

**SPECTRAL PRESENCES IN THREE MODERN PLAYS: IBSEN'S *GHOSTS*,  
STRINDBERG'S *THE GHOST SONATA* AND O' NEILL'S *THE EMPEROR JONES***

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**Abstract**

*This paper primarily aims at studying how modern plays made use of an ancient supernatural agent-the 'ghosts', during a time when procuring the 'willing suspension of disbelief' from spectators was more difficult than ever. The paper analyses how modern playwrights seamlessly blend this apparently incongruent literary device into the matrix of their plays to suit the tastes of their audience as well as give justice to the thematic concerns of their plays. In order to illustrate this three plays have been dealt with in this paper- Henrik Ibsen's Ghosts, August Strindberg's The Ghost Sonata and Eugene O' Neill's The Emperor Jone.*

The word 'ghosts' evokes an assortment of responses like awe, curiosity, scepticism, disbelief, suspense or fear from people all around the world. From ancient times to the present day 'ghosts' have been a steady participant in shaping human experience, whether in the collective consciousness of the masses as an unquestionable, indubitable phenomenon or as a matter of intellectual debate and sceptical cogitation. Even as civilization progressed hand in hand with the galloping pace of science and rationalism, these spectral agencies continued to haunt the consciousness of man with no less adamancy. One needs only to trace the vast literary output throughout the ages that have been concerned with 'ghostly' presences to acknowledge the perpetual and inalienable fascination of the human mind with all that is beyond the purview of the rational and the natural. It would not be very outrageous to assert here that the more humanity has endeavoured to assume a detached empirical outlook, the more it has been fascinated by the idea of things that thwarted all explication. The mass hysteria generated by the Fox sisters in the nineteenth century, with their claims of having the power to communicate with spirits, the widespread popularity of gothic tales, Edgar Allen Poe's continual engagement with these supernatural agents, the chilling ghostly tales of Henry James, the plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, Eliot, O'Neill are veritable attestations of the fact that the skeptic space of the modern mind could still accommodate the specters from the other world. However, in the modern era the writers have the precarious task of extracting the allegiance of readers and audiences who have been fed on a staple diet of disbelief, who have carefully cultivated the propensity to doubt.

The difference between the tasks that is in the hand of the modern writers from that of their ancestors while dabbling in the supernatural phenomenon is effectively elucidated by Virginia Woolf, writing on Henry James' ghost stories. She points out that it was easier for Ann Radcliffe to scare our ancestors. However the modern generation, though largely sceptic are not entirely "immune from the wonder and terror which ghosts have always inspired" (Woolf 5). She asserts,

If the old methods are obsolete, it is the business of a writer to discover new ones. The public can feel again what it has once felt--there can be no doubt about that; only from time to time the point of attack must be changed (5)

Indeed, during the modern era 'old methods' are discarded, the modern writers with commendable deftness shift the 'point of attack'. With the emergence of human psychology, psychoanalysis and eugenics as a fertile ground for study and probation, the writers of fiction and dramas alike found in the visitors from afterlife a perfect symbol to suggest the psychological mire and past ravage in the depths of human beings. Playwrights like Ibsen, Strindberg, O'Neill dabbled in human beings caught in the merciless labyrinths of the past as also in the primal emotions such as fear, guilt, sadness, vengeance. These psychological themes find a perfect embodiment in the incorporeal beings, because just like the existence of ghosts these emotions are exclusively subjective. Most of these emotions are prone to get suppressed, pushed into darkness, into oblivion, or 'killed' metaphorically until these rise to 'haunt' the 'murderer'. These spectres haunt the dark dungeons of the human mind and more often than not fly out of their closets to have an unexpected encounter with the individual's conscious being. Moreover, their shadowy nature is perfectly compatible in portraying human psychological complications which are variable, nebulous and which can only be suggested at, not pinpointed. Their presence, their very question of existence, is fraught with ambiguities. As T.J. Lustig observes, they are at once, "real and imaginary, literary and figurative, dead and alive, full of meaning but also obscure, out of the past yet within the present" (1). It is this quality of inherent enigma and indeterminateness that provides modern writers with an effective tool to explore what interested them the most-- the unfathomable depths and variety of the human psyche. As Virginia Woolf writes about Henry James' ghosts, an insight which is equally applicable for the plays examined in this paper--

Henry James's ghosts have nothing in common with the violent old ghosts--the blood-stained sea captains, the white horses, the headless ladies of dark lanes and windy commons. They have their origin within us. They are present whenever the significant overflows our powers of expressing it; whenever the ordinary appears ringed by the strange. (Woolf 5)

With this general critique on the use of ghosts in modern literature in mind, I will examine three plays in this paper, namely Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata* and O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones* and study the polysemous way in which 'ghosts' as a dramatic device has been utilized.

Ibsen in *Ghosts* launches his polemic against the stifling conventions of society, the rigid hypocrisies one needs to live with, and the dubious patriarchal authority handed down through generations that curb the freedom of an individual to flourish in a private space. *Ghosts* is a largely Realist play, with a sure Naturalist essence that depicts how the past rises from its grave to haunt the present, how the past in spite of repeated efforts at suppression and obliteration casts its ghostly pallor on the present as well as future.

The play is divided into three acts beginning with an impression of domestic bliss and ending in a 'domestic tragedy' (the subtitle of the play). The use of the ghost motif in *Ghosts* is mainly psychological. There are no physical ghosts present on stage. The 'ghosts' of a pestilential past, of a corrupt heredity, of guilt, of frustrating social demands haunt the minds of the principal characters, Mrs Alving and her son Oswald. In syphilis Ibsen finds a perfect metaphor of the psychological and physical degradation of Mrs. Alving and her son. By 'ghosts' Ibsen tries to implicate the quality of haunting or returning from the grave, their disruptive effect on the present that is typical of these spectral forms. In the play, we see characters never fully dissociated from their past. They live their lives through a web of countless memories, recriminations, forever doomed to recount and encounter the phantoms from their past. Mrs. Alving's effort of trying to shun the abominable influence of a contaminated paternal legacy on his son is rendered just as futile as her effort to cover the reputation

of her deceased husband by building an orphanage in his memory is ruined by a fire. The burning down of the orphanage is symbolic as it represents the uncovering of all masks and revealing the ghosts of the past in their stark nakedness. With the burning of the orphanage, all the buried secrets come tumbling out of their graves- Mr. Alving's life of excess, his illegitimate child Regina, his venereal disease which by a cruel twist of fate has been inherited by his son, Mrs. Alving's unrequited love for Manders, her futile attempt at rejecting all binds of conventions and her eventual succumbing to the same web of duty, deceit and hypocrisy from which she tried to flee.

However, Ibsen is particularly ambiguous as to how Oswald contracted the disease. It is significant to note that Regina, another child sired by Mr. Alving, has not contracted the contagion. Therefore, there are equal chances of Oswald having contracted the disease on his own accord, due to the dissolute life that he hints he led in Paris. Either way, Oswald suffers due to a corrupt paternal legacy--either the moral laxity he inherits from his father or the direct inheritance of syphilis.

Just as Oswald experiences the dead hands of the past creeping into his present to choke him, Regina too faces the ghosts of her mother's slack life as a constant accompaniment. From the beginning her stepfather Jacob Engstrand makes it quite clear by hurling epithets like 'hussy' and indicate that he naturally expects Regina to follow her mother's footsteps, that it is but natural that her mother's infirm character has been passed down to Regina. Irrespective of whether Regina has any semblance with her mother's actions, Engstrand inevitably locates her mother's reflection in Regina. Mrs Alving sees the ghost of her past come alive to her when she sees her son and Regina in the conservatory, bringing back memories of a similar, illicit encounter of her husband and Regina's mother there. She cries hoarsely on seeing them,

Ghosts. The couple in the conservatory-- over again! (Ibsen 32)

Mrs. Alving sees the ghost of Joanna incarnate in Regina, the illicit relationship of her husband re-visiting her from its grave in the shroud of her son's incestuous relation. The dead Joanna Engstrand leaves behind her, the ghost of her past actions that haunts Regina at her every footstep. But with the revelation of the truth about the illicit relation between Mr. Alving and Joanna, Regina consciously takes the onus of becoming like her mother, foregoing her own individuality to emulate her mother's life, to "make some use of her youth"(67). She forsakes the life of Regina to become the ghost of her mother. She takes it on herself to emulate her mother's life of ruin, as if like Oswald, the confirmation of a corrupt inheritance proves she couldn't 'help' being like her mother. From here on, it is expected that Regina would go on to live the life of the dead, as Oswald says "A living death" (48), becoming but a phantom of her mother.

Ibsen explores the metaphor of ghosts in a way other than as visitors from the past. In the play, ghosts become a symbol of all the time-worn, age-old traditions, beliefs and conventions handed down by society to individuals as code of living, choking their spirit of individuality, reducing flesh-and-blood humanity to legions of soul-less revenants of hypocritical morality. In one of the most eloquent passages from the play, Mrs. Alving passionately voices her frustration at a society which compels men to become spectral automatons:

**Mrs. Alving.** Ghosts. When I heard Regina and Oswald in there, it was just like seeing ghosts before my eyes. I am half inclined to think *we are all ghosts*, Mr. Manders. It is not only what we have inherited from our fathers and mothers that exists again in us, *but all sorts of old dead ideas and all kinds of old dead beliefs and things of that kind*. They are not actually alive in us; but there they are dormant, all the same, and we can never be rid of them. Whenever I take up a newspaper and read

it, I fancy I see ghosts creeping between the lines. *There must be ghosts all over the world.* (emphasis added, 38)

It is a testament of Ibsen's prolific skill as a dramatist, that without using any physically present ghosts on the stage, he manages to use this supernatural trope suggestively to paint the weeds of the past creeping into our present, and ironically makes use of the supernatural to convey an out-and-out social message.

Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*, written in 1920, garnered strong, but dialectical responses from audiences and critics alike. It narrates the story of an African-American con-artist, who after carving a shady career in America, which included committing two murders, comes to a Caribbean island, where he succeeds in instating himself as the Emperor of the land by cunningly taking advantage of the ignorant natives, until he is chased by his rebelling subjects into the forest, where he encounters phantoms. O'Neill's play depicts an Expressionistic setting, and procures for the audience a peek into the interiority of the protagonist. Through the tropes of a dark and menacing forest, appearances of phantoms, the hypnotic beatings of the tom-toms, incantatory sounds of native ritual utterances, O'Neill lays bare a primitive landscape, which bears very close resemblances with the landscape of the mind, the primordial space of the Unconscious. Thus, Brutus Jones' flight through the forest represents his flight through the jungle of his mind where he suffers the unhinging experience of encountering ghosts from his past-- reminders of his own evil deeds, as well as ghosts from his racial past, a past which is at once as alien as it is excruciatingly familiar.

The use of ghosts by O'Neill gives scope for rich and multifarious interpretations. The ghosts, though physically present on stage are the products of a disintegrating mind that has delved into the depths of its unconscious and unmasked the phantoms from individual as well as the collective graveyard of memories. The ghosts stand for Jones' personal history of misdeeds against fellow Negroes, as also the beckonings of a common racial history, a racial history that Jones negates and represses. It is this slighted and negated racial history which rises up as phantoms of ancestors, beckoning Jones to make amends for his disloyalty to his roots and retire into his primitive womb from where he emerged. Paul D. Streufert gives an insight into the reason as to why ghosts are used by playwrights as a popular trope in plays. He says, "The ghost...creates a space for the playwright to investigate the construction of identity as it occupies a variety of positions and frustrates any number of dichotomies. It is dead and alive, present and absent, Self and Other" (6). This point is pivotal in understanding the role of the spectral presences in *The Emperor Jones*, for the ghosts are the products of a character who has been unable to resolve the 'dichotomies' of his roots, who is suffering from hybrid identity, or more accurately, repressed identity, where one cultural root has been displaced by another, where Americanism has been embraced at the cost of a more integral and inherent Africanism. The ghosts spring from this repressed locale of Jones' Unconscious, this half-illuminated space of Jones' mind, where shadows of his ancestral history lurk. Kathleen Brogan establishes this link between the supernatural and ethnicity in her study of American ghost novels. She says, "Ghosts in stories of cultural haunting are agents of both cultural memory and cultural renewal: the shape-shifting ghost who transmit erased or threatened group memory represents the creative, ongoing process of ethnic redefinition" (12). Suzanne Burr's comment on similar lines, adequately illustrates this point; she observes that the ghost in modern drama is the "shape of dislocation and transience in its earliest formation" (36). The ghosts in *The Emperor Jones* are incarnate forms of this dislocation, hybridity, cultural repression and cultural memory.

From the very beginning of the play the heterogeneous nature of Jones' identity is made adequately conspicuous. His grand palace also speaks volumes about his character:

*The audience chamber in the palace of the Emperor—a spacious, high-ceilinged room with bare, whitewashed walls. The floor is of white tiles. In the rear, to the left of center, a wide archway giving out on a portico with white pillars* (O'Neill 2)

“Whitewashed walls”, “white tiles”, “white pillars”, the profusion of “whiteness” in his palace adequately points towards the hegemonic occupation of the ‘white’ in the personality of Jones. Like a white imperial master, he contemptuously addresses his subjects as “niggers”(4) and carries out a regime of terror, exploitation and gross injustice. He not only denies his culture and his roots, but ostentatiously seeks to replace it with another. However, it is important to note that in spite of having the high-handedness of a white master his language gives away his roots. He speaks in the typical unsophisticated, dialectical language of the Blacks. This heterogeneity is the defining feature of his character. Jones is an amalgam of two cultures. However, the amalgam is not balanced. One culture overpowers and completely camouflages the other. W.E.B. DuBois eloquently gives voice to the conflict of cultures in the ‘souls of black folks’:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness...One ever feels his two-ness,-an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body. (2)

Among the ‘warring ideals’ in Jones, one clearly has precedence over the other- the American over the African.

The neurotic behaviour that he shows during his flight in the forest is a result of the feelings of guilt for having committed two murders- one of a Negro porter Jeff and the other of a White slave-master. In the former, Jones is the master and the oppressor, while in the latter, he is the victimised Negro slave. In the darkness of the forest, the dark corners of his psyche comes to light, he encounters his, in Jungian terms “Shadow-Self” (Mahari 84) , “the repressed Unconscious or the dark side of oneself” (84).

As the play progresses, with the progress of Jones deeper into the forest, we see him regressing further and further into the tenements of his primordial self. As Doris V. Falk aptly comments, “The significance of the play lies not in the superficial narrative, which consists largely in a pursuit of Jones through a forest by the rebellious natives, but the character of Jones, conveyed through a gradual breaking down of his conscious ego and the revelation of his personal and collective unconscious” (66).

In Scene Four, Jones relives his time as a convict in jail, when he kills not a fellow Negro but an oppressive white prison guard. He is no longer the singular, power-crazed, vicious Emperor, but one of the millions of his race, who have suffered the “whips and lashes” (O'Neill 30) of racial subjugation. The phantoms thus serve as agents that open the floodgates of his memory, which hold memories of being both the victim and the victimizer.

Scene Five contains the most eloquent internal monologue of Jones which reveals in stark nakedness his guilty and harrowed soul that had been so long hidden under the ostentatious trappings of “yankee bluff” (O'Neill 10).

Oh Lawd, Lawd! Oh Lawd, Lawd! (*Suddenly he throws himself on his knees and raises his clasped hands to the sky—in a voice of agonized pleading.*) Lawd Jesus, heah my prayer! I'se a po' sinner, a po' sinner! I knows I done wrong, I knows it! When I cotches Jeff cheatin' wid loaded dice my anger overcomes me and I kills him dead! Lawd, I done wrong! When dat guard hits me wid de whip, my anger overcomes me, and I kills him dead. Lawd, I done wrong! (O'Neill 32-33)

Jones' cathartic acknowledgement of his guilt, of his murders, of his tyranny to his race, pushes him deeper into the tunnels of a memory not his own, but of his entire race. His willed detachment from his own heritage collapses and he comes face-to-face with a scene that lives distantly but distinctly in the words of Carl Jung the “collective Unconscious” (*The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*



42) of every Negro--the memory of slavery and the cruel experience of auctioning. Jean Toomer asserts that "Brutus Jones lives through sections of an Unconscious which is peculiar to a Negro. Slave ships, whipping posts and so on...In a word his fear becomes a Negro's fear" (6). From a personal fear, Jones moves towards a racial fear. As Virginia Floyd says, "having denied his cultural roots, Jones must make amends there" (Floyd 209). Floyd's comment echoes Jungian idea of Individuation (Jung, *Psychological Types or the Psychology of Individuation* 42) or the process of acquiring "Total Being" (45) by integrating the repressed Unconscious with the conscious self. It is this which would bring, according to Jung, the healing of the soul. In the words of Jung, "We need some new foundations. We must dig down to the primitive in us, for only out of the conflict between civilized man and the Germanic barbarian will there come what we need; a new experience of God..." (*Letters* 40)

O'Neill, clearly influenced by Jung, dramatizes the theory of Individuation, in Scene Seven where, Jones is showed to be-

completely hypnotized. His voice joins in the incantation, in the cries, he beats time with his hands and sways his body to and fro from the waist. The whole spirit and meaning of the dance has entered into him, has become his spirit. Finally the theme of the pantomime halts on a howl of despair, and is taken up again in a note of savage hope. There is a salvation. The forces of evil demand sacrifice. They must be appeased (O'Neill 40)

The ancestral spirits, the primitive being of Jones will be appeased if he offers himself for 'sacrifice', at the altar of the Crocodile God, and only then will his divided soul attain complete integration. But the ending of this scene problematizes this interpretation, for Jones shakes himself from his reverie and refuses to offer himself as a sacrifice to the Crocodile God. Even as he moves in a trance towards the altar of his sacrifice he is constantly praying to the Christian 'Lawd' to have mercy.-

Lawd, save me! Lawd Jesus, hear my prayer! (*Immediately, in answer to his prayer, comes the thought of the one bullet left him. He snatches at his hip, shouting defiantly*)

De silver bullet! You don't git me yit! (41)

He fires his silver bullets, as a last attempt at resistance and succeeds in chasing the demons away. The silver bullets stand for his indomitable spirit, his relentless resistance to the compelling forces of his racial history, that urge him to join the collective of the native. Viewed from this angle, the ghosts and phantoms that he sees therefore actually represent those social and cultural forces that strive to seek possession of one's individuality and heterogeneity. Jones' last forceful avowal, "You don't git me yit!" is an affirmation of his triumphant independence from conformity and uniformity. The silver bullets stand for his determined refusal to merge with the herd. O'Neill, through the evocative device of ghosts delineates with precision, in the words of Claudia Tate, "the Manichean conflict between their public performance of an essentialized homogeneous blackness...and a private performance of individual personality on the other" (6).

The revenants in *The Emperor Jones* in the dexterous hands of O'Neill do not remain limited to just being clichéd symbols of guilt and fear, they manifest the protean quality of representing variegated things at once, signifying complex concepts like the repressed Unconscious, Jungian Initiation and the conflicting forces shaping a Black identity without being didactic or esoteric. These phantoms capture with subtleties the paradoxes and inscrutability that typically inform the dialectics of race.

Strindberg's *The Ghost Sonata* is one of the key texts which contain the seeds of modern Absurd and Surrealistic drama. Like his other plays, especially the *The Dream Play*, this play seems to lack the logical framework typical of Realistic dramas. *The Ghost Sonata* is bereft of any coherent,

sequential narrative. Unlike the previous plays under discussion, *Ghosts* and *The Emperor Jones*, where there was a clear demarcating line between flesh-and-blood human beings and incorporeal ghosts, in *The Ghost Sonata*, there is a baffling fluidity of existence between the living and the dead. There is a deliberate distortion of illusion and reality, a palpable dream-like quality, “the disconnected but seemingly logical form of the dream” (Strindberg, *Plays of Strindberg* 24) where “Anything may happen; everything is possible and probable. Time and space do not exist. On an insignificant background of reality [lies] a medley of memories, experiences, free fancies, absurdities and improvisations” (24). In *The Ghost Sonata* Strindberg paints life as a folly, an illusion, an irreducible mirage, where “nothing holds when grasped, everything vanishes” (Strindberg, *A Blue Book* 57). The ghosts serve as metaphor of such a life. According to Strindberg, life was nothing but a long tapestry of falsehood, “everything is lying and deception, all of life is faked, the state, society, marriage, family” (57). It is nothing but a world of illusions, of Maya, a mirage and the inhabitants are nothing but ghosts of the living, and salvation can only be gained when one dies, and crosses over to the actual world of reality. For Strindberg, life was synonymous with death, and death with everlasting life of bliss and peace. In a Prologue written for the opening of his own Intimate Theatre, Strindberg says that mankind must undertake journey from the “Isle of Living to the Isle of Death” (Strindberg, *Strindberg's Letters* 63) in order to get liberation from a false existence, a living death, a ghostly pallor of life, devoid of all the warmth and joy that the very word ‘life’ evokes and signifies. Thus Strindberg topples all the foundations of illusion and reality, by questioning the very reality of one’s existence. He deems the life of men on earth as illusory, calls the living the ghosts and ghosts the living. He makes his stage, and by extension the entire world, a graveyard haunted by ghosts masquerading as human beings. Living ghosts join hands with the dead ghosts in a spooky sonata called life, or death, or both.

The atmosphere of *The Ghost Sonata* is permeated with eeriness and other-worldliness. It is populated by unreal and surreal characters, ghosts walk on the stage as naturally as human beings do, ghosts are made visible and free, while human-beings are confined in closets and mummified, human beings are rendered silent, but when they talk, they do so in the language of parrots, the servants suck the nourishment and happiness from the house, while the masters are servile to a life of decrepitude and gradual pining away. Hummel, one of the main characters of the play, “looks like the very devil” (Strindberg, *Plays* 125). He is a “regular wizard” who “can pass through locked doors” (125), he plays the healer as well as destroyer of human lives, one who “plays havoc with human destinies, kills his enemies and refuses to forgive anything” (118). All these render to the play the ghostliness, which forms a perfect setting for the tale of human woe to unfold.

The eerie effect of the play is further intensified, when the shady secrets of one and all are disclosed, when it is revealed no one is as he seems to be. The play, as the lives of the characters in it, is hinged on a fulcrum of lies and illusions. The Colonel is not a Colonel, his daughter is no daughter of his but the illegitimate child of his wife and Hummel, the Dark Lady is the illegitimate daughter of the Consul and janitress, Hummel tries to “steal the soul of the Student with the help of an imaginary claim against his father, who never owned [him] a farthing”(134), Hummel is guilty of drowning a milkmaid in the past, the Mummy is guilty of infidelity, as also the Colonel who is guilty of assuming false identity and seducing a maid and Hummel’s fiancée. The whole “air is charged with crime and deceit and falsehood of every kind”(132). This all-encompassing omnipresent falsehood that characterizes the waking reality of human beings, paradoxically lends their lives a dream-like, illusory quality. Inspired by Hinduism and Buddhism, Strindberg saw the world as an immense “Maya-jal” or “Web of Illusions”, “an imagined world” (Strindberg, *A Blue Book* 35). In an essay called “Self-Knowledge”, Strindberg’s assertion, provides the central dramatic impetus to ‘*The Ghost Sonata*’. Strindberg talks about an enlightening experience when you manage to wake up from “

‘schauderhaft’[horrible] like life, when the scales fall from our eyes, and we see Das Ding an Sich [The-Thing-in-itself]” (*Strindberg's Letters* 61). He writes:

Then one day you wake up, as it were from your sleep, see yourself as a *ghost*, and you are terrified to ask yourself: is this me? (Strindberg, *A Blue Book* 39)

It is this enlightenment process, seeing the Das Ding an Sich in the face once he enters the house that the Student has to undergo. He realizes that the happiness and fulfilment that he saw from outside the house were merely illusions. The inmates of the house only have the appearance of being happy, they merely live a ghostly existence, sapped of all human attributes and joie-de-vivre. He realizes that he himself is nothing better than a ghost, for all his life he had been living a lie. Initially it is all a beautiful ‘fairytale’ for him, but as he enters deeper and deeper into the house, which is a symbol or a slice of the hellish life we all live, his mind is stripped of all illusions. He realizes that it is not unto him to revive the Young Lady, his beloved, for she too is struck with the same affliction as he is- Life. He realizes,

Man must for ever reap what he planted

Happy is he who has done no evil (Strindberg, *Plays* 136)

As Equil Tornqvist comments, “Since life on earth is a shadow life, a mirage, it follows that we all are ghosts- whereas those who appear as ghosts in the play, although dead are the truly living.” (23) In *The Ghost Sonata*, ‘ghost’ becomes an over-sweeping metaphor for the “this whole web of lies, mistakes, misunderstandings that constitute the basic content of our life” and which “changes life into something unreal, dreamlike” (Strindberg, *A Blue Book* 66) as ghosts. It is interesting to note that Strindberg intended to subtitle his play as “kama-lok”, or the “Realm of Death” (*Strindberg's Letters* 61).

However *The Ghost Sonata* doesn’t end on a pessimistic note that dominates the majority of the play. It provides a beacon of hope in death, when the otherwise ghostly mariners of life would cross over the barrier of life and death to be finally liberated. Thus the death of the Young lady at the end of the play paradoxically means her renunciation of a death-like existence and her entry into real life on the other side of paradise.

Thus these modern plays, which have been discussed in this paper make use of the “shadowy nature” (Lustig 1) of ghosts, making the question of their existence and presence on the stage ambiguous and open to speculation. It enables them to explore far-flung themes such as racial identity, man’s existential plight and social entrapments aesthetically, without running the risk of being too direct. They differ from their ancestors in that they do not give us graphic and visually titillating spectral figures. They have acquired layers of meaning and serve a variety of functions in keeping with the changing concerns and tribulations of the modern man. Grover Smith effectively summarizes this subjectivity of ghosts in modern literature: “the true mystery of ghost is bound up with the nature of the perceiver. A ghost is more than something seen; it is something interpreted; and the interpreter is always governed by his understanding and his moral awareness, and hence his self-knowledge” (Smith 244). This is the fundamental aspect in which modern plays differ from their predecessors, barring Shakespeare of course, who seems to have anticipated a lot of that was to become the order of the day in modern literature. The moderns do not reject the time-worn supernatural agent, they give it the essence of their age. This is what Eliot meant when he asserted that the hallmark of modernity is how well it juxtaposes tradition and individual talent-

No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him, for contrast and comparison, among the dead (Eliot 273)

Thus, all literature, is an evocation of the past, “not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence” (273), of the ‘presence’ of the ‘dead’, of its revival and resurrection.



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