SUGGESTIVE HAUNTINGS: EXPLORING COMIC AND FRIENDLY GHOSTS IN WILDE, WODEHOUSE AND KIPLING

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Abstract

The late 19th and early 20th century witnessed the ghost story transcending its purely Gothic bounds, encompassing, as it were, comic, whimsical and even friendly spectres that mirrored the socio-cultural concerns of a fast changing world. Authors such as Oscar Wilde, P.G. Wodehouse, and Rudyard Kipling reconceptualised the figure of the ghost into a subtle device of cultural, aesthetic and social examinations. The current paper aims to examine the ways by which Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost', Wodehouse's 'Honeysuckle Cottage', and Kipling's 'They' unsettle mainstream gothic archetypes via the this usage of comic and friendly apparitions that in turn become a vehicle of delving into or anticipating contemporary motifs and ideas. Wilde's story, analysed through the lens of Derrida's 'hauntology', subtly addresses anxieties about modernity, the lingering effects of the past on the present, and the residual repercussions of grief, guilt, and redemption across time. Wodehouse's comic narrative, by contrast, explores the conflicts between literary conventions and artistic individualism within a meta-theatrical framework. Finally, Kipling's poignant story furthers an 'eco-hauntological' awareness, where the use of the supernatural transforms the landscape into a sentient ecological entity that remembers past tragedies and lost futures.

Keywords: Comic ghosts, hauntology, meta-theatricality, eco-hauntology, 19th and 20th century.

Introduction:

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the ghost story experienced a subtle shift. No longer confined to the gloomy corners of the Gothic tradition, these spectral entities began to appear in more humorous, whimsical, or even sympathetic guises, often mirroring the rapidly changing sensibilities of a fast modernizing world. Writers such as Oscar Wilde, P.G. Wodehouse, and Rudyard Kipling reimagined these spectres not just as terrifying and restless spirits, but rather as subtle literary tools by which deeper cultural, social, and aesthetic concerns could be explored. The current paper aims to examine the manner in which Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost' (1887), Wodehouse's 'Honeysuckle Cottage' (1925), and Kipling's

'They' (1904) subvert traditional Gothic tropes through their usage of comic or friendly apparitions, and by so doing, engage with larger motifs that continue to hold significance in contemporary times.By delving into the concept of Jacques Derrida's 'hauntology', this paper attempts to elucidate how Wilde's story covertly hints at anxieties about modernity, the lingering effects of the past over the present, and the metaphorical continuity of grief, guilt and redemption through the fabric of time.By contrast, this paper also attempts to highlight the manner in which Wodehouse's comedic ghost story addresses the pressures of literary conventions and artistic individuality within an essentially meta-theatrical set-up. Kipling's poignant narrative, on the other hand, subtly anticipates an 'eco-hauntological' awareness, one in which both the spectral children and the forsaken mansion become sentient with sensations of grief and lost futures, and metamorphoses into a space that continues to echo the tragedies of the past. Via the multi-faceted usage of these phantasmal entities, each author thus reflects a moment of cultural or linguistic negotiation, where spectrality becomes a means to an end—a tool of comedic enhancement and an almost subconsciousvehicle of examining issues of change, authorship, and ecological consciousness.

Literature Review:

Traditionally, the figure of the ghost in literature was one of dread and fear, being overtly associated with the terror of the unknown and the uncanny. However, as literature progressed into latter times, the role and representation of these spectres became diversified and multi-layered.Notions such as the "spectral turn"gained ground, highlighting at its wake an emerging interest in the ways by which hauntings appear "textually and materially", encouraging new ways of understanding the same (Holloway & Kneale 297-298). As a result, these spectral beings became infused with wider connotations and interpretations, giving rise to concepts such as the "domestication" of the phantom in Victorian literature that elucidates the way in which these entities may appear in fiction in aninnocuous way (as R. Renee Branca has demonstrated in her "Ghosts That Are Not Ghosts: The Domesticated Un-Ghost in Victorian Fiction").While several studies detail the more serious aspects of these ghostly entities such as C. Lee's "Ghosts here and there: Spectral Resistance and the Ethics of Ghosts in Postcolonial Literature" or Kathryn Edwards' "The History of Ghosts in Early Modern Europe: Recent Research and Future Trajectories", a trend towards an understanding of non-malefic entities is also perceivable.

In this framework, Dorothy Scarborough's analysis of the evolution of the "humorous ghost" receives a distinctly gendered flavour in her exploration of masculine comic ghosts and dignified feminine ghosts (4-10). Such a gendered stance is perceivable also in British comics of the 1970s that juxtapose cautionary lessons with comedic hauntings that represent these spectres as delinquent yet approachable entities as Round has demonstrated in her "'little gothics' Misty and the 'Strange Stories' of British Girls' Comics".

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In children's literature, on the other hand, the friendly ghost has become a ubiquitous persona, one in which they epitomize the trope of the benign phantasmal being who coalesces cultural considerations with an exploration of the uncanny as Sean Ferrier-Watson has demonstrated in her discussion of "mock ghosts" in American children's ghost stories (33-34). Recent scholarships also posit the ways by which children's fiction often utilize horror motifs to examine universal anxieties, whilst at the same time offering a comedic outlet that locates these spectres as mediators between terror and entertainment as proposed by Drosopulos in *The Aesthetics of the Macabre in Contemporary Children's Literature*. A similar trend may also be perceivable in Lamara's *A Study of the Supernatural in Twenty-first Century Young Adult Gothic Literature* in which she delves into contemporary young adult gothic fiction where the "supernatural Other" is portrayed in a facetious tone that serves a dual purpose of addressing adolescent concerns and providing comedic relief.

Within this frame of reference then, the current paper will attempt to look at the manner in which the employment of comic and friendly spectral figures in late-19th and early-20th century literature represents a significant departure from traditional Gothic archetypes, while at the same time serving as a subtle literary technique that consciously or subconsciously anticipates relevant contemporary concepts and motifs (hauntology, meta-therticality, artistic individualism and eco-hauntology). Such a subversion, thus, not only demystifies the terrifying spectral figure, but also imbues the narratives with humour and pathos, transforming the phantom into a multi-layered tool for exploring various psycho-social issues.

The Aristocratic Spectre: Wilde's Hauntological Allegory

In this context, Oscar Wilde's short story 'The Canterville Ghost', offers a classic instance in which a supposedly fearsome entity exhibits qualities that are not just humorous, but also fundamentally human. Such a notion evidently challenges our conception of a ghost being "anti-human", as something which shifts the reader's sympathy towards the haunted and not the haunters (Newton 18-19). Throughout the first half of the story, the focus hinges entirely on the almost ridiculous exploits of Sir Simon de Canterville's failed attempts at frightening the newly arrived Otis family and the absolute almost absurd reluctance on their part to even acknowledge the ghost as being something terrifying. And yet, beneath the surface of these slapstick occurrences, lies Wilde's preoccupation with much more serious issues such as "the contrast between unrelenting American pragmatism and aristocratic English superstitions" (Mendelssohn 167). The ghost therefore, becomes a means to an end, a comic persona who exemplifies the cultural rift not just between two states, but also between two contradictory systems of belief. The conscienceless existence of Sir Simon, who ruthlessly murdered his wife years ago and now revels in his ability to scare people, or even the mischievous almost delinquent exploits of the Otis twins, is therefore pitted against the kind compassion of Virginia whose actions towards the end of the narrative brings an end to the restless

hauntings at Canterville Chase. It is only at the very end that one gets a glimpse into the human that Sir Simon had once been, as his blundering and ludicrous ghostly persona fades into the tragic poignancy of his cruel fate, while the subtle echoes of his message about the power of love over life and death continues to haunt the readers even after the close of the narrative.

Thus, in Wilde's delineation of the ludicrous exploits of Sir Simon, the readers get a hint of his critique of an outmoded aristocratic way of life which is set against the pragmatism, capitalism and resilience of an emerging modern world. Such an inversion of a mainstream gothic trope of the terrifying spectre, therefore becomes explicative of what Catherine Day describes as theVictorian fixation with socio-cultural evolution and the endurance of the pastin her *On Paying Attention: Particularity in Victorian Fiction and Empirical Thought*. Such a stance on the part of Wilde isalso informed by the concept of hauntology, a notion that encapsulates the continuing and lingering presence of the past on the present as exemplified by Sir Simon's persistent hauntings across ages (Fisher 16). This unconscious engagement with hauntology, consequently enables Wilde to examine the ways by which the spectres of history (in this case, quite literally the ghost of an aristocrat) impinge upon and continue to influence contemporary socio-cultural structures. Sir Simon then, is not merely a slapstick supernatural presence in the story, but rather a symbolic rendition of unsettled historical tensions and anxieties that continue to have an impact on cultural narratives on memory and identity as Own Davies has explicated in his *The Haunted: A Social History of Ghosts*.

Hauntology, being less about literal ghosts and more so about what their presence in narratives indicate, then may be seen as relevant in understanding Sir Simon as a metaphor of a past that refuses to perish—both on a personal (his guilt) and cultural level (decaying British aristocracy). Hauntology, thenultimately hints at a sort of disjointedness from history, one in which the past lingers clumsily in a present that does not know how to interpret it. The ghost of Sir Simon, then becomes an emblem of this historical burden that continues to persist in a world that fails to believe, regard or even acknowledge him, as explicated further by his fading powers that had previously been nourished by the bulwarks of nobility, tradition and superstitions.

The Otis family treats Sir Simon as an old-fashioned relic (oiling his chains, giving him medicine, etc.), a commodity that requires their aid to fit into an emerging capitalist world that can transform this once powerful symbol of tradition into an object of entertainment and nostalgia. In hauntological thinking, such a breakdown of actual historic continuity then simultaneously hints at the manner in which the past is eventually transformed into a "ghostly" simulation.

The old English manor, strew with ancient tapestries and bloody secrets, therefore becomes a space which in hauntological terms remain outside linear time, a space in which the past quite

literally bleeds into the present and cohabits clumsily. Sir Simon's reconciliation with his unresolved trauma and guilt at the end of the story, then becomes suggestive of the symbolic laying of the ghost of history to rest, something which may be seen as adding an element of hope to Wilde's hauntological allegory.

The Spectral Novelist: Wodehouse, Meta-theatricality and Artistic Freedom

The latent memories of a place, can at times come back in a palpable form, thereby resurfacing in a way that gives the impression of an uneasy haunting. P G Wodehouse's satirical tale 'Honeysuckle Cottage' depicts a situation similar to this, where against the backdrop of a picturesque English countryside, the comic escapades of "sensational mystery stories" author James Rodman in a house haunted by his aunt's inordinate devotion towards sentimental romance novel, takes the form of a haunting which leaves the young author petrified (Wodehouse 208). In a sense, it is the returned spirit of the aunt, Leila J. Pinckney, who comes back from death to admonish her erring nephew about the ills of sensational fiction and influence him in favour of her own kind of fiction, namely "Squashily Sentimental" novels (Wodehouse 206). In another sense, the almost illusive, surreal atmosphere of the narrative, together with the exceedingly tangible discomposure of Rodman, the only rational being amidst the motley crew of stock characters who swiftly give into tedious romanticism, sparks within the reader's mind a sense that the text itself is a performance, whose existence remains eternally bound within the confines of the Honeysuckle Cottage. As Rodman himself observes:

> …at this moment I am actually living the plot of a typical Leila J. Pinckney novel in just the setting she always used! ...It's the influence of this awful house weighing upon me. I feel like an eggshell in a maelstrom. I am being sucked on by a force too strong for me to resist …My aunt's subliminal ether vibrations have woven themselves into the texture of the place, creating an atmosphere which forces the ego of all who come in contact with it to attune themselves to it. It's either that or something to do with the fourth dimension (Wodehouse 220-221).

This meta-theatrical quality of Wodehouse's tale owes a lot to what Owen Dudley Edwards refers to as "the problem of alter ego and of creations coming to life…by subjecting one novelist to the alien agency of another. In one way Wodehouse himself was haunted by Leila J. Pinckney" (271). Thus, the comic overtones of the story conceal a number of subtle undertones, as the supposed spirit of Leila J. Pinckney and her semi-fictional crew continues to haunt not just Rodman and the readers, but also the text and its author as well.

Much like Wilde's Sir Canterville, Wodehouse's maternal ghost appears not as a terrifying gothic menace, but rather as an affectionate, persuasive and almost editorial presence who prompts her nephew towards hyper-romantic truisms whenever he attempts to compose unsentimental works of mystery. Wodehouse's engagement with the theatricality of the

setting, thus also become suggestive of his play on the image of the 'writer-at-work' with the ghost of Leila J. Pinckney quite literally functioning as a "ghost-writer" from beyond the grave who rewrites the protagonist's stories from inside the narrative.

By emphasizing Aunt Leila's continual interference, Wodehouse also foregrounds the creative process as a sustained negotiation between artistic individuality and autonomy, and the external pressures of social conventions, market expectations or even the lingering effects of obsolete literary styles. Rodman's efforts to bypass the "miasma of sentimentalism" and the "subliminal ether vibrations" of Aunt Leila that pervades Honeysuckle Cottage, thus itself becomes implicative of his desire for individual autonomy against the inexorable encroachments of commercial pressures and inherited tastes (Wodehouse 219-221). Aunt Leila's will which practically coerces Rodman to reside in Honeysuckle Cottage or forfeit a significantly large financial legacy, thus assumes the guise of a play-within-a-play where the protagonist remains caught between the pressures of conforming to his ghostly aunt's stylistic hauntings and maintaining his personal artistic freedom. Such a tension between these antithetical forces therefore engenders the comedic effects of the tale—Aunt Leila's harmless meddling becomes a parody of clichéd gothic horrors, while at the same time acting as a statement on the manner in which individualism in art is frequently jeopardized by invisible yet compelling forces.

Hauntings through Time: Kipling's Eco-Hauntological Narrative

At the crossroads of fate, where the nebulous boundaries between fact and fiction, reality and imagination fade away, a new world emerges, a world in which an author weaves the threads of his own joys and sorrows into the fabric of a tale which then becomes a timeless testimony to his own story. Rudyard Kipling's short story 'They'bears witness to similar emotions, where the author addresses the poignant almost tragic facts of his life and gives it a shape of story. Kipling's narrative, which unfolds during the course of three separate visits to a mysterious almost illusory country mansion, follows the protagonist's journey towards an agonizing recognition in a space, which right from the start appears to exist outside the bounds of the perceptible human experience. Infused with the laughter and giggle of children together with the affectionate almost motherly calls of the blind woman, the place appears to represent an ideal, which nonetheless remains just out of reach. For the narrator, despite all his efforts is unable to see the "quick footed wanderers", and it is only at the very end, following a ghostly kiss on the palm of his hand that he is able to realize that these elusive companions are in fact, spirits of dead children inhabiting the house, his own daughter being one of them(Kipling 278). The apparent amiability of these ghostly children, haunting the past and the present through the fabric of time, therefore becomes a means by which the author addresses the "distinction between conscious knowing and other, more intuitive forms of understanding", since after all the narrative "both depends on and seeks to close the gap

opened by the loss of the daughter. In the pain of this paradox lies the intensity of the story and the narrator's recognition that he can never return" (Mallett "They by Rudyard Kipling"). Unlike in Wilde and Wodehouse's stories, Kipling's child ghosts are therefore neither mischievous nor theatrical, but rather muted echoes that weave through the old country house, infusing the space with an almost palpable poignancy that transforms it into a sentient memorial to their ephemeral lives. The notion that hauntings may extend beyond the personal to encompass entire spacio-temporal environments which then serve as depositories for historical and emotional residue form the basis of the notion of eco-hauntology, a climate oriented offshoot of Derrida's hauntology. Such a substructure inevitably reinforces the manner in which the landscape itself may become a "spectral architectural script" as Chatterjee has explicated in his "Ruskin Bond's Haunted Architecture: Anglo-Saxon Archetypes of the Doon Valley" (1). An almost unconscious engagement with this notion, therefore allows Kipling to examine the intrinsic, though not apparent connection between grief and the wider natural world which continues to bear the intangible imprint of past traumas. The phantasmal children of the story do not appear as atypical apparitions. Instead they are hushed presences that are lightly woven into the sensory landscape of the countryside mansion. At the same time, the ambivalent nature of their existence (literal ghosts or hallucinations of a grief-stricken narrator), corroborates further the perception of the uncanny as both familiar and unfamiliar.

Kipling's rural setting is thus, not merely a backdrop, it is alive and seething with an almost preternatural vitality, a haunted ecosystem and a liminal space where the past crosses into the present, blurring the boundaries of life and afterlife. As the narrator observes:

> The sun had dipped behind the woods and the long shades were possessing the insolent horsemen one by one. I saw the light die from off the top of a glossy-leaved lance and all the brave hard green turn to soft black. The house, accepting another day at end, as it had accepted an hundred thousand gone, seemed to settle deeper into its rest among the shadows (Kipling 257).

Such a stance on the part of the author, then maybe seen as being in tune with eco-hauntological ideas where the natural world retains fragments of ecological consciousness and memories, one in which absence and presence cohabit, moulding the current environment. Indeed, the three-part visit of the narrator to the estate seems to suggest his metaphorical entrapment in a moment that repeats itself. The breakdown of linear time in hauntological thinking, therefore manifests in Kipling's story in the form of a space that continues to function as a temporal anomaly, onethat doesn't move on, but remembers.

In a sense, the ghostly children, ever distant and fleeting also become extensions of the lost futures, so much a part of eco-hauntological consciousness. Taken from life by virtue of their premature passing, these fugitive phantoms collectively symbolize the notions of loss that

haunt the narrator and his world. The mindless destruction of nature perpetrated by human actions that foreclose the futures of entire ecosystems and even succeeding generations, therefore manifests covertly in Kipling's exploration of grief and loss.

It isonly in the figure of the blind caretaker that these ephemeral spectres find companionship and protection, her blindness paradoxically attuning her to the presence of that which remains imperceptible to those with sight. "They come and stay with me because I love them, you see", observers the caretaker (Kipling 262). As a liminal mediator of this haunted ecosystem, only she can perceive the ghosts of (ecological) loss, their absence felt, but never seen. By contrast, the narrator whose grief is intrinsically tethered to the landscape is both consoled and distressed by his surroundings, a fact which finds an apposite parallel in the eco-hauntological motif of 'solastalgia'—a type of emotional anguish engendered by environmental changes in one's place of residence. In Kipling's story then, the land itself seems to mirror the phantoms of grief, loss and mourning, metamorphosing into an ecosystem haunted by the literal ghosts of the past.

Conclusion

Thus, the comic and friendly ghosts of late-19th and early-20th century fiction constitutes much more than merely playful subversions of the Gothic archetype of the terrifying spectre. Demonstrating a deep-seated engagement with the anxieties of a fast changing world, these narratives also retain significance in contemporary times by virtue of having subconsciously addressed and anticipated relevant ideas and motifs. In this context, Wilde's 'The Canterville Ghost' reimagines the spectre as a figure of comedy and pathos caught, as it were, between a declining aristocracy and modern scientific rationalism, thereby unconsciously foregrounding a hauntological co-existence of the past and present. Conversely, Wodehouse's 'Honeysuckle Cottage' furthers the ghost as a meta-theatrical device that addresses issues of artistic individualism and the pressures of convention. Finally, Kipling's 'They' poignantly evokes an eco-hauntological thinking that subconsciously anticipates post-modern anxieties about the interconnectedness of nature, memory and ecological consciousness.

A close reading of these narratives, therefore becomes explicative of the manner in which the ghost story when reconceptualised in humorous terms, may become a vehicle of examining timeless cultural, aesthetic and metaphysical questions. By virtue of their unconscious engagement with hauntological, meta-fictional and ecological discourses, these writers amplify the scope of the ghost story beyond its shadowy Gothic bounds, fomenting narratives that continue to resonate in modern times. In so doing, they reaffirm time and again, the sustained relevance of the supernatural,not just as a source of terror, but also as a vehicle for critical reflection.

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