Seeing and Not Believing: A Critique of Post-Civil War America’s Loss of Faith Through a Spectral Medium

From the fearful imagination of Shakespeare’s Macbeth to the cold conscience of Charles Dickens’s Mr. Scrooge, authors have used apparitions in literature as agents to remind characters of covered sins and to bring them to a realization of past wrongs. Although spectral visitations have threaded through the fine weave of literature since biblical times, the rise of the ghost story as a genre did not become a prominent fixture in the literary canon until the supernatural tales of Hawthorne and Shelley. The use of ghosts in these stories evolved during the nineteenth century from an introspective tool that highlighted challenges with religious issues arising during the Second Great Awakening to an instrument that critiqued questions of realism spawned in reaction to the psychological horrors of the American Civil War and the development of scientific theories which cut at the strata of Christian faith, such as Lyell’s work in geology and Darwin’s theory of evolution. Authors such as Herman Melville, Henry James, and Robert Frost resisted this cultural shift from faith-based views as they grappled with the state of America after the Civil War. Following the Civil War, America descended into another war, a war between the rise of science and the twilight of faith, where realism and empirical evidence denoted that seeing was believing, and faith represented what the natural eye could not see yet the spiritual eye discern.

Today, critics are torn between analyzing the use of ghosts in late-Victorian literature through the context of culture and history or through psychoanalysis. To understand Melville’s,
James’s, and Frost’s use of ghosts in their literary works, it is important to first understand both sides of ghost-story criticism. The two camps argue over the validity of viewing ghosts through the context of history and the different social theories about economic status, gender equality, and racial views that were promulgated during the time period as opposed to the psychological analysis of how sight and psychological impairments might cause one to see apparitions.

The arguments for a historical placement and understanding of ghost criticism attempt to view ghosts as spawning from the historical setting of their use in literature. For example, Sasha Handley argues that “ghost stories were important barometers of cultural change that add balance and complexity to characterizations of eighteenth-century society as a secularizing, rational, and anti miraculous monolith” (Handley 5-6). According to Handley, ghosts are gauges of the historical events and cultural movements that are taking place when authors choose to incorporate them in their literature. She gives examples of how the use of apparitions in early English literature represented the theological conflict between Catholics and Protestants during the Reformation when the doctrines concerning purgatory were abolished and the English Calvinists incorporated the doctrine of Predestination (Handley 1–2). The critic Stephen Greensblatt demonstrates Handley’s ideas of historicist criticism of early English ghost stories in his book Hamlet in Purgatory where he describes how the ghost of Hamlet’s father represents a bridge in the beliefs of Catholic Purgatory and Protestant Hell that were changing during the Protestant Reformation (Greensblatt 240).

According to Handley, ghosts in literature represent not only religious themes, but also challenges made against the supernatural through the scientific revolution. For her, the period from 1600–1800 “represent[s] a particularly significant phase in the history of ghost beliefs, since this period saw them put under the microscope as never before.” During this period of
English history, the rise of the Royal Society in England and the works of Francis Bacon and other philosophers altered the views of supernatural events by forcing them “to be tested and proven by hard fact” (Handley 3). For Handley and Greensblatt, history is the prime lens for analyzing ghosts in literature.

The other side of the critical coin, championed by critics like Srdjan Smajic, argues that ghost criticism should be centered on the question “Is seeing believing?” Smajic postulates that ghost-story criticism is not fully contrived using a historical grounding of criticism because the genre, in itself, defies being pinned down to one historical foundation. This inability to grasp the ghost story is more fully expressed by Smajic when he quotes Julia Briggs who defines the ghost-story genre as being “‘at once vast, amorphous, and notoriously difficult to define’” (Smajic 12). He goes further to say that the main issue with seeking to define ghost stories through history and culture is

perhaps neither the resistance to genre theory nor the ideologically driven dismissal of supernaturalism as escapist entertainment, but rather an embarrassment of ghostly riches in British and other literatures: the ghost’s resistance to the contextualist demand that it deliver a historically conditioned, culturally idiosyncratic socio-symbolic message.

(Smajic 13)

By this, Smajic argues that viewing ghost stories only through historicist criticism limits their meaning because of the multiplicity of meanings derived from their ambiguity. Due to the difficulty of pinning a historically driven message and meaning to the ghost story, Smajic turns to the treatment of ghost-seeing by physicians and physiologists to examine the debate in literature of the physiological aspects of vision and spiritual sight.
Smajic’s criticism focuses on “the tension between ocularcentric faith and anti-ocularcentric skepticism that defines much of Victorian thinking about vision” (Smajic 18). To illustrate this tension, he first analyzes the critiques of ghost-seeing by physicians of the Victorian period who viewed ghost-seeing as both a symptom of illusionary sight caused by sensation or imperfection of physiological elements of the eye and an “optical disease” brought on by the abuse of substances such as “alcohol, opium, and nitrous oxide” (Smajic 26-28). Smajic then turns to authors such as Ruskin and Carlyle who saw the dependence “on retinal vision as an obstacle to developing or recovering a different way of seeing—a truer, because more primal, intuitive, and spiritual, vision” (Smajic 34). The tension between these two sides of the vision debate becomes the spectrum of criticism for Smajic.

Both elements of the ghost-story criticism debate have their place in bringing light to this broad genre of literature. For the purposes of this paper, Smajic’s critical epistemology will be examined and applied. Although both groups of criticism have merit, by looking through the lens of psychoanalysis and the debate between the reality of seeing with physiological sight and the eyes of faith to formally examine the use of ghosts in Melville’s epic poem Clarel, James’s short novel The Turn of the Screw, and Frost’s poem “Ghost House,” ghostly apparitions become a tool to critique the war between science and faith in post-Civil War America and how the quest for empirical evidence does not kill belief.

In Melville’s poem Clarel, Melville navigates the ocean of thought stirred after the destruction of the Civil War in preparation for the centennial of the nation’s birth. The theme of doubt throughout the poem finds life through its characters and their struggles with faith. To understand Melville’s use of ghosts as a formal element to critique the nation’s godlessness and its turn to science in accordance with the ideas presented by Smajic, readers can examine a
portion of canto 1.31 when the character of Rolfe is introduced into the text. Following a long-winded discourse about the failures of Christianity, Rolfe states,

‘The priest, I said. Though some be hurled
From anchor, nor a haven find;
Not less religion's ancient port,
Till the crack of doom, shall be resort
In stress of weather for mankind.
Yea, long as children feel affright
In darkness, men shall fear a God;
And long as daisies yield delight
Shall see His footprints in the sod.
Is't ignorance? This ignorant state
Science doth but elucidate—

Deepen, enlarge. But though 'twere made
Demonstrable that God is not—
What then? it would not change this lot:
The ghost would haunt, nor could be laid.’

(Melville 1.31.182–196)

In this passage, Melville addresses the relationship between faith and science in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Rolfe observes that people will seek refuge in “religion’s ancient port” as the calamities of the world rage, such as the Civil War. He claims that as long as fear exists, “men shall fear a God” and have some kind of belief in Him. Rolfe proceeds to mock this belief by asking if a belief in God is ignorance, and he uses science as a form of measuring stick to determine the level of ignorance of God-fearing people. Lastly, he claims that even if it was possible to demonstrate there was no God, people would still believe, and the ghost of what is religion “would haunt, nor could be laid.” Melville’s use of ghost imagery in Rolfe’s dialogue gives credence to understanding that religion is comparable to a ghost, something not measured and explained solely by scientific evidence.

Melville’s representation of religion as a ghost in this previous portion of Clarel can extend to the canto titled “Sodom” where Melville uses ghosts as muses heralding the fate of
America after the Civil War. What is important in his use of ghosts at this point of the poem is Mortmain’s monologue that expresses the ghosts of Sodom were something potentially real, but not seen with natural eyes. This text makes the reader wonder whether the ghosts are real or just figments of his imagination. Melville writes,

Ah, ghosts of Sodom, how ye thrill
About me in this peccant air…

Slavered in slime, or puffed in stench—
Not ever on the tavern bench
Ye loll'd. Few dicers here, few sots,
Few sluggards, and no idiots.
'Tis thou who servedst Mammon's hate
Or greed through forms which holy are—
Black slaver steering by a star,

'Tis thou—and all like thee in state.
Who knew the world, yet varnished it;
Who traded on the coast of crime
Though landing not

(Melville 2.36.55–56 & 70–80)

This portion of “Sodom” is Mortmain’s monologue to the supposed “ghosts of Sodom” still residing around the Dead Sea after the city’s destruction. In response to a vapor over the Dead Sea, Mortmain claims it to represent the ghosts of Sodom and ventures to discuss their sins that destroyed them. He imputes that the ghost’s sins were that they served “Mammon’s hate” and were involved in slavery as noted by the reference to a “Black slaver steering by a star.” These sins, though potentially Sodom’s, mirror those of the United States that led to the climax of the Civil War.

Following his monologue, Mortmain remains sitting on the shore of the Dead Sea pondering upon certain bubbles he sees in the waves. While he is pondering, the viewpoint of the poem changes to “two spirits” hovering nearby.

Two spirits, hovering in remove,
Sad with inefficacious love,
Here sighed debate: "Ah, Zoima, say;
Be it far from me to impute a sin,
But may a sinless nature win
Those deeps he knows?"—"Sin shuns that way;
Sin acts the sin, but flees the thought
That sweeps the abyss that sin has wrought.
Innocent be the heart and true—
Howe'er it feed on bitter bread—

That, venturous through the Evil led,
Moves as along the ocean's bed
Amid the dragon's staring crew."
(Melville 2.36.116–128)

Melville’s shift to the ghosts’ perspective brings into question the reality of what Mortmain was seeing when he was examining the vapors over the Dead Sea. Were the vapors actually ghosts that Mortmain saw with his physiological vision or were they conjured in his imagination as he reflected on the events of Sodom’s destruction and its correlation with the fall of the United States?

The fact that Melville plays with the idea of reality and something beyond natural sight not viewed by Mortmain denotes that he is trying to show how physical sight is not capable of capturing all that exists. Mortmain, as a ghost-seer, supposes the ghosts to exist, but does not see them, even though Melville acknowledges their presence. His eyes only capture the physical characteristics of the Dead Sea, the waves and a vapor, which he describes as a “gaseous puff of mineral breath” (Melville 2.36.48). By examining the formal elements of these passages in Clarel, the tension between physical sight and spiritual sight described by Smajic is apparent, and Melville uses this tension to illustrate the tension between factual evidence and faith to critique the importance laid on science during the latter part of the nineteenth century and its failures to explain everything. Because of the failure of science to explain all, Melville’s
portrayal of sight denotes that faith cannot be dead, because even faith as a ghost “would still haunt” the world.

Another example of ambiguous ghost-seeing comes from Henry James’ novel, *The Turn of the Screw*. Throughout the novel, James uses ambiguity to shroud the definite existence of Peter Quint and Miss Jessel, two former employees of the estate that the governess repeatedly sees and believes to be ghosts. Critics like Peter G. Beidler and Stanley Renner argue over whether what the governess actually sees is a ghost or a hallucination from her psyche. Beidler turns to firsthand accounts of ghost-seers to support his claim that the governess’s vivid description of Peter Quint’s ghost and Mrs. Grose’s recognition of him are evidence that James is depicting corporeal spirits that are visible to the physical eye (85–87). Contra Beidler, Renner argues that the ghost of Quint is merely “the projection of her own sexual hysteria in the form of stereotypes [of sexuality] deeply embedded in the mind of the culture” (Renner 176).

By accepting the plausibility of both arguments about James’s ghosts, the tension between actual physiological sight of corporeal ghosts and hallucinations from within the mind opens up a new caveat to understanding the underlying tension between scientific empirical evidence and faith based knowledge of the unseen in post-Civil War America. James turns the screw on what can be defined as reality through the perceptions of the governess and the dialogue she has with Mrs. Grose after the first appearance of Peter Quint’s “ghost.”

Before she knows the identity of the ghost, the governess describes the apparition as follows:

He has red hair, very red, close-curling, and a pale face, long in shape, with straight, good features and little, rather queer whiskers that are as red as his hair. His eyebrows are, somehow, darker; they look particularly arched and as if they might move a good deal.
His eyes are sharp, strange—awfully; but I only know clearly that they're rather small and very fixed. His mouth's wide, and his lips are thin, and except for his little whiskers he's quite clean-shaven. He gives me a sort of sense of looking like an actor. (James 29–30)

The governess further tells Mrs. Grose that the apparition was definitely not a “gentleman.” To these somewhat detailed descriptions, the uneducated Mrs. Grose exclaims that the identity of the personage was none other than Peter Quint, the master’s previous valet who was dead.

Though James’s portentous flame of suspense intrigues the reader when Mrs. Grose identifies the apparition, the credibility of this account is dependent solely upon the governess’s description. In the story, the only definite witness of the “ghosts” is the governess. Some may argue that the boy Miles witnesses both Miss Jessel’s and Peter Quint’s apparitions when he asks the governess in the final chapter, "Is she HERE?" referring to Miss Jessel (James 116).

Following this query, the governess exclaims that it is not she and that the cowardly face was in the window before them. To this tirade, Miles responds with the question, “Is it HE?” to which the governess then responds, "Whom do you mean by 'he'?" Miles then screams "Peter Quint—you devil!" (James117). This dialogue shows that Miles had familiarity with the apparitions, at least to a point. The problem here is that shortly after this conversation, the governess rushes to embrace Miles and holds him tight “until his little heart, dispossessed, had stopped” (James 117). This leaves the governess as the only true ghost-seer in the novella, which then causes the reader to question whether or not she actually was seeing ghosts, or hallucinating.

James’s ambiguity about the nature of the ghosts and the doubt of the governess’s role as a ghost-seer indicate a purposeful literary move to make the reader ask questions about whether the ghosts were real or not. By including the governess’s detailed list of physical traits of the ghost of Peter Quint, James puts empirical evidence about the ghosts’ existence against the doubt.
of the governess’s character and her belief in the supernatural. Through this juxtaposition of evidence and belief, James challenges the normal conventions of seeing as being the key factor of knowledge and argues, even if it may only be psychological, that empirical evidence cannot entirely explain certain phenomena, which therefore implies that something other than hard facts must fill the gap. This view strikes at the base of the pure scientific notions of post-Civil War America proscribing that empirical evidence defined the bounds of all truth.

The last example of how ghosts are used by post-Civil War authors to critique the conflict of science and faith comes from the poetry of Robert Frost. In his poem “Ghost House,” Frost describes very eloquently the scene of a ruined house that the narrator is dwelling in. The narrator describes the house as having “vanished many a summer ago / And left no trace but the cellar walls, / and a cellar in which the daylight falls” (Frost 2–4). Around the house, the fences are ruined, and trees that had once been cleared overrun the fields. With the general area being returned to nature, the narrator turns his attention to certain persons that abide with him in house. Frost writes,

I know not who these mute folk are
Who share the unlit place with me—
Those stones out under the low-limbed tree
Doubtless bear names that the mosses mar.

They are tireless folk, but slow and sad—
Though two, close-keeping, are lass and lad—
With none among them that ever sings,
And yet, in view of how many things,
As sweet companions as might be had.

(Frost 21–30)

The reference to “Those stones out under the low-limbed tree” by the narrator leads a reader to conclude that his companions are dead. This implication turns the poem “Ghost House” into more than a story about a ruined home from the past and reveals it is a ghost story.
Though Frost’s poem can be viewed as a ghost story and criticized using the ideas of Smajic, the act of ghost-seeing and the nature of the narrator in the poem both raise questions pertaining to what is actually seen in this poem. The two previous literary works dealt with living ghost-seers that either postulated that ghosts existed but did not witness them (Mortmain), or became the sole witness to the apparitions (the governess). In Frost’s poem, the narrator is both the ghost-seer and addresses the ghosts as “sweet companions” that reside with him in the ruins of the house. This implies that the narrator, by living among these companions, is a ghost himself.

This realization plays with the ideas of sight because every aspect of the landscape that the narrator describes in the poem, from the “cellar in which the daylight falls, / And the purple-stemmed wild raspberries grow” to “[t]he woods come back to the mowing field,” is suspect to the question, “Is it real” (Frost 4–5 and 7)? The detailed descriptions of the ruined house that would serve as empirical evidence defining reality are turned against that purpose because of the ethereal existence of the narrator.

Along this vein, Frank Lentricchia argues that Frost’s poetry examines “the gap between things as they are and the poet’s fictions—dark or bright—and the poet’s acute awareness and manipulation of this epistemological problem” (28). By understanding that Frost grapples with this gap in his poetry, his battle with reality can be transposed to the Smajic’s critical debate between physiological and faith based ghost-seeing, and Frost’s poem becomes a critique of reality and how everything cannot be determined by absolute fact. This interpretation of Frost’s poem lends itself to a broader critique of the post-Civil War context of his writings when science was supplanting belief through its emphasis on empirical evidence. Frost’s poem “Ghost House”
rejects a reality defined by the maxim “seeing is believing” and is evidence of Frost’s rejection of scientific explanations for all truth, thereby leaving room for faith.

The critical debate between a historicist conception of ghost-story criticism and Smajic’s psychoanalytic readings of ghost stories yield no definitive conclusion; both forms of criticism add depth to the sweeping genre of ghost-story literature. Though both forms of criticism are valid, the historical reading limits the breadth of ghost-story criticism because it imbues ghost stories with a set contextual meaning for the time period in which they were written. Smajic’s use of sight to determine meaning enables a broader interpretation of the ghost story. By using his form of criticism, we find a deeper meaning behind the use of ghosts as tools to critique historical events in the works of Melville, James, and Frost. These authors critique the rise of science and the loss of faith in post-Civil War America, and they do so by using ghosts as ambiguous characters to question defining truth through physiological sight. Their critique is that most things cannot be seen through hard facts alone, but through the spiritual eye, which is not beholden to empirical evidence.
Works Cited


