrs. Dorman’s tale, then by their absence from their church slabs, and finally the broken finger found in the dead Laura’s hand (Nesbit 133-36). Whilst



true to the husband, there is little evidence of supernatural activity. This is arguably better illustrated in “Count Magnus”, no doubt due to such ambiguity being another trademark of James’s writing (Cox and Gilbert, “Victorian Ghost” xiv). Magnus Gabriel De la Gardie’s ghost is similarly never showcased outright; instead, the protagonist/reader only witnesses the locks of his sarcophagus being undone and its “lid shifting upwards” (James 63). During his crazed escape back to England Mr. Wraxall’s story is told through disjointed notes, and whilst he is clearly haunted, whether these pursuers are of the ghostly or mental kind is left unclear (63-64). Similarly, in “The Phantom Coach” the protagonist is left with little evidence of his ghostly journey, which almost causes a quarrel with his surgeon (24). Thus, all three stories leave the reader wondering if the events have natural or supernatural causes. Ultimately, like Smajić pointed out, the audience is torn between accepting the unearthly events as true or chalking them up to the limitations and biases of the protagonist’s vision (1109; Bal 159). No matter what, this ambiguity is a way of including the ghost whilst removing the associated supernaturality. After all, as Hay argues, literary purely realist stories often include ghosts for narrative purposes, implying that the relationship between it and realism is “more complex than one of simple opposition” (59). This then hints at another possible interpretation of the ghostly presence, one which will be further explored later.



As showcased, all three stories use both the advantages and limitations of their first-person narratives to ground themselves in believability. Because it is through this perspective that the readers take in the rest of the story, the other aspects accordingly receive a realistic slant. Indeed, as Bal argued, the first-person perspective provides authenticity to even the most far-fetched narrative (13-14). This is also the case for these three tales, and as shall be illustrated in the next section on their characters, these have their own ways of adding to this general trope.

3.2 Characters of Victorian Reality

As mentioned, it is through the characters' perspective that the reader witnesses the events of each narrative. For this reason, they constitute an essential element of all three stories. Additionally, in multiple ways the characters offer a glimpse into the Victorian domestic reality. Perhaps the most obvious example is their true-to-life depictions, but they also encapsulate more abstract aspects of the era. The characters illustrate the relationship between and clashing worldviews of different layers of society. As shall become apparent, the latter is a confrontation tied to the touched upon anxieties of the day.

The characters of the Victorian ghost story, as mentioned earlier, undeniably have their basis in reality, and the examples in these three tales are no exception. They are notable, not for larger-than-life personas or noble titles, but for their mundanity. From Nesbit's lovesick newlyweds and



James's scholar to Edwards' devoted husband, all are markedly ordinary. This is exemplified in their typical middle-class depictions, in keeping with Cox and Gilbert's description ("English Ghost" xv). Similarly, they are consumed not by any larger-than-life quest, but by issues troubling real-life people. Nesbit's opening paragraph describes the couple's economic difficulties, and their struggle of finding a home matching their means (125-26). Likewise, James illustrates Mr. Wraxall's concern about procuring materials for his travel guide (55). The goals of Jack Murray in "The Phantom Coach" are even more mundane, simply being returning home to his wife (13-24). Moreover, they occupy many of the same professions described as common in the social group, from Nesbit's artist/writer couple to Edwards' lawyer and James's scholar (Brewster 232-33).

These depictions made the protagonists relatable to the Victorian ghost story's mostly middle-class readership. Returning to Bal's theories of the extra-textual situation, since the fictional characters mirror the real-life situation of the reader, this creates a stronger sense of immersion (107-108). These qualities combined with the aforementioned narrating style, make the characters feel like actual people. Returning to James's aforementioned comment, it makes the readers feel like if they are not careful something similar could happen to them as well ("More Ghost Stories" ix). As mentioned, the middle-class characters' prominent roles mirror the wider socio-historical context of the era. From the 1850s, this social group was on



the rise, and unlike other layers of society they had both the economic means and tastes to indulge in ghost stories (Cox and Gilbert “English Ghost” xii). Thus, the middle-class was instrumental in the ghost story’s popularity, constituting, as explained by Cox and Gilbert, the main audience for the magazines where they debuted (“Victorian Ghost” xii-xiii). With this in mind, as noted earlier, their central role in each story is understandable.

Despite their prominence on and off the written page, the middle-class protagonist only makes up one part of the wider ensemble. An equally important aspect of each story is the supporting characters, which almost entirely consist of people from other social classes. In “Man-Sized in Marble”, this role is filled by Mrs. Dorman, an old village woman hired as the couple’s housekeeper. Besides being a good cook and gardener, she is also knowledgeable on folklore, telling them tales of “smugglers and highwaymen” and “the "sights" which met one in lonely glens of a starlight night” (126). Her equivalent in “The Phantom Coach” is the old cantankerous domestic servant Jacob, who begrudgingly rescues Murray from the blizzard by leading him to his master’s residence (14-15). In “Count Magnus” the supporting ensemble is larger but less well described, with the exception of Herr Nielsen the innkeeper (56).

Besides their common social backgrounds, all have the shared purpose of informing the protagonist of the ghosts’ existence. When inquiring about the reason for Mrs. Dorman leaving before Halloween, she



tells Jack how the marble knights return when the clock strikes twelve, just to walk to the ruins of their old castle (Nesbit 129). Similarly, Herr Nielsen finally relents under Wraxall's questioning and reluctantly tells him how the Count's ghost murdered two men who poached on his old estate (James 59-60). Similarly, the titular phantom coach is indirectly introduced when Jakob informs Murray of a terrible accident which occurred nine years prior, where a mail carriage drove off a cliff killing all onboard (Edwards 20).

These examples, in particular those of James and Nesbit, illustrate the point made by Brewster, of the supporting characters having a more intimate and knowledgeable relationship to the ghost than the protagonist (236). They are wise enough to acknowledge the very real danger of the supernatural, unlike the main characters who are quick to dismiss it as superstition. Defying the obvious signs of danger, Mr. Wraxall steals the key to the De la Gardie mausoleum and sneaks inside (James 62). Similarly, Jack fatefully ignores Mrs. Dorman's warnings and leaves his door unlocked on Halloween (Nesbit 129,132).

This difference of perspectives equally represents a clash of worldviews, which, besides being a prominent trope of the three tales, mirrors the anxieties of Victorian society. As mentioned earlier, the incredible speed of societal and scientific progress had created a separation between modernity and a past which was still in living memory (Cox and Gilbert, "Victorian Ghost" ix-x). As these stories illustrate, the young



protagonists of the emerging middle-class, like the contemporary consumers of the Victorian ghost stories, are inherently skeptical, driven by what Luke Thurston describes as a strong sense of rationality (2). This understandably clashes with the traditional values and beliefs illustrated by older peasant characters like Mrs. Dorman and Herr Nielsen. The ultimate rightfulness of the latter is a way in which the stories illustrate the fragility of Victorian society. As will be discussed later, the old world, in the guise of the ghost, in a sense haunts and undermines the present.

This theme is similarly showcased in another inclusion to the character roster, that of the scientist or medical professional (Brewster 232-233). In “The Phantom Coach” this is the mysterious unnamed master. He is described as a once great man of science, who became ridiculed by his peers for believing in the supernatural (19). In a monologue in front of the fireplace he tells Murray how the world “grows hourly more and more skeptical of all that lies beyond its own narrow radius” dismissing as fable “all that resists experiment” (18). The master’s comments thus reflect the scientific hubris of Victorian society, the faultiness of which is later illustrated by ghost coach. His counterpart in “Man-Sized in Marble”, the young Irish doctor and the couple's only neighbor, arguably mirrors the establishment's views. When running into Jack, who is raving after finding the knight's resting places empty, he acts as a voice of reason. Hearing his tale, the doctor laughingly chalks it up to “smoking too much and listening to



old wives' tales" (134). However, his scientific mind is challenged when they find Laura dead in the couple's cottage, clenching the knight's broken finger in her hand (136). Like in Edwards' tale, the world of science is ultimately proven wrong against the supernatural.

Despite their differences, the characters of all three tales share undoubtable ties to domestic reality. They serve not only to make the tales believable but also as a conduit for social commentary. Many of the traits brought up here are shared by the ghost stories' locations, which will be explored in the next section.

3.3 Creating Palpable Settings

As mentioned, resulting from the character-bound focalization/narration, the protagonists' senses are essential in crafting the story-worlds. According to the ideas of Bal (125), it is through their sight, touch and hearing that the reader sees the gloomy resting place of the cursed knights, hears Count Magnus's grave opening and feels the desolate moor's bitter cold. Moreover, through their perspectives it is evident that the characters' relatability is reflected in the locales they inhabit. As mentioned, these mirror those found in domestic reality (Brewster 241). Again, as Michael Cox and R.A. Gilbert argued, "[w]e must feel this imagined world to be in its essentials a reflection of our own" ("English Ghost" x).

To underscore this sense of realism, each story is filled with the kind of descriptive detail the authors pointed out as typical of the Victorian ghost



story (“Victorian Ghost” xvii). Thus, Nesbit spends a substantial section describing the couple's “ivy-covered and moss-grown” cottage (126). Similar amounts of detail are given to the church, the final resting place of the malevolent knights. She depicts the building as “large and lonely” with a sizable Norman doorway sealed by a “heavy oak door studded with iron”. Its inside is equally grand with high rising arches and windows of “rich glass” (127). Edwards is similarly descriptive in the depictions of her story-world. She starts her tale by illustrating the “bleak wide moor” and its endless isolation, without “the faintest smoke-wreath, not the tiniest cultivated patch or fence, or sheep track” (13). When the protagonist enters the master’s home, this too is given ample detail, from its “great raftered” hall with its rows of different winter stores, to his chambers filled with books and “philosophical instruments” (16-17).

However, unparalleled in this aspect is “Count Magnus”, no doubt since it too is a prominent feature of James’s writing (Freeman, “The Victorian Gothic” 102). Since the story is framed as scraps from Mr. Wraxall’s unfinished travel guide, it comes off as a documentary in its sheer level of detail. His account is filled with depictions of everything from the manor house of Råbäck, to the Swedish countryside and the Varnhem church with the De la Gardie family mausoleum (James 55-56) The latter, arguably the narrative’s most important location, is described as “a largish eight-sided building” the domed roof of which is topped by “a kind of pumpkin-shaped



object rising into a spire” (56). Its inside is depicted as likewise imposing, the central space of which being occupied by “three copper sarcophagi, covered with finely engraved ornament” (61). The count’s own, besides ominously lacking a crucifix, is covered with depictions of battles and executions, but notably “a man running at full speed, with flying hair and outstretched hands” pursued by a monstrous hooded figure (61). Little does Mr. Wraxall know the latter is an eerie foreshadowing of his own fate.

Such attention to detail is yet another way in which the stories are grounded in plausible reality. What makes James’s tale stand out in this regard is its use of real-world locations. Indeed, in his introduction to *Collected Ghost Stories*, he notes how all the featured locations are in fact “real places” (ix). Although their depictions are heavily fictionalized, there nonetheless exists a manor named Råbäck in Västergötland as well as a De la Gardie family mausoleum in the church of Varnhem. Whilst the settings of the other tales are certainly rich with realistic detail, they lack this authenticity.

However, what the locations of all three have in common is that they play on the reader's frame of reference. According to Bal, if the reader recognizes a place from their own experience, they have an easier time visualizing it, and in turn it feels much more real (126). Naturally the real-life settings of “Count Magnus” have an advantage in this regard, but the same can also be said for the other two. Despite their fictionality, their basis



in familiar reality nonetheless makes them recognizable. As Bal argued, they use the general characteristics associated with each place to make them feel real to the reader (127). Although they have not been to this particular village, manor house or church, their likely experience of similar places allows them to visualize each.

Ultimately the depictions of the locations, much like the characters, create a sense that nowhere is safe from ghostly haunting, which in turn makes the horror more profound. Going back to the previously mentioned quote by James, it gives the audience the feeling that something similar could possibly happen to them too (“More Ghost Stories” ix). These aspects thus combine in the mission of the Victorian ghost story “to blur the boundaries between fact and fiction” and create a world which draws the reader in with an “insidious sense of probability” (Cox and Gilbert, “Victorian Ghost” x-xi).

3.4 The Ghosts of Societies Past

Out of all the aforementioned aspects of the three stories, the ghost is perhaps the most complex and multifaceted. From Nesbit’s demonic knights and James’s phantom count to Edward’s unearthly mail coach, each story features specters as frightening as they are memorable. However, as mentioned, contrasted against the grounded story-world created by the previously discussed tropes and features, they seem out of place. Nevertheless, as similarly discussed earlier, they possess a more nuanced metaphorical meaning, which has more in common with these than first assumed. Like the



narrative structure, characters and locations, the supernatural too has the narrative purpose of illustrating its socio-historical context.

These ghosts, even in light of the stories' short length, take up only a small portion of the overall narrative. Despite this, however, their presence is still felt throughout. As Cox and Gilbert argued, the most effective ghosts are those that intrude “gradually but insistently” (“English Ghost” x). In each story, the protagonist hears of the ghosts well before they manifest themselves, and they are thus full of eerie foreshadowing of their ultimate outcomes. In “Count Magnus”, the audience quickly finds out that there is something peculiar about the 17th century nobleman. The locals all but refuse to answer Mr. Wraxall’s questions, and it is later shown that the count’s casket is sealed with three strong padlocks (61). Something similar occurs in “Man-Sized in Marble”, when the couple notices an unearthly glow emanating from the knights’ sarcophagi, illuminating them in the otherwise pitch-black church. (127-28). Like her Swedish counterparts, Mrs. Dorman greatly fears the ghosts. This is illustrated both in her refusal to stay for Halloween night, as well as in her initial unwillingness to tell the couple about the knights' curse (129).

When the ghosts finally enter the stage, it is apparent that they, whilst distorted, remain recognizable as their living selves, down to “the garments in which the beholder saw them last in life” (Scarborough 91). For example, Nesbit’s marble knights remain clad in “full plate-armour”, with their “bad



hard faces” yet bearing the grim countenances of life (127-28). The same is true for the ghostly mail carriage and its undead passengers, all still recognizably “living” enough to first fool the protagonist. It is only upon closer examination that he realizes that his oddly quiet travelling companions and their icy cold dilapidated ride are not from the world of the living (Edwards 22). Their faces are described as corpse-like, locked in “the agony of death” with eyes that “glowed with a fiery unnatural lustre”. The account of the mail coach itself is equally detailed, with its foul-smelling crumbling interior ripe with decay (22-23). James's tale is vague in this regard, and the only time the count's ghost is described he is disguised in a dark cloak and hat (64). However, his ability to blend in among the living proves he still passes as such (63-64).

Unfortunately for the protagonists, looks are deceiving, and the ghosts of all three tales are portrayed as distinctly malevolent. Their goal, directly or indirectly, is to harm or kill anyone unfortunate enough to encounter them. Those caught within their sights can only, like Mr. Wraxall, “lock the door and cry to God” (James 64). This malicious trait echoes Cox and Gilbert's comment that the most impactful ghosts are “those who are far from pleasant” (“English Ghost” x-xi). In two of the three stories, they succeed in their morbid mission, with the protagonist of “The Phantom Coach” only narrowly surviving due to luck and his “youth and a fine constitution” (Edwards 24). Mr. Wraxall and Laura are less fortunate, both



being found dead at the conclusion of their respective stories (James 64; Nesbit 136). Their ability to perform physical feats like breaking out of their graves, moving through locked doors and harming the living show that the ghosts are not the “misty wraiths” of old (Scarborough 87). They are stronger, faster and more “alive”, possessing great supernatural powers (86).

However, despite the ghosts’ direct physical threat, an equally terrifying aspect is their ambiguity. As mentioned earlier, even their existence in the physical world is questionable. Similarly, the protagonist/reader is never told exactly why the ghosts return from the dead nor their reasons for picking the protagonists as the object of their hauntings. Besides failing to listen to sound advice and having the misfortune of encountering them, there is little to make the protagonists deserve their terrible fates. This quality of the Victorian ghost, to “pursue blameless living victims with relentless unfathomable malignity” is what Cox and Gilbert describe as most disquieting (“Victorian Ghost” xvi).

Judging by this description, the ghost is seemingly a fantastical being, set on frightening and harming the living without reason. Whilst such an interpretation might seem accurate, their real narrative purpose is found elsewhere. As touched upon earlier, ghosts possess a deeper metaphorical meaning, which the aforementioned characteristics all play into. At their most basic, each of them, from the coach that crashed nine years earlier, to the knights of medieval times and the 17th century count, represents the idea



of revenants from the past returning. The ghosts' aforementioned resemblance to their living selves most notably underscores this (Scarborough 91). Particularly in James's and Nesbit's tales, the ghost represents forces from an archaic pre-Victorian past. Moreover, these representations of the past are, as Cox and Gilbert put it, "terribly transformed" ("Victorian Ghost" ix). Again, this can be observed in their ravaged appearances, but especially in their malicious characteristics. As discussed above, these ghosts are depicted as wholly evil, wishing only to do harm.

The depiction of the past as something inherently deformed, archaic and malevolent tells of the Victorian attitude towards it. This concept is a neat segue into the true meaning of the ghost, which as Brewster stated, is a representation of the era's social anxieties (224). As mentioned, one of the Victorians' greatest fears was the fragility of their contemporary existence. The modernity which had arrived at such a fast rate could hypothetically be taken away equally quickly. For this reason, as Cox and Gilbert commented, "[f]or a progressive age, the idea of a vindictive past held an especial terror" ("Victorian Ghost" ix). As shown, in these ghost stories the past "is never a closed book" (ix) but one able to affect the present.

Thus, all three stories play on this fear in creating their frightening effect. Returning to the point made by Hay, this concept is too abstract to be represented in any character or setting (60-61). Therefore, one purpose of the



introduction of the supernatural is to highlight this aspect of society. Like the stories' ghosts, these anxieties exist metaphysically, invisible in everyday life but yet very real. The importance of portraying them could be a reason why the ghost's narrative role remained enlarged during the Victorian era, whilst other story aspects moved towards realism. For this reason, utilizing the supernatural as a metaphor is a poignant way of illustrating them. The ambiguity of the ghost also allows the author to include this without breaking the grounded world created by the story's other elements. Echoing Hay's comments, this proves that ghosts, if handled properly, have a place in realist fiction (59).

The portrayal of societal trauma for frightening effect is arguably one of the main purposes of the ghost stories. The previously mentioned expanded narrative role of the ghost as the story's focal point is evidence for this as well (Freeman 94). Thus, each of the three tales get their haunting effect not from fantasy, but by mirroring their contemporary society. In summary, for these reasons, despite their ties to the realm of the supernatural, I argue that one of the ghosts' true narrative purposes is to mirror the Victorian socio-historical context.

4 Conclusion: Breaking Narratological Ground

In conclusion, as the results of my analysis have illustrated, despite belonging to a genre tied to the supernatural "The Phantom Coach", "Man-Sized in Marble" and "Count Magnus" are also works of social



realism. The multiple tropes and features found in each combine to not only portray a superficial image of the Victorian era, but also one that touches on its more abstract social aspects.

Firstly, the authenticity of the first-person perspective illustrates the period's lean towards realism. Additionally, the characters showcased through it provide an overview of the era's changing demographic situation. Particularly, it illustrates the new central role of the burgeoning middle-class in Victorian society, and how the aforementioned focus on realism mirrors their scientifically based worldview. Furthermore, it shows how this perspective clashes with those of other social groups, particularly the lower classes. These authentic depictions continue in the settings, which reflect those of grounded Victorian reality. Finally, moving away from the physical aspects, the ghost too is included for the same purpose. As made clear, the narrative role of the phantom coach, the demonic knights and the ghost of Count Magnus serve to illustrate aspects of the era, which, like the ghosts themselves, are otherwise invisible. In their case it is the social anxieties of the day, in particular the fear of the past returning to undermine the Victorian present. Thus, the examined tropes and features of each combine to give a historical snapshot, capturing the multiple layers of Victorian life. By including all these different aspects, they align with György Lukács concept of realism as a depiction of "historical social totality" (Hay 57-59).



Moreover, these authentic depictions serve another purpose. By mirroring their own reality to such a degree, the stories become believable to the reader. In a time when, as Thurston pointed out, audiences were more skeptical than ever, this is essential for their ability to frighten (2). The realistic world created by the stories mirror Cox and Gilberts argument that the ghost story's setting needs to reflect real-life ("English Ghost" x). In doing so, they similarly harken back to Bal's aforementioned comments. As she explained, introducing horror into such safe familiar locales makes the terrifying effect all the more profound (126).

Furthermore, the examination performed here has yielded results in another area as well. It has been illustrated that narratological investigation need not be limited to obviously realist literature. Indeed, as these findings have shown, breaking the tradition has produced noteworthy results. As touched upon in the introduction, the purpose of this essay has been to pave the way for narratological research on more unconventional types of literature. Returning to the ghost story, whilst this is already a well-populated area of study, another purpose of writing this essay was to encourage further work here as well. Despite limiting myself to analyzing four literary aspects, there is yet more to explore. The nuances of the first-person perspective, and the internal focalizer/narrator alone has the potential to fill an entire paper. The same can be said for the depiction of its characters and locations. Additionally, since this essay focused on three ghost stories from the



Victorian era, a natural continuation would be to examine if the findings here represent the genre in its entirety. Moreover, another potentially fruitful angle could be to study how this changed in the over half a century which the Victorian era lasted.

Ultimately however, as mentioned earlier, this will be left to other scholars to examine. In summary, what is most important for the purpose of this essay is that it successfully performed a narratological analysis on the three ghost stories, and as mentioned, in doing so my work here has made two things apparent. Firstly, it has proved such an examination to be possible, and secondly it illustrated that literary realism can not only exist but even thrive in a genre as seemingly fantastic as the ghost story.

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