

Educational Association

Through A Glass Darkly

A study morning of ghost fiction and (perhaps) a little ghost fact

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William Elder Building, Castlegate

5th October 2018, 10 am to 1 pm



The idea of the ghost has long been controversial. George Bernard Shaw famously remarked, 'The existence of a liar is more probable than the existence of a ghost', implying that ghostly tales were all fiction. On the other hand, Joseph Addison regarded a person terrified in his imagination by ghosts and spectres as much more reasonable, 'than one who thinks the Appearance of Spirits fabulous and groundless'.

There is no doubt that all cultures abound with accounts of ghosts and hauntings. In Touraine there is an allegedly true story of a large, beautiful house which had stood empty for many years. No one would buy or rent it because it was believed to be haunted by a young female suicide. One day a stranger, ignorant of these stories, bought it, but the ghost raised such an uproar that he was unable to sleep. Then a brave soul came forth betting that

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as an unbeliever he could spend the night in the house unharmed. The next morning, he was found to have hanged himself.

Our ghostly study day morning will not be as macabre as this but it will be fairly comprehensive, ranging from Pliny's letter to Licinius Sura, crediting a ghost-report, to the views of people such as Samuel Johnson, Philip Marchand and G.K. Chesterton. Johnson's view was that rational argument is against the existence of ghosts but instinct is for it. Marchand opined that we should preserve a tiny area of agnosticism and hope that the question remains academic.

In English literature there is considerable argument about where ghost fiction began. One candidate is Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*, the first Gothic novel, and therefore, in M. R. James' view, a "progenitor to the modern ghost story". However, ghosts were already highly familiar. We find them in many Elizabethan and Jacobean plays, not least Kyd's *The Spanish Tragedy* and Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, *Hamlet* and *Macbeth*, all of which will be briefly mentioned

Another area where the ghost often features in is psychologically based mystery writing. One of the texts we shall here consider is *The Turn of the Screw*, and another the first detective story in English, *The Hand and the Word* by the Irish writer Gerald Griffin (1803-1840).

It would be a disservice to study the subject without reference to M.R. James and particularly to his story *Whistle and I'll Come to You*. Also featured will be two ghost stories by Ruth Rendell and some of the supernatural short stories of Saki (H.H. Munro). In lighter vein we shall consider Wilde's humorous *The Canterville Ghost* and Gilbert and Sullivan's satirical *Ruddigore*, of which we shall view an excerpt.

Finally we shall discuss a few supernatural poems (circulated in advance) and examine one or two allegedly real ghostly visitations, including the haunting at Borley Rectory and the Cock Lane Ghost. The latter, described as a 'true case of murder, sex and haunting in Dr. Johnson's London', should bring matters to a lively close.

The cost of the lecture is £9 including refreshments. All are welcome and no previous knowledge is assumed.

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