Tales in which the spirits of the dead encounter the living emerge from almost every culture, but it was not until the second half of the eighteenth century that Europeans began to construct ghost stories as they would be categorized today. These fictions were designed to be pleasurably frightening in themselves, rather than using ghosts to warn, to counsel, to instigate vengeance, or to guard or reveal treasure, and placed the encounter with the ghost, and the experience of haunting, at the center of their narratives. Since then, ghost stories have remained enduringly popular, and their writers have often displayed a sophisticated awareness of the genre's conventions, history, and key texts.

First-generation Gothic frequently used the specter (see spectrality) as a discrete episode in a longer narrative rather than as the basis of a novel's plot – the appearance of the Bleeding Nun in Matthew Lewis' *The Monk* (1796), or the lengthier and more sophisticated "Wandering Willie's Tale" from Walter Scott's *Redgauntlet* (1824) are typical examples. Writers quickly grasped that lengthy ghost stories were challenging to sustain, as the intervals between the ghost's appearances often lapsed into padding, though there are exceptions: Stephen King extends W. W. Jacobs' 3,000 word vignette "The Monkey's Paw" (1902) to 480 pages in *Pet Sematary* (1985) (see king, stephen). By the late 1820s, the ghostly was starting to focus on a single incident – stories were shorter, concentrating their effect by being readable at a single sitting (preferably by candlelight) and excising subplots and other extraneous material. From the beginning, the ghost story typically deployed realist description, attempting to make the intrusion of the supernatural (see supernatural, the) into the everyday all the more startling by detailing settings readers could visualize, but its most sophisticated exponents combined this attention to exteriority with a corresponding interest in the psychological consequences of exposure to the supernatural. Walter Scott's "The Tapestried Chamber" (1828) is a classic example of the former approach, with a paradigmatic plot in which a character spends a night in a haunted chamber, while Edgar Allan Poe's "The Tell-Tale Heart" (1843, rev. 1845) sacrifices quotidian scene-setting in order to extract maximum capital from dramatizing the protagonist's traumatized condition (see poe, edgar allan). The two approaches were by no means mutually exclusive – Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Margaret Oliphant, and Henry James offered masterful fusions of them in late Victorian works such as "Green Tea" (1874), "The Library Window" (1896), and *The Turn of the Screw* (1898) – but they determined the shape and focus of almost every ghostly tale for the best part of a century. It was only when later modernism began to excavate the Gothic past in brief, poetic sketches such as Virginia Woolf's "A Haunted House" (1921) or the stories of Mary Butts that a serious alternative to them emerged, and even then it has not proved especially influential.

The ghost story was a central aspect of Victorian culture, being, as Darryl Jones says, "a reaction to the secular, materialist, industrial modernity that animated the dominant, progressivist Victorian utilitarian ideology" (Jones 2011: xviii). Its most famous practitioner was probably Charles Dickens, who wedded Gothic shock effects (a doorknocker transforming into a hideous face) to Christian homily in *A Christmas Carol* (1843) and also recognized the opportunities offered by industry and technology in...
"The Signalman" (1866), in which a railway worker is haunted both by precognitive visions and his own sense of duty in a life governed by the telegraph and mechanical signals (see dickens, charles). Dickens' contemporary, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, offered a different approach, detaching the ghostly tale from a Christian, providential framework in "Schalken the Painter" (1839) and mapping the traumatized protagonists of Poe onto settings such as the Victorian country house and, more subversively, the modern city (see le fanu, joseph sheridan). Le Fanu exploited the properties of Gothic and sensation fiction – frame stories, embedded narratives in the form of letters and other documents, historical settings – but he added to them a fascination with the workings of conscience, sexual uncertainty, and a post-Darwinian anxiety about humanity's place in the order of things. He was also prepared to leave the supernatural content of his fiction ambiguous on occasion, and as such proved a significant influence on M. R. James.

The Victorian ghost story took a variety of different forms. Edward Bulwer Lytton dramatized an attempt to investigate, rather than simply visit, a haunted house in "The Haunters and the Haunted" (1859) (see bulwer lytton, edward). Elizabeth Gaskell combined the detailed settings familiar from her realist novels with an increasing psychological sophistication in tales such as "The Old Nurse's Story" (1852), while Rhoda Broughton, a niece by marriage of Le Fanu, brought out the genre's sexual undertones in "The Man with the Nose" in Twilight Stories (1879). Amelia Edwards, Mary Braddon, and Mrs. J. H. (Charlotte) Riddell added to the roster of female ghost story writers, with Riddell especially interested in the violation of domestic spaces often strikingly akin to those inhabited by her readers. Rather than clearly signaling her ghost stories as fantasy, Riddell gave a vivid sense of supernatural entities lurking around the edges of everyday life, an approach many later writers would exploit to striking effect.

All of these writers drew on a body of generic conventions which they refined and developed, but by the late 1880s newer voices were demonstrating how "ghostly fiction, like other literary modes, typically follows a cycle of innovation, imitation, decline, burlesque and revival" (Freeman 2012: 150). Oscar Wilde spoofed many older tropes in "The Canterville Ghost" (1887) but at the same time offered a ghost who is as developed as, perhaps more developed than, the story's other characters; Wilde's Sir Simon is a focus of sympathy not simply because of what has happened to him in the past, but for how he now "lives." Jerome K. Jerome satirized Dickensian Yuletide ghosts in his Told After Supper (1891), a witty compendium of exhausted Gothic tropes. H. G. Wells offered a new version of the disembodied spirit in "Under the Knife" (1896), the story of an experience under general anesthetic; revisited the haunted chamber motif in "The Red Room" (1896), a story which at once ridicules cliché and conjures terror; and, like Wilde, showed how difficult life as a ghost could be in "The Story of the Inexperienced Ghost" (1902) (see wells, h. g. (herbert george)). Ghostly spirits had long sought peace through the laying of a curse or a Christian burial, but Wilde and Wells began a trend that led, eventually, to the ghostly lovers of Peter Beagle's 1960 novel A Fine and Private Place (its title an allusion to Marvell's "To His Coy Mistress"), the murdered narrator of Alice Sebold's The Lovely Bones (2002), and, inadvertently, to the twenty-first century vogue for "supernatural romance."

With the wells of the "traditional" ghost story running dry in the 1890s, the balance between realism and psychology began to tip in favor of the latter, not least because writers such as Henry James were anticipating devices that would soon become associated with early modernism (see james, henry; modernism). Le Fanu had used indeterminacy and ambiguity in a number of his stories, but Henry and M. R. James, along with Rudyard Kipling, Vernon Lee, May Sinclair, Oliver Onions, and Edith Wharton,
recognized that relationships between readers and authors were changing, and that the reactions of
the reader were vital in constructing the meaning and effect of a story. Subtlety and obliqueness were
the keynotes of the fiction that this prompted, qualities that were taken to extremes first by Walter
de la Mare, and then by Elizabeth Bowen and Robert Aickman, writers in whose stories it is often
impossible to say not only whether there is a ghost at work but also to understand exactly what has
happened. In *Something of Myself* (1937), Kipling told his readers that no text could ever be edited
sufficiently – whatever was written could always be filed down further (see kipling, rudyard). This led
him to produce the profoundly ambiguous "Mrs. Bathurst" (1904), in which a man is haunted by the
image of a former lover he has seen in a cinema news-reel, and "They" (1904), a moving account of a
blind woman who can "see" the spirits of dead children as a result of her own bereavements. It is left
for us to realize why the narrator is able to hear the children too.

Although the ghost story is rarely recognized as an aspect of modernism, its early and mid-twentieth
century practitioners in Britain and the United States were often remarkably innovative in both its
subject matter and its representation. Henry James, whose brother, William, was a significant figure in
the Society for Psychical Research, remarked that "the whole of anything is never told" (James 1955:
18), a maxim that was applied to telling effect in uneasily ambiguous stories such as "The Friends of the
Friends" (1896) and his masterpiece, *The Turn of the Screw*. M. R. James littered his stories with
pastiche documents that destabilize the neat compartmentalization of past and present (see james, m.
r. (montague rhodes)). Oliver Onions made masterful use of free indirect style in "The Beckoning Fair
One" (1911) to make it increasingly unclear where the boundaries between the narrator and the
possessed protagonist might be drawn. "Roumm," another story from Onions' *Widdershins* (1911),
offered a ghost that could seemingly penetrate solid matter in a tale made all the more effective by
the protagonist's inadequate vocabulary – how can he explain something which lies outside his
experience and perhaps even beyond language itself? Some practitioners worried that the ghost would
have no place in the world of the electric light, but haunted or possessed machinery soon became a
significant presence in the ghost stories of an increasingly technological twentieth century, from the
motor vehicle of E. Nesbit's "The Violet Car" (1910) to the incarnation of malign metropolitan energies
of Fritz Leiber's "Smoke Ghost" (1941). Telegraphs, televisions, computers, radios, even the industrial
laundromat of Stephen King's "The Mangler" (1972): all have exemplified what M. R. James called "The
Malice of Inanimate Objects."

Another strand of the fin-de-siècle ghost, especially after the Oscar Wilde trials of 1895, was a sense of
(homo)sexual transgression, something that, like the ghost in "Roumm," defied linguistic utterance.
John Meade Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895) seems haunted as much by the presence of Lord
Alfred Douglas as it does by the evil spirit of Adrian Temple, the seventeenth-century occultist whose
rediscovered violin has such terrible consequences for its finder; there is a notably "queer" atmosphere
to many of the fictions of Henry and M. R. James; while discreetly homosexual writers who had known
Wilde, such as E. F. Benson and Robert Hichens, produced either misogynistic fantasies or, as in
Hichens' "How Love Came to Professor Guildea" (1900), explored themes of masculinity, celibacy, and
sexual secrets (see queer gothic). When Guildea sits on a bench overlooking Hyde Park one night,
smoking and staring into the darkness, he is unwise to leave his front door open. These fictions were
not as technically innovative as those of Kipling or Lee, but they did reflect the uncertainties of their
time where sexuality was concerned. Religious uncertainty too came to light, notably in the fictions of
Algernon Blackwood (see blackwood, algernon), whose unconventional spiritual allegiances (he might be
regarded as a pantheist with Buddhist, Hindu, and pagan sympathies) were reflected in stories that at
times offered fairly traditional encounters with unquiet spirits ("Keeping His Promise" 1906) but
elsewhere dramatized vivid accounts of the supernatural energy inherent in the natural world ("The
Willows" 1907, "The Wendigo" 1910). Blackwood's ghosts were not always human – in "Onandonandon"
(1921) a feverish man is haunted by a dog's repetitive barking, while in "The Man Whom the Trees
Loved" (1912), the spirit of the forest comes to possess a man living on its border. His ghosts were not
always malign in their intentions and much of his fiction represents an attempt to understand the
otherness of a world as yet unexplained by science. His John Silence, Physician Extraordinary (1908) is
a remarkable fusion of the ghost story, the work of psychic investigators, and a suggestion of
psychiatry as traumatized patients such as Arthur Vezin in "Ancient Sorceries" recount their
extraordinary experiences.

During and especially after World War I, the ghost story took a number of paths. It was, on occasion,
consolatory (as in Arthur Machen's "The Bowmen" (1914) and "The Happy Children," written in the
aftermath of the Lusitania's sinking), but elsewhere it fed off the growing cultural visibility of
psychoanalysis as a response to wartime trauma, and the uncertainty of newspaper accounts of the
conflict, with their columns marked "Missing." The missing, those deemed neither alive nor dead but lost
and unaccounted for, return to dramatic effect in Elizabeth Bowen's "The Demon Lover" (1941) and
Robert Aickman's "A Roman Question" (1966), but their unresolved absence helps to accentuate the
increasing tendency of writers to reject explanation or analysis. Aickman (see aickman, robert), who
argued that the ghost story's workings were akin to poetry, termed his fiction "strange stories," while
Bowen located the essence of the genre as being "a series of happenings whose horror lies in their
being just, just out of the true" (Cox and Gilbert 1986: ix-x). Edith Wharton's "Pomegranate Seed"
(1930) seems to feature a series of letters from the dead summoning the living to join them; the
stories of L. P. Hartley offer similarly open-ended accounts of mysterious events.

These fictions were rarely explicitly horrific, relying on subtle suggestion to play on their readers'
imaginations, and these tactics have remained of central importance to the genre. Some writers, such
as M. R. James, are chiefly remembered as writers of ghost stories; others, Bowen, for instance, or
Vernon Lee, are regarded as writers who wrote ghost stories alongside other fiction – in such cases, it
can be difficult to distinguish whether a story such as Bowen's "The Happy Autumn Fields" (1945) is a
ghost story or not. This generic ambiguity tends to be the preserve of more self-consciously literary
fiction, since modern Gothic novelists such as Peter Straub or James Herbert openly admit their
generic affiliations in Ghost Story (1974) or The Ghosts of Sleath (1994). Nevertheless, even stories
which declare their ghostliness from the outset remain interested in the experience of being haunted
rather than just showing encounters with supernatural entities, and although Julia Briggs suggested in
1977 that the ghost story had become "a vehicle for nostalgia" and "a formulaic exercise" (Briggs 1977:
14), her pessimism seems misplaced. Ghosts are still alive and well on both sides of the Atlantic in, for
example, the continued popularity of Susan Hill's The Woman in Black (1983) and its 1987 stage
adaptation, the best-selling The Lovely Bones, the dark comedy of Hilary Mantel's Beyond Black
(2005), and in the work of writers such as Mark Samuels, Reggie Oliver, D. P. Watt, and others
associated with small presses such as Tartarus and Inkerman specializing in supernatural fiction.

SEE ALSO: Aickman, Robert; Blackwood, Algernon; Bulwer Lytton, Edward; Dickens, Charles; James,
Henry; James, M. R. (Montague Rhodes); King, Stephen; Kipling, Rudyard; Le Fanu, Joseph Sheridan;
Modernism; Poe, Edgar Allan; Queer Gothic; Spectrality; Supernatural, The; Wells, H. G. (Herbert
George).
REFERENCES

FURTHER READING

APA
Chicago
Harvard
MLA
APA

Chicago

Harvard

MLA