

The Portrayal of Ghosts in Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House*: Is it Really a Ghost Story?

Ismet Dilaver

International Burch University, Bosnia and Herzegovina

ismet.dilaver9[at]gmail.com

Abstract: *Virginia Woolf's short story A Haunted House (1944), published in her collection of short stories, reflects the early twentieth-century modernism displayed through two couples, one earthly, and another ghostly. It is a story that caused many questions for literary critics due to its mysterious setting and poetic, prose-like style of writing. Woolf's A Haunted House is a story of love, loss, death, connection, senses, fantasy, but more than anything else, it is a story of mystery, since it leaves its readers wondering whether it is a ghost story or not, where the borderline between real and imagined is wafer-thin. By relying on the latest research in the area of polysensory studies, this paper aims to prove that Virginia Woolf's A Haunted House does not necessarily need to be seen only as a ghost story, but it might be interpreted as a story where ghosts are just used as metaphorical representations displaying questions more important for our being.*

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, A Haunted House, Ghosts, Fantasy, Polysensory.

1. Introduction

People's belief in the afterlife, and together with it – ghosts, exists for a long time, and goes back to pre-literature traditions and cultures. Ghosts were not a popular source of entertainment in old and Middle English literature, since people were still afraid of them, but once people stopped believing in them, ghosts became a subject of many authors' writings, and people started reading ghost stories for pleasure and amusement. The existence of ghosts is interwoven with fantastic and gothic elements, darkness, horror, etc. Still, in modern literature, ghosts are often represented as friendly, not representing any threat to human beings.

Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House* is a story of friendly ghosts who cohabit with human beings, and it reflects monologues of early twentieth-century modernism which pushed the boundaries of how reality is represented, and is characterized by experimentation, stream of consciousness, fragmented ideas, interior monolog, distortions in time, symbolism, and multiple or shifting perspectives. Although Woolf is best known for her novels, her short stories cannot be disregarded, especially *A Haunted House*, which, due to its shortness, cannot even be considered a short story, but flash fiction. Even though ghosts are (seemingly) situated at the very core of Woolf's *A Haunted House*, the story deals with love, loss, connection, confusion, movement, and death. However, before I move to the scrutiny of ghosts' portrayal in this story, I will first reflect on what other researchers discovered on this topic, and I will use it to support my statement that this story does not need to be seen only as a ghost story, but it has a deeper meaning, where ghosts are used to display more important issues. Further, the physical presence of ghosts in the story is questionable itself, and I will observe it through polysensory lenses.

Merriam-Webster online dictionary defines a ghost as “the soul of a dead person believed to be an inhabitant of the unseen world or to appear to the living in bodily likeness”, while the Oxford Learner's Dictionary states that ghost

represents “the spirit of a dead person that a living person believes they can see or hear.” These views of ghosts imply that they come from another – unseen world, while ghosts usually get attached to a person who can see or hear them. Reasons for ghosts' intrusion into our world are many, while usually they seek revenge and disappear after completing their task. In order to have a ghost story in the context of literature, ghosts must encounter and interact with human beings. If there are only ghosts, or if there are no ghosts, there is no a ghost story. Ghost stories, especially in late modernism, were told orally in front of campfires, creating a spooky and gothic atmosphere.

Lenggel Kinga (2014) underlines in her thesis paper titled “Ghosts in English and Irish Literature” that ghosts first appeared in Greek literature, then they reappeared again in Shakespeare's works, and they finally became popular in Modernism as a source of entertainment. Michael Cox confirms this long history of ghosts in literature in his book *The Oxford Book of Victorian Ghost Stories* (2003) by stating that ghosts are represented as reflections of the distant past. He furthermore argues that a ghost story, especially in Victorian times, “was typically domestic in tone and inclined to blur the boundaries between the fact and fiction” (p. x), and this is crucial for the scrutiny of ghosts in Woolf's *A Haunted House*, since from the very beginning of the story, until its very end, it is unclear whether there are ghosts, or not. However, for Cox, ghosts were creatures associated with fear, sin, and revenge, while Woolf portrayed ghosts as friendly figures that happily cohabit with people.

Ghost stories represent a form of intrusive fantasy as well, since they are creatures that found a way into our world from the invisible world. Lee Kovacs classifies literary ghosts into four distinct groups: the Gothic ghost, the Romantic ghost, the Theatre ghost, and the Contemporary Ghost. For Kovacs, ghosts are as important on screen (and theatre) as in literature (1999). In this context, Woolf's *A Haunted House* would reflect the contemporary ghost approach.

Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House* is not the only example of an unconventional, friendly ghost. Another significant example of a friendly ghost can be seen in Oscar Wilde's *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), which portrayed a ghost who was mocked by living people, and where the focus was put on British and American stereotypes and symbolism. Further, one of the most salient examples is Casper, a friendly ghost, who first appeared in the first half of the twentieth century and who is now one of the most popular characters in children's literature, and his character gained even more popularity in screen production (s).

From all the information mentioned above, we might infer that there are two main ghost types as present in literary works: ghosts who are in the real world seeking revenge, and friendly ghosts who mean no harm to human beings. Now, having defined ghosts, and their presence in literature, we can move to the scrutiny of ghosts as portrayed in Woolf's *A Haunted House*.

2. Objectives of the Study

The main purpose behind this paper is to demonstrate that this selected work cannot be observed only as a ghost story. But in contrast, I will demonstrate that these ghosts in Woolf's *A Haunted House*, are not even real ghosts. Instead, they are just a result of the author's artistry. To support my view of this story, I will rely on research in the area of polysensory, with a special focus on auditory and visual stimuli. Further, this study aims to provide answers to the following research questions:

- 1) Is Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House* a ghost story?
- 2) How are ghosts portrayed in Woolf's *A Haunted House*?
- 3) Can our mind trick us into believing we are seeing something (ghosts in this case)?

Ghosts in Virginia Woolf's *a Haunted House* as Seen through Polysensory Optics

Given that this essay relies on studies in the polysensory area, we should first reflect on what other researchers concluded about such an approach in literature. Bertrand Westphal in his *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (2011) explains that places, and how we perceive them, particularly depends on our senses. He further underlines that "the perception of our environment clearly involves all five senses" (p. 132), including vision, hearing, olfaction, gustation and tactile perception. Still, even though senses of gustation, hearing, touch, and olfaction are all important to us, not only to experience places (such as the house in Woolf's *A Haunted House*), but also to survive and live decently, Westphal argues that (eye)sight is way more important than other senses. He states that the "history would elaborate the long story of the world's conquest by vision over many years and describe the triumph of the visual over other forms of sensory perception" (p. 131). Yi-Fu Tuan agrees that sight is the most important sense, while, in addition to this, in his *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (1977), he conveys the significance of hearing:

Is a sense of distance and of space created out of the ability to hear? The world of sound would appear to be spatially structured, though not with the sharpness of the visual world. It is possible that the blind man who can hear but has no hands and can barely move lacks all sense of space; perhaps to such a person all sounds are bodily sensations and not cues to the character of an environment (p. 14).

Westphal further divided senses into two separate groups, as the following excerpt, from his book *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, demonstrates:

In fact, this hierarchy emerges directly from the language of geography that implies that certain senses are more active than others. Smell, touch, and taste would be intimate, passive, bodily senses, while sight and hearing are more remote and mental— although we should refrain from generalizing. In any event, all the senses convey perception insofar as they receive information (kinesthetic or biochemical sensation) and develop that information through a mental process (identification or association). (2011, p. 133).

Westphal confirms here that there are two senses, more active than others: auditory and visual stimuli. These two senses will be placed in the focus of the following development of this essay, since they are predominantly used when describing ghosts in Woolf's *A Haunted House*. As the following excerpt from the story demonstrates, from the very beginning of the story, the narrator explicitly states that there are two ghosts moving throughout the house seeking something:

Whatever hour you woke there was a door shunting. From room to room they went, hand in hand, lifting here, opening there, making sure – a ghostly couple. "Here we left it," she said. And he added, "Oh, but here too!" "It's upstairs," she murmured. "And in the garden," he whispered "Quietly," they said, "or we shall wake them" (Woolf: 1944, p. 3).

Even though the narrator argues that there is a ghostly couple looking for something, these ghosts were actually never seen by anyone. Still, the narrator portrays this ghostly couple as friendly and careful, since they are whispering and murmuring not to disturb anyone, and not to wake up another, living couple. The story is narrated in the first person, and the unnamed (female) narrator represents the only person able to perceive the presence of these ghosts. The narrator explains that she can hear these ghosts as they are looking for something:

But they had found it in the drawing room. Not that one could ever see them. The window panes reflected apples, reflected roses; all the leaves were green in the glass. If they moved in the drawing room, the apple only turned its yellow side. Yet, the moment after, if the door was opened, spread about the floor, hung upon the walls, pendant from the ceiling – what? My hands were empty. The shadow

of a thrush crossed the carpet; from the deepest wells of silence the wood pigeon drew its bubble of sound. "Safe, safe, safe," the pulse of the house beat softly. "The treasure buried; the room..." the pulse stopped short. Oh, was that the buried treasure? (1944, p. 3).

As the narrator claims that she can hear these ghosts, the main point of the story shifts from these ghosts to the "buried treasure" the ghostly couple is looking for. Then, the narrator explains she can even see ghosts:

The wind roars up the avenue. Trees stoop and bend this way and that. Moonbeams splash and spill wildly in the rain. But the beam of the lamp falls straight from the window. The candle burns stiff and still. Wandering through the house, opening the windows, whispering not to wake us, the ghostly couple seek their joy (1944, p. 3).

Even though the narrator claims here that she sees the ghostly couple, everything she sees is only reflections and shadows, which is not equal to seeing the actual ghost. However, the action in the story development is explained in detail, even though it is based only on auditory and (in fragments) visual stimuli. The story continues placing focus on the "buried treasure", but the above-mentioned excerpt actually answers what the "buried treasure" stands for. These ghosts are looking for their hidden joy. At this point, we still do not know what their joy is, but the following excerpt from the story provides the answer:

Stooping, holding their silver lamp above us, long they look and deeply. Long they pause. The wind drives straightly; the flame stoops slightly. Wild beams of moonlight cross both floor and wall, and, meeting, stain the faces bent; the faces pondering; the faces that search the sleepers and seek their hidden joy. "Safe, safe, safe," the heart of the house beats proudly. "Long years" he sighs. "Again you found me." "Here," she murmurs, "sleeping; in the garden reading; laughing, rolling apples in the loft. Here we left our treasure" Stooping, their light lifts the lids upon my eyes. "Safe! safe! safe!" the pulse of the house beats wildly. Waking, I cry "Oh, is this your buried treasure? The light in the heart" (1944, p. 4).

Here we have the answer to our question. The ghost's "buried treasure", their hidden joy, is actually "the light in the heart", or "love" in the heart of the living couple. Then, after completing their task and discovering their joy, the ghostly couple disappears (which fits in the context of a ghost story). Still, from the beginning of the story, until its very end, we are not provided with strong evidence that these ghosts are real and present in physical form. Further, we see here that the narrator "imagines" ghosts standing over the bed as she sleeps, which confirms that we are talking of an allegory here, and/or this could even just be the narrator's dream told to us in the structure of a story? The entire concept of ghosts is based on auditory and (moderately) visual stimuli. Nobody has even seen the ghostly couple, but the narrator (who is, at the same time,

one of the story's characters) describes shadows and voices she has seen and heard. Further, we need to keep in mind that the story seems to be told on the edge of a conscious state, which additionally questions the acumen of ghostly presence. This places the story between reality and fiction, since the entire idea of ghosts in the story is based solely on the feeling that something is out there with you. However, the ending reveals the main theme behind the story's plot, which is love, and the struggle to find it in your heart.

If we compare Woolf's *A Haunted House* to other ghost stories, we will see that it differs in some essential segments. Oscar Wilde, in his *The Canterville Ghost*, introduces a friendly ghost, who incessantly interacts with the family living in the haunted house. Finally, as the story reaches its ending, the ghost manages to advance to the afterlife. Similarly, ghosts in *Lost Hearts* by M. R. James also disappear from this world, but only after killing the person responsible for their death. Doing so, they fulfill their task which kept them in our world. This story is also marked by the interaction between ghosts and the story's living characters. However, both of these ghost stories describe ghosts in detail, describing both their physical form along with their intentions, while Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House* lacks the interaction part, as well as the physical presence of ghosts.

Although the physical presence of ghosts in Woolf's *A Haunted House* is questionable, my understanding of the story is that the ghostly couple here was used as a metaphorical representation of the real couple's alter ego. Ghosts in the story display the message that love is the only thing important, and only when we find it, we can feel complete. This is especially important because the living couple lives a "normal" life, not paying attention to concepts such as love, while the ghostly couple represents the real couple's contrast, by intensively searching for their hidden joy (love). This view could be supported by a poetic and prose-like style of writing, together with many literary devices that go together with such a style of writing. In the story, we have many examples of repetition, "safe, safe, safe" (1944, p. 4), and symbolism (and personification) of the house, which is represented as the story's living character, and is associated with safety, while being hunted at the same time. There are even instances of rhyme, as can be seen in the very last sentence "The light in the heart" (1944, p. 4), where light and heart are used in the same sentence, creating a very poetic effect.

Notwithstanding, Virginia Woolf's *A Haunted House* may still be seen only as a ghost story if observed superficially, but when examined in detail, it is clear that the story's focus is on love, feelings of loss, confusion, connection, and/or even death.

3. Conclusions

To sum up everything that has been stated so far, this is both a ghost story, and not, it depends from the perspective of view. Still, I proved here, that even though the story might seem simple at the first sight, it is complex in many strata. Besides its structural complicity, the story cannot, and

should not be observed only as a ghost story, since it (metaphorically) conveys messages crucial for our existence.

This analysis raises new questions: is the story just a dream? Or, can this work even be considered a story due to its poetic and prose-like narrative? The story further provides another point of view to Woolf's *A Haunted House*, while, at the same time, it offers new perspectives on the story that could be examined. Therefore, this paper serves as a starting point for analysis that other researchers could further scrutinize.

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