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Ghostly Goes On. Can Ghost Stories Provide the Perfect Allegory for Loneliness and Neglect in Children's Writing?

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Abstract

It could be argued that the popularity of ghost stories for young readers (seen most clearly in the Middle Grade age bracket) is due to a demand for 'age appropriate' horror novels for a younger readership, eager to lap up spooky tales. However, could there be more going on than meets the 'pale blue eye'?

When studying recent titles within this category, it is possible to interpret these novels as extended allegories in which the ghost, an 'invisible' character by all accounts, represents the protagonist and their feelings of loneliness and at times, neglect. Is it possible that ghosts provide the perfect personification of parental neglect (real or perceived) in a way that is accessible to young readers? It is perhaps no coincidence that often the parents or guardians in these stories either don't notice the aforementioned ghost, or they choose to ignore it completely. By contrast, the young protagonists who understand what it feels like to be overlooked or feel invisible, are in no doubt of the ghosts' presence.

If this allegorical trend is to continue into the future of children's writing, how can we utilise it to improve the representation of the complex emotional needs of children in a way that is accessible, entertaining, and still excitingly spooky?

Keywords: *Ghosts, haunting, loneliness, empathy*

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What is a ghost story? If we go by Robert McKee's definition, it falls into the subgenre of the "supernatural" as it most often involves "irrational phenomenon from the spirit realm" (McKee, p.80). That being said, the discerning ghost-story enthusiast may like to clarify this definition as the "super-uncanny," which unlike the "uncanny" itself, i.e., phenomenon in which there is a "rational explanation" for the source of horror, the "super uncanny" keeps the reader "guessing between" rational and supernatural explanations (McKee, p.80). For the sake of this paper, all personal views regarding the spirit realm may be suspended and henceforth, all subject material will be treated as the "super-uncanny" and all terms used in reference to 'spirits', 'restless souls', 'the undead', and those who have "passed over" (Coward, p.29) can be deemed synonymous with ghosts.

With that clarified, we can look at why ghost stories are so popular within the Middle Grade market. It is interesting to note that the earliest-known representation of a ghost dates back to ancient Babylon where a tablet made in around 1500 B.C.E. is believed by some scholars to depict a ghost (Gershon, 2021). So, ghosts are nothing new in storytelling. Even in the modern day, it could be said that ghosts maintain a permanence in the literary canon and more broadly, pop culture. A poll conducted in 2017 found that a third of the British public believed in "ghosts, spirits, and other types of paranormal activity" (BMG Research, 2017). Therefore, it may be stipulated that the concept of ghosts is easily accessible to young readers because it is so entrenched in our culture. Yet, if we were to rely on this point alone, it still would not explain the number of ghostly novels lining the shelves in the middle grade section of any high-street bookshop.

If we look more broadly at the literary history of children's stories being used as cautionary tales, ghost stories find their place among others such as Grimm's fairy tales, thanks in no small part to their ability to frighten, and thus, lodge themselves into the minds of young readers. In European folk and fairy tales, both the Brothers Grimm and Charles Perrault designed their parables to have "a moral twist" (Roller, 2021). I speak for myself, but I think others might agree that tales from the Brothers Grimm, or childhood fairy tales more broadly, have an uncanny ability to stick in our minds even as we grow up. On a personal note, Hansel and Gretel is still able to give me the heebie-jeebies all these years later and has perhaps made me fearful of forests to an unnatural degree, as well as strange women who inhabit houses made of gingerbread. But this raises an important point, it was the intention behind the stories documented by Jacob and Wilhelm Grimm and forged by Charles Perrault that these stories were to be learned from. They were designed to serve as "warnings for children to behave themselves as anything else – discipline instilled through fear" (Roller, 2021). So, the trend of scary stories being aimed at children is not a new invention.

However, if we look at some modern ghost novels more closely, I think we can agree that this is no longer the sole purpose of the humble ghost story. The stories emerging in this genre now have shifted their focus and while they still have the intention of being scary or spooky to some degree (they are 'scary stories' after all), their purpose goes far beyond scaring children into good behaviour by capitalising on their fear. Modern ghost stories can be used as a source of comfort and compassion to young readers who may feel like ghosts in their own lives. Often unseen, unheard, and almost always overlooked. As Stephen King, the horror master himself puts it, "Monsters are real, ghosts are real too. They live inside us" (King, 1977). It is my opinion that in some recent Middle Grade novels, a trend is emerging which utilises the genre to a far greater degree. To illustrate this point, I'll look in depth at two recently published Middle Grade novels that gained good commercial success, and which centre around ghosts and hauntings. This is by no means an exhaustive examination of the entire subgenre, but by tackling two novels in detail, I think it shall demonstrate my point and perhaps show some evidence of the trend emerging in this corner of the children's market.

So, the overarching trope present in these Middle Grade novels focused on ghosts, is how a protagonist befriends a ghostly figure who was wronged during their lifetime, or at least discovers a great deal of empathy with them as the protagonist sees themselves reflected in this restless spirit. Some of the earliest narratives surrounding ghosts focus on souls who belong "to a realm of the dead" returning to the world of the living due to "improper funeral rites or unfinished business" (Gershon, 2021). Ghost stories following this theme have been found in "ancient China, Egypt, India, Greece, Ireland, Scotland and Rome" (Gershon, 2021).

"Unfinished business" is certainly a reason for the return of the ghost in the first novel I shall look at which is Lucy Strange's *The Ghost of Gosswater*, published in 2020. As concisely demonstrated by the title, the novel features the titular ghost which helps the young protagonist on her journey of self-discovery. I was fortunate enough to have some of my questions about this novel put to Strange herself by agent and author, Rachel Hamilton. When I asked why Strange was so drawn to ghostly tales, she stated that their beauty lies within their "scope for allegory" (Strange, 13:35) and that a ghost story "can be all sorts of things" (Strange, 14:21). This is indicative of the nature of the genre and, to my mind, demonstrates why it is such a wonderful vehicle for metaphor in Middle Grade writing. Author Cavan Scott noted that scary stories help kids learn that "it's OK to be scared" and that "monsters are fun, but they should also help us understand scary situations, and how to cope with them." (Scott, 2019)

It is interesting to note that Strange stated that "none of [her] ghosts are scary" or "malevolent" (Strange, 6:10) and that even though the ghost of Gosswater may seem scary at first, her scariness actually originates from her "restlessness of wanting to put things right" and "wanting to help" (Strange, 6:10). Thus, the "unfinished business" seen in ancient stories, still has its influence in novels today. The 'restless' spirit appears to the protagonist Agatha ('Aggie'), when she is tricked out of her fortune and ancestral

home and left without any clear parental figure and is thus, “quite alone” (Strange, 9:14). Agatha understands the plight of the restless spirit, seeking to right the wrongs of the past as she is on the same quest. Characters who are themselves outsiders, may be more likely to understand the plight of a wronged spirit as they know what it feels like to be wronged and unable to put things right. It is this powerlessness that connects the protagonists so deeply with the ghosts they encounter as apart from the occasional appearance, (which is so often overlooked by the adults or guardians in the story) the ghosts find themselves unable to influence the world around them or struggle to even be heard.

Although in the case of *The Ghost of Gosswater*, the connection between the protagonist and the ghost has a particular biological element, as it transpires that the ghost is the spirit of Aggie’s mother, the desire for friendship and understanding is stronger than a maternal one. As Strange herself stated, Aggie is “quite alone” (Strange, 9:14) and “has no parent figure at all” (Strange, 9:23) but principally, what she really “need[s] is a friend” (Strange, p.183). Her connection with the spirit of her mother arises from a deep desire to “have a proper friend” (Strange, p.90). It is this loneliness and lack of parental guidance, or for that matter, any positive adult figures in Aggie’s life, which breeds her need for kinship and makes her more receptive to the restless spirit haunting Gosswater, as she sees her own struggles reflected in the lonely ghost. Aggie herself states that at her father’s funeral, all the adults talk “about her...as if [she] really [was] invisible” (Strange, p.61).

Another example of middle grade fiction in which the protagonist empathises with the ‘invisible’ character, (once again, a ghost), is Phil Hicke’s 2020 novel, *The Haunting of Aveline Jones*. As the title suggests, the story focuses on the haunting of the titular character, Aveline. The isolation of the main character also stands out as a key component of this novel, as much like Strange’s novel, the young female protagonist is sent away from her home to live with a relative stranger. In the case of Aveline Jones, she is sent to stay with her Aunt Lilian whom she “hadn’t spent much time with...before now” and so, is “daunt[ed]” by the prospect of staying with her as “on the few occasions she’s met her Aveline always felt a little intimidated” (Hicke, p.10). Once Aveline is sent to stay with her aunt, she is left feeling “very alone” (Hicke, p.20), much like Strange’s protagonist who is “quite alone” (Strange, 9:14). Hicke even links his protagonist directly to the location itself when it is stated that Malmouth “felt like somewhere the world had forgotten about” and that Aveline felt like she had “been forgotten about, too.” (Hicke, p.63)

An area of difference in Hicke’s novel, however, is the presence of a guardian figure – Aveline’s aunt. Rather than being a comfort to Aveline, at first Aunt Lilian makes Aveline feel more isolated. Aunt Lilian expresses her disbelief in ghosts, driving a wedge between her and her niece. After hearing a mysterious “series of thumps make their way across the ceiling” (Hicke, p.104), Aunt Lilian denies the presence of the restless spirit, and instead points to the fact that “the house is old and somewhat eccentric” (Hicke, p.105). This lack of belief in ghosts from Aveline’s temporary

parental figure, as well as Aunt Lilian's lack of belief in Aveline's supposed ghostly experiences, contributes to her feelings of isolation while also enhancing the verisimilitude of the narrative. It has become part of the literary canon surrounding ghost stories that any sensible adult would not believe in such a thing. As Robert McKee states, "We behave according to what we believe to be the truth" but we "cannot know absolutely" what indeed is the truth, only what "we *believe* to be true" (McKee, p.148). Conversely, John Yorke states that through "the course of [a] story" we are able "to debate" truth, and "test its limits" (Yorke, p.194).

Yet this disbelief may be doing more than simply adding an air of believability to the novel, as in the case of *Aveline Jones*, the disbelief of Aunt Lilian leads Aveline to explore the disappearance of the young girl Primrose on her own, forging a connection to the ghost through her diary entries. When Aveline discovers her diary, she feels as though "a thin gossamer strand" reaches out through the past "to pull the two of them together" (Hickes, p.67). It should also be noted that the ghostly figure of Primrose is a similar age to Aveline and therefore, one of the reasons that Aveline finds a point of connection between them. This may be indicative of the wider role that ghosts play in Middle Grade literature as they highlight the deep desire of characters to find friends of their own age. This taps into one of the common themes in Middle Grade literature as the *Writers' & Artists' Guide To Writing for Children & YA* states, "Children think that their experience of life or family is the 'norm.'" However, they also imagine that "they are the only ones feeling the way they do about things that happen to them or around them" (Strachan, 2020). Therefore, it is understandable that protagonists – and by proxy readers of this age – seek friendships to make sense of the world around them and feel less alone. As Cavan Scott so aptly states, "Scary books give us a chance to examine what we're afraid of, to talk about it, and to shine a light on negative emotions rather than just bury them deep inside." (Scott, 2019) What better way to do that than through a frightening tale?

The humble ghost story has a long and rich history which is still being forged to this day. It is no secret that as our culture has changed, so too have our stories. Things that were once deemed frightening and used as a tool for scaring children into 'good behaviour' are now being used as a means through which we can provide comfort and compassion to children. With a growing understanding of the needs and psychology of children, we as authors can adapt even the oldest of stories to serve a new purpose and perhaps do so without causing quite so many nightmares.

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Author Biography

Nell Griffin is a recent graduate of the MA in Writing for Young People at Bath Spa University. In 2020, she graduated from Bath Spa with a BA (Hons) in Creative Writing. She is currently working on her debut Young Adult novel. Nell has a keen interest in horror as well as comedy and is inspired by the work of M R James. When she's not writing, Nell can be found in the depths of West Wales in the rugged landscape which informs much of her writing. The literary representation of ghosts and their myriad of meanings deeply interests her.