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The Ghosts We Think We Have

Postmemory in Dickens's *The Haunted House*

Rachael Buchanan

When one thinks of Charles Dickens, one is immediately reminded of the holiday spectral, due to a certain ever-popular novel. But *A Christmas Carol* is not the end-all of holiday tales within Dickens's canon. In fact, after the wild success of that famous holiday novel, Dickens began to write Christmas stories yearly and often collaboratively. These holiday tales became a staple of the season, attracting authors from far and wide. From names as famous as Elizabeth Gaskell to more obscure individuals like John Hardwood, Dickens hired writers for his Christmas works. Dickens created "frame" stories in which he would write the beginning and end of a piece, leaving its subsequent parts for his writers to finish.

All obviously Christmas-themed, these frame stories told varied narratives within an overarching narrative, presenting a plethora of colorful characters with unique manners of storytelling in a style that Melissa Gregory suggests in her article "Dickens's Collaborative Genres" is comparable to "Frankenstein's monster" (220). Gregory elaborates: "With their abrupt, lurching motion, Dickens's Christmas numbers manage to elude the total control of their authoritative editor . . . Dickens had to reanimate them every

year" (220). So, while his annual collaborative works served to keep alive the spirit of Christmas his readers had come to expect, Dickens's efforts to pen frame stories was an arduous process for him. The authors he hired often missed the mark he established for content and main themes. The result were stories that, rather than flow with an inherent consistency and overarching continuity, read like fragments of many stories glued together— all rough edges and vacillating unity.

Such is particularly true of one frame story published in the 1859 Christmas edition of Dickens's journal *All the Year Round*, a piece entitled *The Haunted House*. The story follows a man renting a supposedly "haunted" house. After driving his servants to hysterics over circumstantial evidence that seems to prove the house's ghostly nature, the man, John, dismisses them. He then invites a host of friends to spend some weeks together in the haunted house. At the end of their stay, the guests discuss any evidence of the supernatural they witnessed. Speaking to the structure of the narrative, Ruth F. Glancy explains, "The framework of 'The Haunted House' was purposefully autobiographical, the narrator a thinly disguised persona" of Dickens, with "the insistence that the framed tales [written by other authors] also be autobiographical" (64). However, the parts of the work penned by other writers "lacked . . . philosophical or thematic connection with the framework" (64). In other words, despite Dickens specifically requesting that his contributors' stories for *The Haunted House* draw from their own personal lives, none adhered to this request. At least, not in typical fashion; most of the stories within the frame of *The Haunted House* are not autobiographical, unless one views them through the lens of postmemory.

The presence of memory in Dickens's body of work is commonly discussed in academic circles, the past often analyzed as a distinct influence on the present for the characters in Dickens's work. For example, Robert E. Lougy states that "for Dickens the past, however ancient, makes its presence felt in the shapes and forms of our actions and social practices," going on to discuss how childhood memory influences adult experience in Dickens's *David Copperfield* (406). In this sense, in Dickens's works, the past is something inescapable, a part of the present reality and future of his characters that molds how they view what happens to them on a daily basis. They can no more ignore the past than they can ignore what is happening around them in the present, or what will happen to them as they look to the future. What has happened to them dictates what will happen to them, as

their pasts dictate their actions moving forward through their lives. Adding another angle on this topic, James E. Marlow asserts that, in Dickens, “To have memories of any kind is to be softened, for an awareness of the past dissolves the tyranny of the present” (23). In this, Marlow suggests that the characters in Dickens’s works are gentled by their pasts, memories putting into perspective that which they experience in the presence. The power of nostalgia is present here, asserting itself to the detriment of the “tyranny” of the current moment, which suffers at the hands of hindsight. These associations between the influence of a character’s personal past on their personal presents is common—a thread that stretches through much literary criticism on Dickens and memory.

No literature associated with Dickens, however, has ever been considered through the lens of postmemory. Postmemory was originally coined by Marianne Hirsch in the context of the children of Holocaust survivors, and the concept has impacted many literary contexts. Andreas Athanasiades looks at postmemory in memoir fiction, describing the concept as “[denoting] the traumatic experience of the first generation of immigrants that is transmitted to the second generation in such a powerful way that the latter perceive these memories as their own” (27). Diverging from this use of postmemory in literary analysis, Maria Rice Bellamy posits that postmemory can be “[physical], affecting the inheritors of traumatic memory in their bodies as well as their minds and emotions” in fiction, giving “body to an important form of trauma’s ghost” (45, 75).

In the context of *The Haunted House*, postmemory is best understood through Athanasiades’s definition—“memories from a past never actually experienced” by the individual reminiscing (27). With this definition established, postmemory applies in three particular chapters of *The Haunted House*: “The Ghost in the Clock Room” by Hesba Stretton, “The Ghost in the Picture Room” by Adelaide Anne Procter, and “The Ghost in the Garden Room” by Elizabeth Gaskell. All three deviate from Dickens’s longing for autobiography by presenting some form of a memory that the writers themselves never experienced. However, when we consider postmemory as memories an individual gleans from other individuals’ personal memories and stories, each of these chapters are arguably examples of biography. Not autobiography, per say, as none of the authors presented stories from their own lives. Yet, in the frame of postmemory, these stories can be viewed as (auto)biographical recollections of the characters themselves. Through this

lens, I argue that these three chapters fit into Dickens's desire for personal histories through three subspecies of postmemory: "familial" postmemory, "artistic" postmemory, and "traumatic" postmemory. Thus, when associated with postmemory, these three elements of the *The Haunted House* challenge Dickens's criticism of his authors' noncompliance.

Stretton's "The Ghost in the Clock Room," the first chapter, achieves biographical status through the use of familial postmemory. In defining this subspecies of postmemory, I return to Athanasiades's work on postmemory in memoir, in which he analyzes a memoirist who "digs deeply into family narratives so that he might fully understand himself" (26). Familial postmemory thus draws a connecting line between the individual and the family, and such a postmemorial connection between family members is evident from the start of Stretton's piece. The chapter concerns one John Herschel, cousin of Dickens's narrator, who, upon being asked if any ghost has haunted him during his stay, "turned rather red, and turned rather white, and said he could not deny his room had been haunted. The Spirit of a woman had pervaded it" (32). Here, Stretton establishes the presence of the past in Herschel's present—a feminine past. This brings up immediate questions: why is a man speaking of not just the memory of a woman but the "Spirit of a woman" pervading his room? The use of the word "spirit" creates a concrete sensation, the presence of an actual individual rather than the remembrance of one, and that in turn implies that a woman has been haunting Herschel. Any story to follow is guaranteed to belong to that woman, blotting out the possibility of Herschel's own biography in *The Haunted House*. Stretton continues to distance John Herschel from the ghost that has been haunting him; in response to questions concerning what the ghost said to him, John says "apologetically, that he could have wished his wife would have undertaken the answer, for she would have executed it much better than he" (33). The reader now suspects that the memory that will be expounded upon will not be Herschel's but his wife's. This is a notion confirmed when Herschel relents and begins "his" story, gravely intoning, "Suppose the spirit . . . to be my wife here, sitting among us" (32). One may argue that this woman's story may in fact be biographically tied to Stretton—until one recalls that Stretton herself never married. This reality clearly distances Stretton from John Herschel's wife. There is then no hope (or at least very little) of Dickens's longed-for (auto)biography cropping up in Stretton's section of *The Haunted House*—the memory does not even

originate with the fictitious John Herschel; he stands cued to start a tale that clearly belongs to his wife.

Then the memory itself begins, with a shocking first line: "I was an orphan from my infancy, with six elder half-sisters" (33). Now, the content of this opening itself is not wholly shocking; many stories, after all, begin with a child becoming an orphan. The truly mystifying element of this starting line is the use of "I." John Herschel is clearly speaking as the established narrator, yet he has declared he is going to tell the story of his wife. Who, then, is the "I"? I, John Herschel? Or I, Herschel's wife? An answer to this becomes clear when, a few sentences later, the "I" narrator explains how "Most people know a character such as I had grown—a mindless, flirting girl, whose acknowledged vocation was the hunting and catching of an eligible match" (33). The reader assumes that "I" is John Herschel's wife, though he is the one telling the story. He, too, is the "I." Postmemory has arrived on the scene; John tells the memory of his wife in the first person as if he were his wife, providing an example in the process of memory transferring from one family member to the other. This phenomenon occurs throughout Stretton's piece, as John Herschel/Herschel's wife says such things as "I remembered that my brown hair fell in curls round my face, and that my dark blue eyes were considered expressive, when I looked up to meet [John's] gaze" (38), and "[John] had taken me in his arms, and my head rested against his strongly throbbing heart" (45). These narrative details are quite evocative and feminine—one can almost feel how the narrator's hair falls "in curls" around her face, feel a pulse when she lays her head against John's "strongly throbbing heart." If there is a trace of the masculine here, it is buried under this woman's desire to be taken up in her lover's arms and her self-conscious remembrance of her beauty when she looks up into his face. The reader must actively recall that they are really being told this story through a man's voice, as John conveys his wife's words for his audience.

By blending Herschel and his wife's memories, the story is not merely biographical for the two characters involved, but strangely autobiographical for both of them. Even though the wife appears to be the narrator, the *husband* is the narrator, a phenomenon resulting in the complete melding of his and her memory. They have become one person, with moments of self-reflection throughout the narrative, such as when John Herschel/Herschel's wife states, "[John] knew nothing of the wiles of woman" (38). This self-reflection fits the familial postmemory Athanasiades describes in his article,

as the man tells a “family narrative” that allows him to “fully understand himself” through the eyes of his family (26). Through the memory of someone else, presented in a first-person narrative, John Herschel reflects on himself in a roundabout manner, all the while twisting what seemed to be a completely nonbiographical story into an autobiography, albeit a fictitious one. This phenomenon causes Stretton’s chapter in *The Haunted House* to fit into Dickens’s desired paradigm of autobiography.

In similar fashion, Procter’s “The Ghost in the Picture Room” obtains a sense of biography through artistic postmemory. Procter’s chapter demonstrates an interaction between the past and an artist who adopts and adapts that past. Jordan Tonsgard suggests that artists’ writing of the past “explore the active space of creation in the absence of personal experience to construct narrative images of postmemory” (268). Tonsgard further explains that through postmemory, artists “[embrace] the creative and imaginative nature of . . . inheriting the legacy of trauma . . . embracing the creative and imaginative necessities of approaching the past by drawing it, writing it, and sharing it” (277). Though Tonsgard specifically refers to graphic novelists, his point suggests that artists can inherit traumas and stories not their own by conveying those memories in a sharable form. This occurs in Procter’s chapter of *The Haunted House*, narrated by a woman named Belinda, who tells the story of an ancient nun’s trauma in poetic form. This artistic medium creates a form of postmemory between Belinda, the poet, and Angela, the ancient nun—a connection that gives Belinda claim to the nun’s life and history in a postmemorial manner, and which, in turn, makes Procter’s chapter of *The Haunted House* (auto)biographical.

The poem begins, “Belinda, with a modest self-possession quite her own, promptly answered [for a ghost story] . . . in a low, clear voice” (83). Here, Procter sets up a very confident, sure narrator—one in “self-possession” of the words she speaks in a “clear voice.” Belinda claims the story she is about to tell as her own; in that sense, Procter’s main character adheres to Dickens’s request, even if Procter herself does not. Belinda, as “the artist,” paints a picture for her audience: “A Portrait such as Rembrandt loved to paint— / The likeness of a Nun” (10). The poet explains how “[She] seemed to trace / A world of sorrow in the patient face, / In the thin hands folded across her breast” (12), lines that foreshadow trauma and set up forthcoming postmemory. The history of the artist and her subject blurs when Belinda “gazed and dreamed” at the portrait “Till an old legend that I once had heard

/ Came back to me" (15). Belinda has connected herself to a past that is not her own, but which is hers in the sense that she is its voice. She lays claim to the memory of someone else, presenting this past in a form that nods to Tonsgard's assertions of postmemory in artistic endeavors.

Belinda further connects herself to the legend through her trip to the actual setting of the legend, where "one who had dwelt . . . In that fair home . . . told / The convent's treasured legend, quaint and old" (37-42). With this assertion, Belinda tells of a nun who is given "charge of a young wounded knight" (127), an event that becomes a "fatal, coiling net" (173) that captures and draws the nun out into the world, and misery. Belinda describes how the nun "strove to dream, and strove in vain" (202), ending with her eventual return to the convent. Unlike Stretton's switch from third to first person point of view in John Herschel's narrative, Procter does not have Belinda tell the nun's tragic story in first person. The nun is called by her name, Angela, and thus Belinda does not project herself directly onto the other woman's history. However, Belinda still assumes the right to spin musings at the conclusion of Angela's history, asking,

Have we not all, amid life's petty strife, / Some pure ideal of a noble life
/ That once seemed possible?" (Procter 328-30) and concluding that "now
[we] live idle in a vague regret; / But still *our place is kept*, and it will wait,
/ Ready for us to fill it, soon or late. (334, italics in original).

This allegorical conclusion sets up Belinda as the mouthpiece of Angela the nun's story. As Belinda interprets and provides meaning from Angela's experiences, she claims ownership of a past that is not hers and thus establishes artistic postmemory. In this manner, Procter's seemingly non-biographical, mythological poem meets the (auto)biographical criteria Dickens set forward for *The Haunted House*.

In Gaskell's chapter of *The Haunted House*, "The Ghose in the Garden Room," a similar phenomenon occurs—traumatic postmemory. Petra Fachinger defines this concept when she "discusses three contemporary German Jewish novels by second-generation writers that describe the search of their middle-aged protagonists . . . for their parents' traumatic past" (49). This subspecies of postmemory comments on how trauma experienced by one person can affect another. Though Fachinger is specifically talking about parent-to-child trauma, Gaskell's chapter demonstrates this notion of trauma in a non-familial context. In the chapter, the narrator describes a

trauma inherited from an acquaintance, which, in telling his rapt audience, he claims as his own.

This form of traumatic postmemory is evident from the very beginning of Gaskell's portion of *The Haunted House*. The tale belongs to Mr. Underly, who starts by stating "'My bedroom . . . has been haunted by the Ghost of a Judge'" (Gaskell 138). Mr. Underly is not a judge himself; the reader realizes that the judge in question is in fact a friend of Underly who once told Underly a story. Quite an impressive story, it seems, as Underly declares "I never shall forget the description [the judge] gave me, and I never have forgotten it since I first heard it'" (138). This sets up Underly to tell a second-hand account, a direct violation of Dickens's (auto)biographical wishes. Underly rectifies this error by explaining how the judge "'returns to me in many intervals of quiet leisure, and his story haunts me'" (138). This "haunting" is evidence towards traumatic postmemory, the story Underly is prepared to tell being a major part of his own memory, a story that has come to him "in many intervals," during times of "quiet leisure." Underly is not simply remembering what the judge once told him—he is explaining a story he has often contemplated independently, a story that has invaded his personal life. This evident pervasiveness of the tale teases Underly's audience, who "one and all called for the story, that it might haunt [them] likewise" (139). Like crazed hyenas, Underly's audience claws after the trauma he has described to them, longing to be similarly "haunted." With this, traumatic postmemory becomes a collective rather than purely individual exercise; their wish to be "haunted" speaks to the nature of trauma—its power to consume, intrigue, and fascinate even in a secondhand fashion. Egged on by this collective desire for trauma, Underly weaves the narrative of a man and woman who served as witnesses at a trial presided over by Underly's judge. The couple marries late in life and raises their single son Benjamin alongside his cousin and adopted sister Bessy. Over the course of the dismal story, Benjamin shows that he is spoiled rotten, vainly flaunts his own good looks, milks his parents dry, and breaks Bessy's heart (139–215). Underly spins a tale of broken hearts, forsaken childhood promises, and familial betrayal. By the end of Underly's tale, little of the family's joy and happiness is left intact—the lives of Bessy and her aunt and uncle broken to pieces in the wake of Benjamin's ill deeds.

The peak of trauma in the story is a scene of robbery near the end of the tale, long after Benjamin has cast his family off in disdain. In this part of the

story, Bessy wakes up during the night to discover multiple men breaking into the house; she crawls out of the window and runs for help, beseeching neighbors with a cry of “There’s robbers in the house, and uncle and aunt’ll be murdered!” (192). Bessy and rescuers rush back to the house, and, while the menfolk run upstairs in pursuit of robbers, Bessy discovers another intruder. He “was an enemy, a robber, that was all she knew, and she sprang to the door of the closet, and in a trice had locked it on the outside” (195). Robbers detained, Bessy “[hears] her name softly, and urgently called . . . ‘Bessy, Bessy! for God’s sake, let me out!’” and realizes the villain is no other than her precious Benjamin (198). Thus, the elderly couple are called up to witness before Underly’s friend (the judge) against their own beloved son—the tale’s ultimate tragedy (208–15). These traumatizing events of twisted familial relationships, betrayal of trusts, and lost love leave a lasting impression on Underly. Though he hears this tale through the judge who stood witness to Benjamin’s parents’ sorrows, the details of the story of Benjamin’s wretchedness has become a story that Underly claims as his own, like Belinda with the ancient nun. Thus, through the lens of traumatic postmemory and in terms of Underly’s narrative, Gaskell’s portion of *The Haunted House* is (auto)biographical.

Charles Dickens’s Christmas frame stories tend towards the disjointed and the unconfigured more than the unified and the whole. Upon an initial look, the frame story *The Haunted House* is no exception to this rule, full of chapters that ignore Dickens’s request for autobiographical tales. When viewed through the lens of postmemory, however, these chapters align more with Dickens’s desires than one might initially imagine. Because they adopt memories through trauma, artistic connection, and familial relationships, these stories can be read as their protagonist’s autobiographies within *The Haunted House*. These tales thus achieve a sense of biography, showcasing the effects of memory on the present by emphasizing an individual’s ability to be affected by the memories of others, the stories of others’ lives, and the trauma experienced by people that one has, perhaps, never even met.

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