

The Role of Ghosts in Literature

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Ghosts and other spirits appear in every culture: like stories of ghostly revenge in ancient China and Japan, haunted houses in the Middle East, and African and Native American ghosts that must be appeased or avoided. In Western literary tradition, ghosts appear from the beginning. The ancient Greeks write about them often: Odysseus encounters his mother in the afterlife, where ghosts are “shadows” and must drink blood in order to speak. Later, ghosts haunt the cemeteries of Athens and appear in plays to demand revenge.

Another important source of our literature also gives us ghosts: in the Hebrew Bible, the Witch of Endor calls up the ghost of Samuel for King Saul. In the Christian Bible, the disciples fear that Jesus might be a spirit when he walks on water and again when he appears after his death (that’s why Thomas wants to touch his wounds). And ghosts go on haunting and horrifying through the Roman Empire, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance, from Virgil’s Aeneid (where a dead husband brings a warning), to Hamlet’s father, Scrooge’s three Christmas visitors, and modern ghosts like the anonymous one in *The Haunting of Hill House*.

All these ghosts have a lot in common, in terms of their reasons for appearing and the nature of their apparitions. But for literary purposes, an important question is: why do they appeal to us? I can think of three possible reasons:

First, our minds, like our bodies, crave exercise, and we enjoy exercising our emotions – even the ones that would be unpleasant in real life, like fear. For example, In Susan Hill’s *The Woman in Black*, when the young lawyer is alone in the isolated old house, blinded by fog, and the sound of a chair rocking comes from the locked room, we can be frightened, but not threatened, by the scene.

Second, we love to unravel a mystery, and ghost stories are often like detective stories in this regard. In Francis Crawford’s story “The Upper Berth,” why can no one spend a night in the stateroom where the drowned man slept? In Shirley Jackson’s *Hill House*, what has happened in the house to make it so much like a living thing gone mad?

And third, I think we like the idea that what we experience in our daily lives might have another dimension, one that connects to a broader experience – even if it’s bleak or frightening. We like to imagine that there IS a veil, beyond which the past is present, and dramatic events are being re-enacted, just beyond our powers of perception.

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