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Seeing and Not Believing

A Critique of Post-Civil War America's Loss of Faith Through a Spectral Medium

Alan Hickey

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. Authors such as Herman Melville, Henry James, and Robert Frost resisted this cultural shift away from faith-based views. 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.

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 historical analysis of ghost literature uses ghosts as gauges of past events and cultural movements that are taking place when authors incorporate them in their literature (Handley 5–6).

A psychological view centers ghost criticism on the question, “Is seeing believing?” Srdjan Smajic, professor of English at Tulane University, submits 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). This tension rests in the conflict between a focus on a faith-based sight where seeing is the way human beings define truth (“seeing is believing”) and skepticism concerning the reliability of sight to define the world (seeing is not believing). By using psychoanalysis to formally examine the use of ghosts in Melville’s *Clarel*, James’s *The Turn of the Screw*, and Frost’s “Ghost House,” ghosts become a tool to critique the war between science and faith in post-Civil War America.

The theme of skepticism throughout Melville’s poem *Clarel* finds life through its characters’ struggles with faith and the ghostly apparitions embodying religious belief. In the poem, Melville navigates the ocean of thought stirred after the destruction of the Civil War in preparation for the centennial of the nation’s birth. 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, a religious skeptic and companion of the protagonist, 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 Mortmain’s 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 lolled. 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 and a turn from faith generally.

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?

Melville seeks to show how physical sight is not capable of capturing all that exists by playing with the idea of reality and something beyond natural sight not viewed by Mortmain. 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. 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. Because physiological sight does not capture all of truth, as science and reason intend, faith is needed to understand the world.

Henry James uses ambiguous ghost-seeing in his story, *The Turn of the Screw* to bring into question whether ghosts are real or merely hallucinations. Throughout the novella, 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)

By including the governess’ 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’ character and her belief in the supernatural. 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 Mrs. Grose seems to believe the governess, the credibility of the governess’s account is dependent solely upon her testimony. 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!" (James 117). 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' 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. 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 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.

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, however, 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.

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