Touch of the Troubled Dead: Spectral Trauma in 19th Century Ghost Stories

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Certification of Approval

I certify that I have read Touch of the Troubled Dead: Spectral Trauma in 19th Century Ghost Stories by Anthony Abuan, and that in my opinion this work meets the criteria for approving a thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree Master of Arts in English Literature at San Francisco State University.

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Abstract

In nineteenth century ghost stories, the hand is a pronounced feature of the ghost which is otherwise difficult to pin down as a literary figure. This study contends that the tactile exchanges between the ghost’s hands and living bodies are a recurrent trope and heuristic. These tools allow us to formulate a discourse of ghosts and to better understand the agency inscribed within them. I term this the “ghost-hand function” and argue that it is expressed in two distinct ways: combat and confirmation. The ghost-hand combat function dramatizes the struggle between life and death. These tactile exchanges demonstrate how agency is conferred upon the ghost through its hands. The focalization of hands in these stories helps readers acknowledge and confront their anxieties about mortality. I analyze this through the ghost stories of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Lafcadio Hearn, and Fitz-James O’Brien. The ghost-hand confirmation function goes beyond this adversarial binary between the living and dead to explore a wide array of emotions felt by the ghost and ghost-seer. This is a paradox that asks ghost-seers and readers to treat the dead as though they were living. Ghosts use their hands to negotiate the spaces they haunt, and their hauntings are motivated by affect instead of antagonism. This results in ghosts that are as human as the ghost-seers they encounter. I analyze this through the ghost stories of O’Brien, Wilkie Collins, and Margaret Oliphant. The conclusions offered by this analysis are unsettling as the literary figure of the ghost is often far more identical to ourselves than we might think. The ghost-hand function helps to reveal a subversive discourse that undergirds the ghost story. This discourse illuminates how the ghost as a literary figure progresses over the second half of the nineteenth century and the ways in which that configuration is informed by issues of mortality, memory, mourning, and grief that haunt both the living and dead.
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Introduction

In Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843), the ghost of Jacob Marley appears to Scrooge wreathed in chains, and cautions Scrooge that he too is heading towards a chain-bound afterlife:

> the spectre raised a cry, and shook its chain and wrung its shadowy hands . . . “I wear the chain I forged in life . . . I made it link by link, and yard by yard; I girded it on of my own free will, and of my own free will I wore it. Is its pattern strange to you? . . . Or would you know,” pursued the Ghost, “the weight and length of the strong coil you bear yourself? It was full as heavy and as long as this, seven Christmas Eves ago. You have laboured on it, since. It is a ponderous chain!” (54)

This excerpt offers a significant image and metaphor to understanding the figure of the ghost, and scores of later adaptations remain faithful to the image of Marley’s Ghost encumbered by chains that he “forged in life,” and numerous achieve high marks of textual fidelity by adding Marley’s piteous cries and rattling of his chains (54). Marley’s chains symbolize his attachments to wealth and relationship to the economic systems which he prospered from in life (yet doom him in death).¹ This curious spectral metaphor is shackled to the hands of the ghost, and it suggests a liminal space between the material reality of encumbrance and the immaterial reality of ghosts. *Forged*, within the Dickensian sense, operates within the registers of both a material smithing sense and a sense of authenticity denoted through signature; it arouses little surprise that both associations are situated within the hand. However clunky Marley’s line, “I girded it on of my own free will” may sound, the prevailing notion is that Marley’s acts in life serve as both

¹ Simon Hay argues that “death is a beginning, rather than an end” in this ghost story (65). With blunt force in the opening of *ACC*, Dickens delivers, reaffirms, and manipulates the notion that “Marley was dead: to begin with” (39). Jennifer Bann argues that “Marley’s ghost [is] in a long tradition of the limited dead” and his “chains represent not merely the consequences of his actions but the negation of action itself” which is evidenced “in presenting ghosts as essentially restricted figures—catalysts to another’s action rather than the agents of their own” (663).
the literal smithing structure and material through which the chain is forged. Marley’s chain is adorned with several manual articles common to his business: “cash-boxes, keys, padlocks, ledgers, deeds, and heavy purses wrought in steel” (51). Marley forces Scrooge to reckon with and consider the chain he, too, is doomed to bear. While Marley does confirm the existence of a life beyond death to Scrooge, what Marley is really there to confirm for Scrooge is situated within this manually forged chain he alludes to. To Scrooge and the reader, the chain can be perceived visually upon Marley. Yet Scrooge’s ghostly chain is invisible to both Scrooge and the reader. In his description of the chain, Marley plays upon the word “ponderous” which operates in both the registers of contemplative and literal weight. Filled with the fright of the “weight and length of the strong coil” which he his colleague bears, Scrooge looks “in the expectation of finding himself surrounded by some fifty or sixty fathoms of iron cable: but he could see nothing” (54). This passage evokes a contradistinction between the observable reality of the material chain about Marley and the one Scrooge has “laboured on” that is visually inaccessible – but frightful, nonetheless. In this regard, Scrooge’s blindness is a theme drawn out and developed over the subsequent staves until he receives the staggering clarity of vision through his encounter with the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. Scrooge vacillates between doubt and belief in the supernatural phenomenon he encounters as a ghost-seer. These tensions and liminal spaces between the material and immaterial, the visible and invisible, the there and not there, are all typical for ghost-seers within the ghost story.

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2 These objects which Marley is also encumbered by are nearly all manual instruments of business. This lends itself to a Marxist critique which Andrew Smith argues for. He writes that “the encounter with Marley makes visible what capitalism tries to render invisible, namely the labour which is inherent to, and so sublimated within, the process of commodity production” (36).
This study of the English ghost story tradition from the mid to late nineteenth century focuses on the hands of the ghost and its relationship with living hands, bodies, and minds. The ghost story and the literary figure of the ghost developed and expanded during the nineteenth century which this thesis explores through the ghost story authors’ usage of ghost-hands as a recurrent trope. Through the second half of nineteenth century, the use of spectral metaphors spread beyond the boundaries of the ghost story genre to permeate others. My two introductory Dickensian examples of the Ghost of Marley and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come show how the hands of the ghost and their exchanges with Scrooge are the site of both the trauma and transformation that are at the core of the ghost story tradition. Scrooge’s interactions with both sets of ghost-hands are emblematic of what I call the “ghost-hand function” that I contend is a heuristic to the broader ghost story genre. I argue that this ghost-hand function is expressed in two main ways: combat and confirmation. This introduction uses these Dickensian ghosts as a model to demonstrate how both functions are expressed in *ACC* before moving to discuss them across the mid to late nineteenth century. The ghost-hand combat function is first discussed in terms of the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come, and this combat function is the focus of chapter one of this study. The ghost-hand confirmation function is later discussed in terms of Stave One’s the Ghost of Marley sequences, and this confirmation function is the focus of chapter two of this study. This introduction concludes with a discussion of the ghost’s hands across several examples of the English ghost story to demonstrate how this trope of the ghost’s hand permeates popular nineteenth century literature. This study focuses on the tactility and agency of the ghost’s hands, and this affords cohesive reading of the disparate ghosts that haunt the English ghost story tradition as not quite the strange bedfellows one might think them to be.
The Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come’s “Point”

The combat ghost-hand function dramatizes mortality and the struggle between life and death. Death is the ultimate antagonist and metaphorically the old enemy of the living, and the hands of the ghost symbolically serve as extensions of his own hand. In this light, ghosts are malignant ministering spirits on death’s behalf that assault the living and are prepared to claim mortal lives. The tactile exchanges here are ones of violent combat and destructive contest; these violent gestures performed by ghosts range from grappling, wrestling, molesting, choking, and to generally assaulting the living.

Stave Four offers the most pronounced example of the exchanges between living and dead hands within this Dickensian ghost story. Hands and fingers appear throughout the text, and the most infamous is the dreaded pointing finger of the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come. The last of the three ghosts operates much differently than the others as it refuses to hold any dialogue with Scrooge. All directive and communicative powers are conferred upon its ghostly hand; each beckoning direction and command of the pointing finger are self-evident in terms of the ghost’s motivation and lesson. Scrooge notes the ghost’s figure “shrouded in a deep black garment” that “left nothing of it visible save one outstretched hand” (102). The ghost’s hand assumes authorial powers in its ability to direct both Scrooge and the reader. Despite the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come’s pointed efforts, it is only to Scrooge’s surprise that the corpse at the center of this stave is himself. Like Marley forcing Scrooge to listen to the spirits at his window in the first Stave, the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come forces Scrooge to look at a thinly covered

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3 This is a significant turning point in popular representations of the ghost; the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come is easily understood as a figure of Death, and Dickens’s depiction of this black shroud affirms this. Susan Owens notes that the “unusual element is the colour of its garment” being black “rather than the traditional white which adds to its mysterious and funeral air” (187).
corpse and listen to how it “announced itself in awful language” (109). The ghost offers the
ghost-seer, Scrooge, one of the most literal confrontations with mortality detailed within the
ghost story tradition. The ghost-hand combat function is further detailed as the ghost with
“steady hand…pointed to the head” beckons Scrooge to look and bear witness to his own corpse
(109). The hand is reinforced as a site of legibility for Scrooge. What is being made legible
through this *awful language* is Scrooge’s own mortality. The corpse before Scrooge is his own
and the narrator affirms this through Scrooge’s manually-oriented realization that “the motion of
a finger upon [his] part, would have disclosed the [covered] face” (109). To this end, the Ghost
of Christmas Yet To Come foists this confrontation with mortality upon Scrooge in a fashion that
is heavily coded as a manual and digital act (in the most literal sense).

The ghost’s hand also guides Scrooge towards an epiphany in the cemetery and among
the gravestones. We read that the ghost “stood among the graves and pointed down to One” and
continually commands Scrooge to approach and read the gravestone; Scrooge’s reading is even
syntactically sutured to the direction of the ghost’s finger as the passage relates that he “crept
towards it, trembling as he went; and following the finger, read upon the stone of the neglective
grave his own name” (115). After this moment of recognition, the ghost melodramatically
mimics and reinforces Scrooge’s thoughts as the ghost’s “finger pointed from the grave to him,
and back again” (115). The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come’s point drives home the same
lesson the corpse beneath the veil from the prior scene, and it is worth noting that this grave
which Scrooge is forced to confront is reminiscent of a cenotaph, or an empty tomb, in a sort of
paradox. Scrooge is at once in the grave and not; he is dead and alive. This type of temporal
collapse is commonplace for the ghost story, and Dickens’s play upon it is noteworthy. The
notion of the cenotaph as an empty memorial to commemorate dead buried elsewhere checks out
in this Dickensian example; the elsewhere is temporal not spatial as the Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come takes Scrooge into the future. The entire sequence is filled with paradoxes, but the living Scrooge encountering the dead Scrooge and his grave force him to reckon with mortality in a visceral way that he cannot explain or account for. Like a ghost himself, Scrooge is displaced from his own time. Amidst Scrooge’s desperate promises, Dickens seems to collapse the ghost and ghost-seer, blurring the boundaries between them noted in descriptions of the hand. The ghost-hand combat function comes into full focus as Scrooge makes his well-known promise to “honour Christmas in [his] heart, and try to keep it all the year” (117). As Scrooge makes this plea, the ghost-hand combat function is fully expressed; we read that “in his agony, [Scrooge] caught the spectral hand. It sought to free itself, but he was strong in his entreaty, and detained it. The Spirit, stronger yet, repulsed him” (117). This sequence moves from Scrooge upon his knees in supplication before the ghost to Scrooge rising and grappling with it. He appears to be imbued with strength and might from his change of heart, and this allows him to capture and hold the Ghost’s hand. Scrooge and the Ghost find themselves in a grappling contest which immensely diverges from how Scrooge interacts with the other ghosts and their hands.

Dickens inscribes a tactility to this contest in both Scrooge’s strong entreaty and the Ghost’s stronger yet repulsion of him. This is an inversion of how the ghost-hand combat function is normally expressed as it is most often the living that seek to repulse the touch of the dead and not vice versa. This ghost-hand combat function’s result is that it reverts this haunting all the way back to Scrooge’s bedroom as we read that “holding up his hands in one last prayer to have his fate reversed, he saw an alteration in the Phantom’s hood and dress. It shrunk, collapsed, and dwindled down into a bedpost” (117). The ghost’s fantastically disappears which thwarts any real resolution to this odd contest of living and dead hands. The once questionable
immateriality of the ghost is transubstantiated into the commonplace material artifacts of Scrooge’s bedroom. It is rare in ghost stories for both the living character and ghost to survive and make it to the narrative’s end. Exceedingly and excessively, this ghost-hand combat function results in the destruction of mortal life; it provokes all of the danger and peril of Death as antagonist. This ghost-hand combat function makes legible the mechanisms of horror which the ghost story employs to produce its chilling and sensationalist effects. Dickens utilizes the ghost-hand combat function to marvelous ends in The Ghost of Christmas Yet To Come’s manually-oriented haunting of Stave Four. Elsewhere in the nineteenth century ghost story tradition, ghosts are often more than grim teachers and their stories are didactic in different ways than in ACC. Unlike this example, these ghosts and their tactile exchanges with living bodies cause the living to try as best they can to repulse their ghostly touch. Chapter One explores a few of these examples and argues how the ghost-hand combat function is expressed within them. The ghosts and ghost stories at hand in this chapter are Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s “The Cold Embrace” (1869), Lafcadio Hearn’s “A Passional Karma” and “Ingwa-Banashi” from In Ghostly Japan (1899), and the first half of Fitz-James O’Brien’s “What Was It?” (1859). This final ghost story offers a neat division between a ghostly attack and its aftermath which I use to bridge the divide between both chapters from the combat to confirmation function.

The Ghost of Marley and the “Invisible World”

While the hands of ghosts typically assault the living, they are not limited to just violent acts; ghostly hands have the power to comfort, protect, reveal, and warn. The most significant action these hands are able to perform is establishing and confirming contact between the realms of living and dead. This ghost-hand confirmation function is expressed within the tactile exchanges between dead hands and living bodies in ghost stories. It extends beyond merely
confirming a possibility of an afterlife as it paradoxically asks the living to understand the dead as though they are still living (and possess just as much agency and humanity). Marley’s haunting opens up the possibility of an existence after death to Scrooge; this unsettling conceit is evidenced in Scrooge’s anxious expectation of the ghostly appointments that have been heralded by this visit. Marley foretells of the three ghosts to call upon Scrooge and states that “without their visits…you cannot hope to shun the path I tread” (56-7). The “ghost of warning” trope is popular within the ghost story genre. While Marley’s haunting falls in line with this, the ethical and moral dimension motivating his haunting push him beyond this trope.

Marley’s ghost forces Scrooge into a process of identification that crosses the boundary between living and dead; nearly all of Marley’s remarks are pointed towards Scrooge seeing that death is a last call for identity formation and that Scrooge will be doomed as Marley is doomed if he continues without change. Marley states that he is not merely doomed to wear his chain, but he must sit “invisible beside [Scrooge] many and many a day” to observe his commonplace scornful deeds that Marley cites as being “no light part of my penance” (56). As the opening of this stave relates, Scrooge “was a tight-fisted hand…a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner!” (40). Scrooge’s iniquities that forge his own chain are described as predominately manual and tactile acts.

This ghost-hand function is clearly informed and influenced by Spiritualism and its concerns with mediumship and establishing contact with the dead. If the nineteenth century

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4 The temporal collapse in the ghosts’ visits underline the powers of the afterlife. Marley tells Scrooge to “expect the first to-morrow, when the bell tolls one” and “expect the second on the next night at the same hour,” and “the third upon the next night vibrate” (57). However, when Scrooge wakes after the final visitation, it is still Christmas day, and he exclaims: “The Spirits have done it all in one night. They can do anything they like” (119). The ghosts and Scrooge galivant across time and space, and Scrooge’s observation of their ability to do anything they like includes transgressing and violating the appointed times and temporal lines Marley heralds for them.
zeitgeist of Spiritualism involves both the knowable existence of an afterlife and the notion that the living can go to great lengths to attempt to make contact with those that populate it, then this ghost-hand function is the ghost story authors’ realized answer to the questions Spiritualism proposes answers to. If the dead can be contacted in any verifiable and confirmable sense, what then? What follows the confirmation? Admittedly, this is ambitious to attempt dealing with here – yet I maintain that the ghost story is an answer to the nineteenth century’s cultural preoccupation with Spiritualism (albeit somewhat cynically.) After all, the ghost story takes for granted what had thrown Spiritualists into crisis and eventually led its decline: evidence. Embedded within whatever frame narratives, beset by whatever truth-statements, entrenched within whatever unreliable narrator’s focalized viewpoint, the ghost story offers evidence of its hauntings that is compelling to both the ghost-seer and reader (however they might fall upon the spectrum of skepticism.) This is borne out by ghost story authors as an epistemological game.

Returning to Dickens, the ghost of Marley uses his hand to command Scrooge to stop and listen to the multitude of lamenting spirits just outside which further confirms the existence of this “Invisible World” to Scrooge (59). As Marley’s haunting concludes, the ghost is described as holding “up its chain at arm’s length, as if that were the cause of all its unavailing grief” (56). After delivering his ominous warning, Marley performs a curious spectral exit; we read that he “beckoned Scrooge to approach, which he did” to the open window before “Marley’s Ghost held up its hand, warning him to come no nearer” (57). The passage relates that Scrooge follows the command: “not so much in obedience, as in surprise and fear: for on the raising of the hand, he became sensible of confused noises in the air; incoherent sounds of lamentation and regret; wailings inexpressibly sorrowful and self-accusatory” (57). Scrooge is propelled into an uneasy realm of knowledge that is pivotal to his ultimate transformation for “the better.” The knowledge
of the consequences he must face in the afterlife becomes a clear and present danger in Stave Four where the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come eerily drives Scrooge to the crisis of conscience at the core of his change of heart. Andrew Smith argues that Scrooge’s conversion undermines and marginalizes a discussion of poverty “because the emphasis [is] on how Scrooge needs to effect a compassionate change by becoming a better capitalist, as it is only through putting his money into circulation that, paradoxically, the inequalities generated by capitalism are alleviated” (38). Dickens, of course, would have believed ACC offered a far greater impact on the socio-economic problems of his day, as can be noted in his reflection that his readers would “feel that a Sledge hammer has come down with twenty times the force – twenty thousand times the force – I could exert following out my first idea” of writing a polemical exposé of labor and inequity (Dickens qtd in Owens 188).

Despite Scrooge attempting to make light of this initial ghost encounter and levying the rational quip that Marley is likely “more gravy than grave,” an uneasiness persists for Scrooge after Marley exits. We read that as he closes the window he “tried to say ‘Humbug!’ but stopped at the first syllable” (59). He attempts to find reassurance in disbelief, yet this passage suggests that this ghost encounter has deeply troubled Scrooge, and it foreshadows the transformative nature of the ghost-filled narrative to follow. Ultimately, Scrooge is positively transformed by his experiences with the ghosts, and he learns to empathize with his fellow man as well as to better the working conditions of his employees. Peter Capuano discusses how the nineteenth

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5 Shane McCorristine notes that Scrooge’s appeals to reason interrogate “the dissonance experienced by the ghost-seer at the uncertainty of knowing whether the senses are to be trusted in their interpretation of reality” (61). While Scrooge’s infamous retort is humorous, it is a means of deflecting the terror of the supernatural encounter he finds himself within; Smith argues that this is in line with Dickens’s use of “mocking the faux gravity of the ghost story” in light of his use of ghosts in The Pickwick Papers where “the jocular, unconventional mode of the narrative enables Dickens to represent some form of spirit intervention” (34).
century changed the metaphor of the hand in significant ways. For a contemporary account of hands, Capuano gestures to Henry Morely’s article “Ground in the Mill” (1854) in Dickens’s *Household Words* (1850-59) about the poor working conditions laborers endured in manufacturing. Morely laments and pleads for the men, women, and children who lost through accident 106 lives, 142 arms and/or hands, and 1,287 fingers (2). Morely describes the fingers crushed by the maw of industrialization in relation to the appropriate financial restitution due which recalls Thomas Carlyle’s criticism that “our old modes of exertion are all discredited, and thrown aside” as well as Carlyle’s own haunting image of “the shuttle drops from the fingers of the weaver, and falls into iron fingers that ply it faster” (34).

The ghost-seer is often traumatized and transformed by their ghost encounter in a multitude of ways beyond the violent and combative, and this ghost-hand confirmation function looks at the ways in which the knowledge that ghosts offer the living is often situated in tactile interactions of the hand. This is routinely expressed as the transformation and conversion of the skeptic to “true-believer” of ghosts. To this end, the Doubting Thomas narrative is useful to consult as a biblical archetype. While ghosts have a complicated and nuanced relationship with Christianity that nineteenth century ghost story writers convolute rather than clarify, there is a surprising amount of precedence for the existence of ghosts and their encounters with ghost-seers

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6 Peter Capuano argues that “anatomical models of Godly design in the natural world shifted from the human eye in the eighteenth century to the hand in the nineteenth century” as he cites that the “notion of anthropomorphic exceptionalism was then jarred, of course, by the almost simultaneous ‘discovery’ of anthropoid apes and Darwinian evolutionary theory” (1). Capuano further argues that “the hand is the basis for more metaphors, familiar phrases, and idiomatic expressions than all of the other parts of the body combined” and that this leads to “this lopsided bodily emphasis [which] causes the words we use to describe our hands—take, grasp, handle, make, maneuver—to become abstract concepts, and we tend to forget their concrete connection to our embodied handedness”; Capuano notes “philosophers of language refer to this as a dead metaphor where we kill literal meaning through overuse” (3).

7 Smith further affirms this sense in arguing how the ghost represents the working class as he observes that “characters become ghostly machines [that] play out Thomas Carlyle’s anxiety, expressed in 1829, that ‘men are grown mechanical in head and in heart as well as in hand’” (51).
in Judeo-Christian belief. The Doubting Thomas narrative may very well be considered a Biblical ghost story variant as the resurrected Christ is met with disbelief and skepticism by the apostle Thomas. Christ invites Thomas to “reach hither thy finger, and behold my hands; and reach hither thy hand, and thrust it into my side: and be not faithless, but believing” (KJV John 20:27). The inherent tactility of the invitation is one that I believe is integral to the preoccupations of the ghost story, and one that can be best understood through the ghost-hand confirmation function. Overcoming doubt is purposefully and significantly interlocked with tactile confirmation which lies at the heart of the transformations expressed in the ghost stories.

There are numerous questions of faith and doubt that mark this ghost-hand function, and many of them directly issue out of concerns with grief and mourning. These ghost encounters have a certain subdued malignity to them that differentiates them from the combat function and affords the ghost-seer a multitude of other more compelling emotional registers. Within this iteration of the ghost-hand function, the visceral potency of mourning, memory, and grief come to bear upon the figure of the ghost. The tactile exchanges of living and dead hands in this variant range from the humorous and curious to the sincere and tragic as seen in the gestures of beckoning, reaching, caressing, and grasping. I detail the ghost-hand confirmation function in chapter two, returning to O’Brien’s “What Was It?” (1859) to discuss the second half of the story before focusing on the ghosts of Wilkie Collins’s “Mrs. Zant and the Ghost” (1885), and Margaret Oliphant’s “The Open Door” (1882) and “Old Lady Mary” (1884).

The Ghost-hands Across the English Ghost Story

The figure of the ghost is incredibly indeterminate which has led to some discord in scholarship about the ghost and its role in literature. Thus, it is worth pausing over a list of the most common types of ghosts to convey how critics and authors describe “the ghost” in very
disparate and amorphous ways. In alphabetical order, the ghost can also be: an apparition, an
eidolon, a ghoul, a phantasm, a phantom, a poltergeist, a revenant, a shade, a shadow, a soul, a
specter, a spirit, a visitant, a wight, and a wraith. The inclusion of the ghost itself—in any of
these manifestations—is routinely the tie that binds the subgeneric silos of the ghost story
together as a generic category. This abundant ghost story tradition of the mid to late 19th century
is a composite of numerous often confused and contradictory sub-genres. The ghost-hand
function that I identify in this thesis is a tool that can help us define more precisely the genre of
the ghost story and its meanings: the ghost story takes the hands of the ghost as a recurrent
generic trope and site of identification. Identification, in this sense, refers to the process of ghost-
seers understanding how the ghost resembles themselves and vice versa in these encounters. To
this end the living identify with the dead through the figure of the ghost, and the exchanges
between the hands of the living and dead are the textual site at which this is most apparent.

This thesis focuses on how ghost story authors use the ghost-hand combat and
confirmation function to achieve the changes and transformations of ghost-seers undergo as they
encounter ghosts. These combat and confirmation functions are observable through the tactile
presence, gesture, and action of the hand which are inscribed there to chart how these encounters
produce changes in ghost-seers. Two of the English ghost story’s generic signatures are the
presence of the ghost itself and appeals to objective truth. Ghost story narratives begin by
offering a commonplace “truth-statement” and appeals to reason that underscore the
transformative nature of the narrative to follow. These truth-statements and logical appeals
function as a structural and rational barometer for the ghost-reader. All ghost-seer testimonies
(which form the bulk of the genre) are near-death experiences that traumatize mortal minds and
bodies. These encounters disorient ghost-seer protagonists; the trauma which these hands inflict
are at the crux of how change is produced in these texts, and the exchanges between dead hands and living bodies trace the changes ghost-seers undergo. As Dickensian ghosts take Scrooge across spatial and temporal boundaries, this study takes a similar path to show how the ghost-hand function is a recurrent trope across the genre through the mid to late nineteenth century and how the tactile exchanges of living and dead hands offer a useful tool to understand ghost stories.

Ghost-hands and how they traumatize and transform mortal bodies and minds can bridge idiosyncratic authorial divides within this disparate genre from the mid to late 19th century. By placing a few memorable and spectral moments from *Wuthering Heights, The Turn of the Screw, Middlemarch,* and *The Woman in White* within conversation with one another, an eerie pattern emerges where the hands of the ghost appear to be reaching out across time and space. Emily Brontë offers *Wuthering Heights* (1847) as a gothic landscape littered with ghosts and hauntings. Brontë relates that Lockwood, awakened by sounds at the window, reaches out “to seize the importunate branch: instead of which, my fingers closed on the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand!” (21). He recounts this violent grappling with the ghost-hand of young Catherine as “terror made me cruel” as he “pulled its wrist on the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down…still it wailed ‘Let me in!’” (21). This violent and tactile grappling between living and dead hands is a decidedly spooky opening to Lockwood’s understanding of how the Heights are haunted by the past.8 In *The Turn of the Screw* (1898), the hand of the ghost recurs as a site of transformation for the ghost-seer. As the Governess relates her first encounter with the ghost of Peter Quint: “he never took his eyes from me” as she recalls that she “can see at this moment the

8 *Wuthering Heights* is an example of how “the dead return because we want them back” as Catherine Belsey argues and that “perhaps the intensity of Heathcliff’s longing summons Catherine” (184-85). After all, Lockwood’s ghost encounter is problematized as potentially a dream – yet Heathcliff’s response to it and cries out into the night’s air are ones that affirm the reality of haunting at the Heights.
way his hand, as he went, passed from one of the crenelations to the next” (20). The frightful
gesture of the ghost-hand appears and functions as its corporeal antecedent; this contest colors all
of Bly’s hauntings as antagonistic for the Governess.

This trend of ghost-hands extends out beyond its original generic category as seen in the
works of Collins and Eliot. Wilkie Collins leans into a ghost story aesthetic in the opening
sequence of *The Woman in White* (1859) as his description of Walter Hartright recounts his
nocturnal journey “strolling along the lonely high-road...when, in one moment, every drop of
blood in my body was brought to a stop by the touch of a hand laid lightly and suddenly on my
shoulder from behind me” (23). While this turns out to be Anne Catherick and not a real ghost,
Collins employs spectral sensationalist thrills throughout his novel. George Eliot’s *Middlemarch*
(1871) offers a powerful example of ghost-hands in Edward Casaubon’s realization of mortality;
the narrative relates: “when the commonplace ‘We must all die’ transforms itself suddenly into
the acute consciousness ‘I must die—and soon,’ then death grapples us, and his fingers are cruel”
(399). The language underscores Casaubon’s deft realization that mortality is not merely an
abstract academic concept. Casaubon does not come to realize mortality in general; he *feels his*
mortality. Eliot binds such a realization with masterful tactility to the cruel fingers of death as it
grapples us. The fears of touching and being touched by the hands of ghosts, as this thesis seeks
to demonstrate, are steeped in a tradition of understanding them as the hands of death itself.
Chapter 1: The Ghost-hand Combat Function

Lafcadio Hearn’s often-anthologized “Nightmare-Touch” is a curious blend of ghost story and confessional sketch; Hearn “venture[s] to state boldly that the common fear of ghosts is the fear of being touched by ghosts” which for Hearn is to say “that the imagined Supernatural is dreaded mainly because of its imagined power to touch. Only to touch, remember! — not to wound or to kill” (225). Hearn grapples with his own fears of ghosts and their imagined potential to touch the living here which raises the concerns of the hands of ghosts and what they are imagined doing in literature. Hearn offers a metafictional discourse that arises through his insistence on the “imagined Supernatural” and the “imagined power” these hands wield that suggests the root of fear for the ghost-seer (and reader) is ultimately psychological. Hearn places a sort of cap, or upper limit, on the ghost’s ability to touch not resulting in harm, and this may be just an expression of his own wishful thinking. The liminal space between truth and fiction recalls what Shane McCorristine argues in that “ghost-seeing ‘fact’ and ghost-seeing ‘fiction’ need not exist in conflict with each other” and that their discourses are more interrelated than either skeptics or supporters would like to believe (227). Hearn’s argument here is reassuring, and it distances the potential for violence and harm wrought by supernatural hands, yet the ghosts that haunt the English ghost story tradition contradict this sentiment as they most decidedly do wound and do kill. Through a variety of manual acts, these ghosts grapple, wrestle, molest, choke, and generally assail the living within these stories. As these are often violent

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9 Ann Gagné’s work take this a step further from the hand to touch as the site of tactile exchange; she argues that touch “is always reciprocal and chiasmic” in that “to every touch there is a toucher and a touched” (118). She explains that “touch is the language of how bodies interact with their environment and with others, where the residue of those tactile moments informs and is informed by sociocultural conceptualizations of proximity and closeness” (1). The inherent difficulty presented by tactility, according to Gagné, is because of “the reciprocal nature of tactility” where “subjectivity and objectivity are at times blurred” (15).
encounters, there are slim chances that both the ghost-seer and the ghost survive through the narrative’s conclusion. A staggering majority of ghost stories dispute Hearn’s reassuring caveat through ghostly violence inflicted upon the living (Hearn’s own ghosts included.) Yet Hearn is keen to ascribe the bulk of ghost-fear to the potential for tactile exchange between the dead and living, and the larger genre does bear this out in offering numerous highly sensational examples of ghosts touching the living or being touched by the living.

The ghost-hand combat function denotes the traumatic and transformative changes that underpin the ghost story genre through the tactile exchanges of dead hands and living bodies. These usages of ghost-hands function as a way of dramatizing mortality as an antagonistic struggle between life and death where the ghost-seer protagonist represents the living; the ghost, in turn, represents the dead. This dramatization is textually expressed within the hands of the ghost and their interactions with living bodies. The ghost-hand combat function illuminates how Death is allegorized as a force which inevitably always conquers the living. Furthermore, this function shows how the ghost story is deeply implicated in that allegory. In this light, ghosts are allegorically linked to death and are representational extensions of it. Informed by mortality and death, the tactile exchanges of the ghost-hand combat function are literal confrontations between victors and victims. Death, in an inevitable and gothic-inspired twist, always has the upper-hand.

As the ghost progresses through the second half of the nineteenth century, there is an important reconfiguration at play that begins with the Dickensian ghosts. The ghost’s malignancy

\[\text{References}\]
10 Grant Allen’s “Our Scientific Observations of a Ghost” (1878) being a rare (and delightful) exception to this.
11 Katherine Rowe has noted the ways in which hands “figure the associative relations between persons and communities: the marital, martial and economic bonds symbolized by a handshake, a signature, a gift, the wearing of a ring or the wielding of a sword” and how “it is through the associative relations expressed in manual gesture that changing definitions of powerful action and powerful actors are imagined, contested and revised” (1).
12 As the nineteenth century progressed, temporal collapse became one of the ghost story genre’s major preoccupations. The ghost as literary figure is displaced in time. Simon Hay argues that the general aim of ghost stories is to foreclose “any such attempted bracketing-off of the past, of memory, of tradition” and that “the ghost is
towards the living aligns it more with older revenant models of the specter, yet the ghost’s motivations mark a stark difference from mere revenants. The common trope of unfinished business and revenge are still compelling ones and do motivate the ghosts discussed in this section to a certain extent. Yet the nature of unfinished business, the grounds for vengeance, and even the notions of pure malignancy are more complicated and nuanced than this revenant model. Jennifer Bann argues that this older category of revenants is best understood as “the limited dead,” and she points to the ghost of King Hamlet as emblematic of this limited dead configuration; the nineteenth century progression of the ghost appears to take on an ethical dimension where their prevailing motivations are not so easily black and white as those of King Hamlet. Hamlet’s own ghost-seeing encounters spurn real subsequent action, and the ghost of his father interacts little with the world around him. The ghost’s ability to do anything is bottlenecked in Hamlet’s agency and actions. Operating by vastly different principles of spectrality, the ghosts discussed here are agents unto themselves, and how their hands interact with living bodies reveals their agency.13

This chapter shall demonstrate how this ghost-hand combat function operates within the works of Mary Elizabeth Braddon, Lafcadio Hearn, and Fitz-James O’Brien. Braddon’s “The Cold Embrace” (1869) demonstrates how the ghost-hand combat function is an expression of both the ghost’s agency and vengeance and how both are inscribed within the hands of the ghost and its actions. Hearn’s “A Passional Karma” and “Ingwa-Banashi” from In Ghostly Japan the figure that crosses boundaries between past and present, life and death, modernity and tradition” (78). Melissa Edmundson asserts that “the unsettling nature of the ghost not only complicates the present, but also exists beyond a specific moment, representing the past and influencing the future” (Women’s 6).

13 The hand is a dominant metaphor across nineteenth century literature, and the hand functioned as more than a metaphor as Katherine Rowe point out. She details how the hand functioned as “a standard measure” across culture and history: “hands” for height of livestock, “cubit” for distance between the middle finger to elbow, “rule of thumb” being a metric for thickness, and “handfull” being a measure of volume to name a few examples that have permeated language (9).
(1899) offer variations upon vengeance and the ghost-hand combat function. These examples challenge where the spatial and cultural parameters of the ghost story genre are drawn (especially as it relates to the figure of the female ghost.) Lastly, the ghost-hand combat function shall be discussed as it is expressed in the first half of O’Brien’s “What Was It?” (1859). By dealing with these texts in achronological order, this discussion moves ghost-like itself to show this pattern across temporal and national boundaries. All of these examples offer a pattern of ghost-hands assaulting the living in highly malignant ways; the hands of ghosts choking the living is the most violently coded form of these tactile exchanges between dead hands and living bodies. Three of the four ghost stories discussed within this section have this violent ghost-choke as the primary point of tactile interaction between ghost-seer and ghost. While these stories are unique and posit their own ghost story poetics, a cohesive pattern is elucidated by the ghost-hand combat function.

“By Touch Alone”: Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s Vengeful Ghost-hands

One of the many women writers of ghost stories during the nineteenth century, Mary Elizabeth Braddon wrote several ghost stories, and her “The Cold Embrace” (1869) is one of the more popular of her spectral oeuvre. Women’s ghost stories of this period offer a specific register of social critique, and scholarship on these women writers and the ghost stories they inscribed their critiques within only became a point of focus in the second half of the twentieth century. In this ghost story, the ghost of Gertrude chokes the protagonist as a means of fulfilling the promise which he has broken. In this instance, the ghost-hand combat function serves, in a gothic light, to inflict the vengeance of the dead upon the living; the dead hands of

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14 Women’s ghost stories, according to Melissa Edmundson, offer “spectres that are more ‘real’ because they are grounded in contemporary social concerns that affected real people” and that Victorian women writers “truly brought ghosts home…on British soil and made those spectres matter to the British reading public in a body of literature that reflected…a heightened awareness of problems that already haunt the living” (Women’s 21).
the ghost, in this story, return as a reminder and signifier of eternal love with which the ghost of Gertrude seeks to assault the living protagonist. Braddon situates the promise of eternal love within the hand through the normative marital trope; this is used as a means of setting up the conflict between dead hands and living bodies. In order to understand the ghost-hand combat function within Braddon’s text, it is necessary to discuss the nature of the living character’s conversion into the ghost which is itself a marginally popular trope within larger genre.15 Gertrude’s journey from beloved, to once-beloved, to specter situates this as a narrative of broken promises. Aviva Briefel argues that “the hand of a deceased individual typically returns to impose its fatal mark on the living” and that Gertrude “returns in spectral form as a pair of hands that ultimately strangles him to death” (‘Hands at a Séance’ 98).16

The first step to understanding the nature of Gertrude’s return as ghost is to understand the promise offered to her as a young lover and the symbol of the protagonist’s mother’s ring. Both of these aspects are sited within the hand; the normative marital trope of the giving and taking of hands as well as the engagement ring. As a whole, Braddon’s story offers a narrative of young love and broken promises, yet what makes it unique and worthy of further inspection is how she uses the figure of the ghost to hold the young lover to account for his promises which he failed to uphold. Thus, this is a ghost of vengeance – yet not unjust or unrighteous – as the narrative seeks to explain.17 The protagonist places “the betrothal ring upon her finger, the white

15 This is a recurrent trope in across numerous ghost stories written by women during this period; Edmundson argues that the dearth of scholarship on women’s ghost stories has “to do with a wider neglect of the short story, within which the ghost story…has been doubly marginalised” because of its associations with seriality (Women’s 9).
16 Aviva Briefel remarks that “the language of palpability and paradoxical materiality that is so pervasive in spiritualist accounts of spectral hands” is offered within Braddon’s ghost story as well; Briefel argues that such language is appropriated from spiritualist writings of the period and “is common in the number of stories of vengeful ghost-hands that haunts the popular press of the period” even if they reject Spiritualism (“Hands at a Séance” 98).
17 Gertrude’s ghost is empowered in death in ways that she was not afforded in life. Catherine Belsey notes how the young lover “cannot escape [her] icy hands that clasp his neck whenever he finds himself alone” after Gertrude’s suicide (110). Jennifer Bann asserts that Braddon’s “narrative portrays Gertrude as a threatening ghost with the
and taper finger whose slender shape he knows so well” as the narrator relates that the ring was “a massive golden serpent, its tail in its mouth, the symbol of eternity” (67). Importantly, it is described as being “his mother’s, and he would know it amongst a thousand” citing even that “he could select it from amongst a thousand by the touch alone” (67-8.) Briefel observes that this ring is “a token of his (temporary) affection” (“Hands at a Séance” 98). This normative romantic mode of professing love is inscribed as a manual act as he “places it on her finger” as the two “swear to be true to each other for ever and ever…and death alone could part them”; the young lover goes on to speculate: “can death part us?” arguing that he would return from the grave to her before stating “if you loved me, you would return, and again these fair arms would be clasped round my neck as they are now” (68). Gertrude cites that only those who commit suicide are “the lost wretch[es] on whom sorrowful angels shut the door of Paradise” and haunt the living because their spirit has become unholy (68).

With the young lover’s promise in mind, Braddon does not offer the figure of the ghost ex nihilo, but rather her ghostly configuration is heavily wrought within the textual nature of both eternal love and damnation. Braddon literalizes eternal love while simultaneously ascribing the potential for haunting as one only accessible by those that have committed suicide. Craftily, Braddon delineates the ways in which Gertrude is driven to no other resource than suicide by her unnamed lover. Braddon’s ghost of vengeance is born of a literal notion of eternal love. It should be noted, however, that Gertrude is not the active one in the vow making and professing. Yet her ghost status is a direct result of the failure the protagonist has in upholding his promise and fulfilling it. Gertrude’s lover leaves her to copy the masterpieces in Florence, and his absence ability to overpower and ultimately destroy the living, but this force is neither indiscriminate nor, the narrator suggests, unjustified” citing that Gertrude acts “as an individual with the same desires she had in life” (678).
causes her much sorrow. The suffering she feels and their betrothal are secret; she mourns as “the lover writes—often at first, then seldom—at last, not at all” (68). Gertrude’s secret-fiancé-in-absentia brings her more anguish and more despair beyond her own longing. Her father arranges an engagement with a young rich suitor. Gertrude’s hope that “there is time yet” dwindles in light of her lover’s inaction noted in “he does not write – he does not come” (69). Gertrude’s despair “usurps her heart and will not be put away” as the appointed day approaches and “her father will hear no entreaties; her rich suitor will not listen to her prayers” (69). She is crestfallen and having no resources to postpone or any recourse that is not the impending marriage – she resolves that “to-night alone is hers--this night, which she may employ as she will” which she does as she hurries “out on to a lonely bridge, where he and she had stood so often in the sunset, watching the rose-coloured light glow, fade, and die upon the river” (69). As this moment suggests, Gertrude takes her own life by jumping from the bridge.18

The protagonist’s abandonment of Gertrude as he pursues his career is a freighted choice in Braddon’s ghost story. He chooses to pursue the manual craft of the arts. When describing him, the narrator begins to drop his “beloved” naming convention and shifts towards “the artist,” which underscores the ways in which he is displaced from this early romance narrative and shifted towards the eventual ghost-seer status. Yet not without the twist of irony, the narrator describes that her lover returns; he “had received [her letters], but he loved her no longer” (69). He thinks that “if she had a rich suitor, good; let her marry him; better for her, better far for himself” as he has “no wish to fetter himself with a wife”; he had returned with the expressed

18 cf. Thomas Hood’s “Bridge of Sighs” (1844). Braddon’s text can be read as a ghostly epilogue of Hood’s lamenting account of young female suicide. Gertrude’s death falls under the rubric of improper burial which recurs as a conceit across numerous ghost stories. Jennifer Bann writes that the older “pre-Victorian understanding of limited, relatively powerless ghosts” typically “appear to the living because their incomplete burials or unresolved circumstances prevent them from ascending to the afterlife” (674).
purpose “to arrive in time to salute the bride” (69). The narrator reflects on his cruelty in forgetting the fateful promise he had made of taking Gertrude’s hand in marriage: “and the vows – the mystical fancies – the belief in his return, even after death, to the embrace of his beloved? O, gone out of his life; melted away for ever, those foolish dreams of his boyhood” (69-70). The nature of the failed promise is what directly leads to her ghost status. He drives her to suicide, and as she described earlier in the narrative, she believes that it can only be those that die by their own hand that are fated to walk the earth after death.

He returns to find fishermen pulling a body from the river and learns of a young girl’s suicide. He asks to sketch her, citing his belief that “suicides are always handsome” (70). The figure is revealed as he “lifts the rough, coarse, wet canvas from her face. What face?...His cousin Gertrude--his betrothed!” (71). Her body is described with a focus on her arms and hands first as he notes “the rigid features--the marble arms--the hands crossed on the cold bosom; and, on the third finger of the left hand, the ring which had been his mother's--the golden serpent; the ring which, if he were to become blind, he could select from a thousand others by the touch alone” (71). He flees from the scene as he tries to console himself in asserting that “grief, true grief, is not for such as he” (71). This denial of grief is curious. He compartmentalizes any sense of culpability in the matter and he flees which both affirm his guilt. Braddon’s narrator inscribes a certain sinister quality this increasingly repugnant artist as we read that after fleeing he “tries presently to think of himself as he is, apart from his cousin’s suicide. Apart from that, he was no worse off than he was yesterday” (71). This denial of grief, then, is in multiple registers; his refusal to grieve Gertrude’s death is under the larger affective rubric of his belief that he is not susceptible to grief at all. This is, of course, fodder for the cruel irony of the haunting to follow.
Gertrude’s ghost will exact the toll of the promises he issued to her in life; in Braddon’s spectral economy, she seeks what is due to her which involves the manual labor of her cold dead hands.

The first ghost-encounter is a vengeance-filled wreaking of havoc that literalizes eternal love at the hands of the ghost. Thus, the first haunting is described in a subdued sense of safety for the protagonist where he stands by a cathedral “with his dog at his side. It is night, the bells have just chimed the hour, and the clocks are striking eleven; the moonlight shines full upon the magnificent pile, over which the artist's eye wanders, absorbed in the beauty of form” (72). The narrator takes particular pains to describe that he “is not thinking of his drowned cousin, for he has forgotten her and is happy” (73). Lulled into a sense of safety and absolution of guilt, young lover is attacked by the ghost, as “suddenly some one, something from behind him, puts two cold arms round his neck, and clasps its hands on his breast” (73). Followed by the usual ghost story trope of “yet there is no one behind him” as he is alone, he looks about him to see “in the broad moonlight there are only two shadows, his own and his dog’s…there is no one…and though he feels, he cannot see the cold arms clasped round his neck” (73). The narrator describes the tactility of this in remarking that “it is not ghostly, this embrace, for it is palpable to the touch – it cannot be real, for it is invisible” (73). Catherine Belsey notes the important shift leading up to the nineteenth century “when the Enlightenment placed ghosts in the eye of the seer, it moved the occult from the world to the mind” to which she concludes “if ghosts are deceptions of our own making, it follows that rational thinking does not define us” (192). But as the protagonist seeks to “throw off the cold caress” he actually “clasps the hands in his own to tear them asunder, and to cast them off his neck…[feeling] the long delicate fingers cold and wet beneath his touch, and on the third finger of the left hand he can feel the ring which was his mother’s” as the narrative description digresses into the previously offered ones of the ring where the
protagonist would “know [it] among a thousand by the touch alone” (73). With no small amount of cynicism, the narrator cites that “he knows it now!” as now the protagonist has “his dead cousin's cold arms are round his neck–his dead cousin's wet hands are clasped upon his breast” (73). He, like so many ghost-seers, wonders “if he is mad” as he “stands in the moonlight, the dead arms around his neck, and the dog at a little distance moaning piteously” (73-4). This haunting concludes with “in a breath the cold arms are gone” (74). The haunting turns into a series of grappling ghost-encounters that plague the protagonist. Jennifer Bann argues that Gertrude’s life “is a sequence of denied opportunities and negated agency; abandoned by her lover and forced into an unwanted marriage by her father, she lacks any ability to affect the world around her through words, deeds, or thoughts” and that “death transforms passivity to action, as Gertrude’s lover finds himself haunted by the constant, inescapable sensation of her arms around his neck” (677). Like many ghost-seers, his attempts to flee and to avoid isolation to stop the hauntings are a fool’s errand. He goes to Paris and arrives in time for Carnival.

The struggle between ghost-hands and living bodies reaches a fever pitch during the final encounter which extends this beyond a mere dramatization of mortality. The protagonist is comforted by reaching a grand Parisian dance where he is sure to find “no more darkness, no more loneliness, but a mad crowd, shouting and dancing” (75). In this moment, he feels a sense of self being reauthorized: “his old light-heartedness come[s] back” yet this turns as the party

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19 McCorristine offers a historical context to the troublesome issue of spectral clothing that both supporters and skeptics of spiritualism hotly debated; the critic writes that “‘ghosts are never without drapery’ and the argument that apparitions invariably appeared in dress according to the fashion of the period during which they lived” naturally feed into adjacent debates the limits of spectrality (91). In 1863 George Cruikshank remarked that “ghosts cannot, must not, dare not, for decency’s sake, appear without clothes” which suggests that he is arguing for the existence of spectral clothing. Yet, he also asserts that “there can be no such things as ghosts or spirits of clothes,” and he concludes that ultimately ghosts are not real (Cruikshank qtd in McCorristine 91).

20 Dogs, too, can interact with ghosts (which shall be noted in the ghost stories to come as well.) During this first haunting, Braddon writes: “‘Up, Leo!’ he shouts. ‘Up, up, boy!’ and the Newfoundland leaps to his shoulders – the dog’s paws are on the dead ands, and the animal utters a terrific howl, and springs away from his master” (73).
dwindles and he is “alone in that vast saloon” (75). The commonplace mechanisms of a ghost story haunting begin to operationalize within this isolated silence: the protagonist is “alone” and “in the terrible silence” when “he hears the echoes of his own footsteps in that dismal dance which has no music” (75). The setting of the dance is countered, finally, by the protagonist hearing “no music but the beating of his breast” and feeling “the cold arms are round his neck” that “whirl him round” and “will not be flung off, or cast away” (75). His ability for flight is foreclosed as “he can no more escape from their icy grasp than he can escape from death” (75). He reverts into his initial ghost-seeing actions of looking “behind him” and seeing “nothing but himself in the great empty salle” (75). While he finds uneasy reassurance in his faculty of vision, his senses are conflicted as the narrative relates “but he can feel – cold, deathlike, but O, how palpable!–the long slender fingers, and the ring which was his mother’s” (75). With heavy handed gothic irony, Braddon structures this final sequence as a dance between the ghost and ghost-seer where silence is “only broken by the echoes of his own footsteps in the dance from which he cannot extricate himself. Who says he has no partner? The cold hands are clasped on his breast, and now he does not shun their caress. No! One more polka, if he drops down dead” (76). This moment recalls the danse macabre, and there is dark irony undergirding all of Braddon’s text as Gertrude is only fulfilling the promise he challenged her to fulfill in the throes of romance. Bann argues “the cold embrace of the story’s title is more possessive than affectionate, the physical enforcement of an emotional claim” as she explains that “the lover kept permanently beyond Gertrude’s reach in life is literally held within it in death” (677). Revenant narratives of “dangerous dead women” as Belsey writes that “call the living to account” are products of misogynistic culture; yet in surveying stories of women as ghosts, she concludes that this is the “result of a shared social anxiety…[of] terrifying phantoms who, released in death
from the humane inhibitions that bind the living, wreak an appalling revenge on those implicated, whether personally or culturally, in the practice of their oppression” (115).

The haunting and the entire narrative are drawn to an abrupt close with the gendarmes inspecting the hall after the dog is found howling outside. They find “near the principal entrance they stumble over—The body of a student, who has died from want of food, exhaustion, and the breaking of a blood-vessel” (76). Belsey explains that “as sources of terror, malign female ghosts might well compensate in the tales for any slights and exclusions their story-tellers experienced in reality” and concludes that this marks “an uncertainty about what women just might be capable of if pushed too far” (118). Bann argues that Gertrude’s life “is a sequence of denied opportunities and negated agency; abandoned by her lover and forced into an unwanted marriage by her father, she lacks any ability to affect the world around her through words, deeds, or thoughts” and that “death transforms passivity to action, as Gertrude’s lover finds himself haunted by the constant, inescapable sensation of her arms around his neck” (677). Braddon’s use of the ghost-hand combat function is significant as it displaces the agency of the ghost-seer for that of the ghost; in this case, Gertrude becomes a fully realized agent in death, and she employs that agency to enact vengeance upon her lover that has wronged her. It is also equally important that he recognizes this haunting is brought down upon him by her hands. Ann Gagné’s work on tactility is useful to consult here as tactility is inherently liminal in the exchange between toucher and touched; Gagné concludes that “this Ouroboros of tactility is seemingly irresolvable and indifferenciable” (15). Braddon uses the mother’s ring as a signifier of identity, a grave reminder of the promise broken, and as tactile imagery to be described again and again as the young lover feels in each of Gertrude’s cold embraces. It is perhaps no coincidence that the
serpent ring might very well be an ouroboros as it is at the center of so many fraught discourses that weave into one another in this ghost story.

**“Those Hands Were Not Dead”: The Violent Hands of Lafcadio Hearn’s Ghosts**

Lafcadio Hearn’s “A Passional Karma” also takes up the ghost story concern of literalizing eternal love which results in a ghost-hand combat function exchange. The narrative begins by describing a romance between the lady, O-Tsuyu, and the samurai, Shinzaburō. This romance is fraught as she is the only daughter of a banner-leader with an infamous “reputation for cutting off heads” (40). The young lovers are dissuaded and each is individually told that the other has died (true in O-Tsuyu’s case, but false in Shinzaburō’s.) Time passes and during the Festival of the Dead, Shinzaburō sees both O-Tsuyu and her servant, O-Yoné. He invites them in and renews his courtship of O-Tsuyu as the narrative relates that “after that night they came every night for seven nights…always at the same hour” O-Tsuyu and O-Yoné visited Shinzaburō and that “the twain were fettered, each to each, by that bond of illusion which is stronger than bands of iron” (45). Hearn’s story shares an intertextual link to Braddon’s in underscoring the dangers of eternal love beyond the prescribed temporal boundaries of a corporeal body.

The love story that Hearn weaves within this ghost story is one that subscribes to both the notion of reincarnation and karma which is similar to Braddon’s ghostly conceit. Yet this extends the temporal boundary much further to encompass several generations which is an obvious extension of the different religious traditions that Hearn appeared to be quite fascinated with. The Buddhist and Shinto beliefs which Hearn is a cultural transmitter of in his ghost stories profess to the potential for reincarnation and the existence of karma across lifetimes. Hearn

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21 cf. Marley’s chains and the literal forms of bondage that ghosts feel in death. Hearn employs this to describe eternal love, yet it should be overlooked that both Scrooge and Marley place a love of wealth above any personal relationship. Marley is fettered with spectral chains to the object-attachments he wrongly devoted himself to in life.
writes that there are loves so strong that lovers are devoted to one another beyond the span of one lifetime; Shinzaburō discovers this from a high-priest he consults and that the karma which “binds [him] to the dead is very strong...probably the girl has been in love with [him] from a time long preceding [his] present life,—from a time of not less than three or four past” lifetimes (50). O-Tsuyu and O-Yoné continue to call upon Shinzaburō, which causes his own servant, Tomozō, much distress. O-Tsuyu professes that during their time apart she could never think “of accepting any other man for my husband...[even if] my father were to kill me for what I have done, still—after death itself—I could never cease to think of you” as O-Tsuyu cryptically states that he “would not be able to live very long without me” (46). Hearn punctuates this spooky statement with O-Tsuyu “clinging closely to him, with her lips at his neck, she caressed him” (46). All of this is seen by Tomozō, peering in through a window to watch over his master, yet as this occurs “an icy trembling seized him” because O-Tsuyu had “the face of a woman long dead,—and the fingers caressing were fingers of naked bone” and her body waist-down “melted off into thinnest trailing shadow” (47). This image is emblematic of the Japanese ghost stories (also called kwaïdan) Hearn served as cultural translator of to Western readers.

Shinzaburō eventually learns that O-Tsuyu and O-Yoné are ghosts. He seeks to protect himself from them after he learns that he is not long for this world if he continues on courting a ghost-lover. Under direction of the high-priest, he engages in a series of manual acts of remembrance and religious rites that are to ward off the ghosts and prevent their entry into his home. After their visits are thwarted, O-Yoné discovers that Tomozō has aided Shinzaburō, and she forces Tomozō to foil his master’s plans under the threat of death. He does so the following evening only to discover the next morning that: The passage relates that his servant found him: “Shinzaburō was dead—hideously dead;—and his face was the face of a man who had died in
the uttermost agony of fear” (56) Yet Hearn affords readers obvious forensic clues to the nature of his death as “lying beside him in the bed were the bones of a woman!” and “the bones of the hands, clung fast about his neck” (56). While the contest between the ghost’s hands and the ghost-seer is obscured, its effects are no less significant; the ghost-hand combat function is expressed through the violence of ghost-hands assaulting and choking living bodies.

Hearn’s “Ingwa-Banashi” takes a radically different view of eternal love as a bond within a ghost story context. It is less preoccupied with the notion of multiple lifetimes as “A Passional Karma” is (but it should be noted that the role of evil karma does indeed play a crucial role.) Nevertheless, this ghost story is concerned with the material and mortal conditions of the human body and the spectral and eternal bonds that can be forged upon them. “Ingwa-Banashi” stands as a unique outlier to the examples offered in this section as the exchange between dead hands and living bodies is not one of choking as with the rest, but rather this is coded as an equally combative, violent, manual act. Following Braddon’s example, this ghost story begins at a narrative point in which the ghost is still alive, however, this ghost story takes a significant departure from Braddon’s trope of the ghost returning as a realized expression of eternal love – Hearn’s ghost of daimyō’s wife seeks to inflict irreparable harm upon the concubine that will fulfill her status as wife after her death. The daimyō’s wife has the trauma-bound prerogative to ensure that her husband’s concubine cannot fulfill her soon-to-be status of wife of the warlord; to ensure this, the daimyō’s wife deprives her of any sexual identity through the bonding of the hands to her breasts. While this is a divergent type of assault from the ghost-choking sequences discussed elsewhere in this section, this example’s significance is two-fold. First, this text contradicts the popular trope of female revenants that only haunt, target, and assault men in their pursuit of vengeance. Second, this text shows that contests between dead hands and living bodies
are not always resolved by the death of the living; the combat function in “Ingwa-Banashi” results in a symbolic death which is perhaps more horrific than the literal one it supplants.

Hearn’s iteration of the ghost-hand combat function mirrors aspects of Braddon’s example in terms of literal posturing of the body as well as the development of a living character into a ghost, yet with a pointedly different motive. The narrative begins with the daimyo, a feudal warlord figure, and his wife. The text states that “the daimyō’s wife was dying, and knew that she was dying” during “the year 1829 by Western counting; and the cherry-trees were blossoming” (61) The text relates that the daimyō’s wife thought “of the cherry-trees in her garden”, “of the gladness of spring”, “of her children”, “of her husband’s various concubines,—especially the Lady Yukiko, nineteen years old” (61) Hearn weaves in a telescoping effect that weaves seamlessly within the dying wife’s train of thought. She calls Lady Yukiko to “speak to her about the affairs of this household”, and she relates to the young concubine that “I am going to die…I want you to take my place when I am gone…cherish our dear lord: never allow another woman to rob you of his affection” (62) The daimyō’s wife’s makes the request to see the cherry blossom tree or yaë-zakura\(^{22}\) from her garden which is in bloom in a “voice [that] had gradually become clear and strong,—as if the intensity of the wish” had given her new life (63).

Hearn’s “Ingwa-Banashi” engages in a highly material form of haunting that diverges from the larger ghost story tradition, yet it is worth noting that the material aspects of the body are still being governed by an immaterial ghost of the dead wife. Yukiko is ordered to take her upon her back to the garden to see the cherry blossom tree in bloom, and the dying daimyō’s wife lifts “herself with an almost superhuman effort by clinging to Yukiko’s shoulders. But as

\(^{22}\) Hearn, in an abundance of caution, includes the following footnote in his manuscript of In Ghostly Japan to ensure that the sexual nature of this reference is not lost on Western readers: “yaë-zakura, yaë-no-sakura, a variety of Japanese cherry-tree that bears double-blossoms” (62).
she stood erect, she quickly slipped her thin hands down over the shoulders, under the robe, and clutched the breasts of the girl, and burst into a wicked laugh” (63). As she does so, the daimyō’s wife proclaims “I have my wish for the cherry-bloom,—but not the cherry-bloom of the garden!… I could not die before I got my wish. Now I have it!—oh, what a delight!” (63). This deception is the crux of this ghost story as the events to follow confirm. The posturing and positioning of this mimics Braddon’s ghost and her spectral embrace. This moment operates within an obvious sexual register; this manual exchange of vengeance and sexual assault begins here and shifts to the spectral in what follows to demonstrate the ghost-hand combat function.

Lastly, “Ingwa-Banashi” inverts the common trope of offsetting the ghost story narrative with a framing truth-statement. Instead, Hearn opts to end with a truth-statement moment as Yukiko dissolves, ghost-like herself, into textual and historical obscurity. Hearn relates that the daimyō’s wife “with these words she fell forward upon the crouching girl, and died” (63). But death is not the stopping point for this ghost story as the narrative continues that “the cold hands had attached themselves in some unaccountable way to the breasts of the girl,—appeared to have grown into the quick flesh. Yukiko became senseless with fear and pain” (63). The hands are conferred with spooky and supernatural qualities as they are bonded to the flesh, which puzzles all within the daimyō’s household. Doctors are called and puzzled as the “hands of the dead woman [could not] be unfastened from the body of her victim”; they cling so “that any effort to remove them [brings]…not because the fingers held” but because “the flesh of the palms had united itself in some inexplicable manner to the flesh of the breasts!” (63-4). The branches of medicine and science are flummoxed by this case. Further resources sought through a foreign Dutch surgeon diagnose that “there [is] nothing to be done except to cut the hands from the corpse” and it “would be dangerous to attempt to detach them from the breasts” (64). As we read
that the hands “were amputated at the wrists” yet “remained clinging to the breasts; and there they soon darkened and dried up,—like the hands of a person long dead” (64).

Hearn does not give readers much time to reckon with the horrific image of the daimyō’s wife’s dead hands before escalating the horror of this ghost story. We read that “this was only the beginning of the horror” as Hearn proceeds to detail that “withered and bloodless though they seemed, those hands were not dead. At intervals they would stir—stealthily, like great grey spiders” and nightly “would clutch and compress and torture” (64). For a litany of reasons, a normal life is foreclosed to Yukiko, who, “cut[s] off her hair, and [becomes] a mendicant-nun” (64). We read that Yukiko then “besought the dead for pardon…but the evil karma…could not soon be exhausted” as each night “the hands never failed to torture her, during more than seventeen years” (64). Hearn ends by offering an inverted truth-statement that affirms the sense that this is a historical record. Instead of beginning the ghost story by an appeal to truth, Hearn chooses to conclude his story with one. At the end of this text, we read that this ghostly account is “according to the testimony of those persons to whom she last told her story…in the third year of Kōkwa” and that “thereafter nothing more was ever heard of her” (64). Thus, Yukiko fades like a specter herself into narrative and historical obscurity. Belsey explains that these female ghosts have a wide array of motivations in that some are “just plain malign” and others “are victims of other women” (115). In cases of remarriage, Belsey points out that it is unclear if “first wives have a claim to fidelity beyond death – unless in the unease of their successors,” and

The severed hands of the daimyō’s wife recall A.C. Doyle’s infamous ghost story, “The Brown Hand” which Sarah Bissell notes is a ghost story where an Englishman is haunted and “tormented by the ghost of an Indian man seeking his amputated hand, which has been lost in a fire” (46). Bissell affirms the notion of unfinished business and improper burial as motivations of the ghost, yet what is astonishingly suggested by Doyle’s ghost story is that “substituting another man’s hand for the lost one, the narrator successfully achieves a ‘reasonable compromise’ with the spectre in order to fulfil its wishes and alleviate the haunting” (46).
she concludes that this “long history of menacing female revenants registers a broader fear that sooner or later the oppressed group will escape their culturally prescribed place” (115).

“A Pair of Sinewy, Agile Hands”: Fitz-James O’Brien’s Invisible Ghost

Fitz-James O’Brien’s “What Was It?” (1859) demonstrates the ghost-hand combat function through the return of ghost-hands’ choking living bodies. O’Brien’s title is, as Sarah Bissell points out, among a larger tradition of ghost story titles that are self-referential and metafictional in their own hyperawareness of both the supernatural, paranormal contents they offer as well as their appeals to veracity and observable truth that is often situated within vision. This can be seen in the titles of ghost stories such as Ellen Wood’s “Reality or Delusion?” (1868), Rhoda Broughton’s “Behold It Was a Dream” (1872), Amelia B. Edwards’ “Was It an Illusion?” (1881), and many others; Bissell concludes that titles such as these “gesture towards the persistence of these tensions between vision and knowledge, illusion and reality” (42). In O’Brien’s text, the ghost-seer, Harry, engages in a struggle and contest with the ghost initiated by the ghost’s surprise attack. The tactile exchanges here are all coded as violent and manual acts of grasping, choking, grappling, and binding. This ghost story offers the generic signature of the truth-statement at its outset. Harry recounts that the events he “detail[s] are of so extraordinary a character that I am quite prepared to meet with an unusual amount of incredulity and scorn” and that he “accept[s] all such beforehand” (25). Harry cites his own “literary courage to face unbelief” and resolves to offer the narrative in a “simple and straightforward” manner to relate

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24 This brief sample of titles gestures to the genre’s increasing preoccupation with delusions, hallucinations, and other psychological explanations of ghosts; these became major trends within late nineteenth century ghost stories. McCorristine notes that hallucinations were “the most popularly known form of ‘cognitive slippage’” of the period and it began to be “a prominent literary trope in supernatural fiction [in] the 1840s” and that ghosts-seeing as hallucination became the “conceptual basis of the uncertain realism evident in the framework of the Victorian ghost story” (65).
“some facts that passed under my observation…of the mysteries of physical science [that] are wholly unparalleled” (25). Brittany Roberts observes that ghost stories “frequently begin with some sort of truth-statement and very often posit the reader as sole judge of whether or not the story is likely to have really occurred” (63). These types of appeals to reason are typical within ghost stories, and the truth-statement is a generic marker of the nineteenth century ghost story.25

O’Brien leans heavily into the ghost story genre’s aesthetics in priming the reader for the haunting. The encounter begins “in total darkness” with only “the atom of gas that still remained alight [from] the burner” (30). Harry recalls “lying still as a corpse…[when] an awful incident occurred…a Something dropped, as it seemed, from the ceiling, plumb upon my chest, and the next instant I felt two bony hands encircling my throat, endeavoring to choke me” (30-1). Thus, Harry’s struggle with the ghost begins as he reassures readers that “I am no coward, and am possessed of considerable physical strength” which allows him “in an instant” to “wound two muscular arms around the creature, and squeezed it, with all the strength of despair, against my chest. In a few seconds the bony hands that had fastened on my throat loosened their hold, and I was free to breathe once more” (31). Nevertheless, this is just the beginning as Harry recounts “then commenced a struggle of awful intensity” (31). Harry has only his tactile faculty available to him as this struggle occurs “immersed in the most profound darkness, totally ignorant of the nature of the Thing by which I was so suddenly attacked” (31). This wrestling match between ghost-seer and ghost is provocative. We read that Harry finds his “grasp slipping every moment,

25 Luke Thurston argues that this “very common trope, almost a generic cliché, of the Victorian ghost story was to raise the question of truth at the outset of the text, perhaps with some rhetorical guarantee of the ensuing narrative’s veracity” (468). Roberts affirms this obsessive about the notion of “truth” in the ghost story’s relationship to both sensation and detective fiction (60). She argues that the ghost story’s continued use of “markers of identity and status…frequently obscure more than they make legible”; the critic concludes that “identity can be frighteningly inexplicable and social certainties curiously uncertain” through this ghost story paradigm (60).
by reason, it seemed to me, of the entire nakedness of my assailant, bitten with sharp teeth in the
shoulder, neck, and chest” (31). Harry relates the struggle to “protect [his] throat against a pair of
sinewy, agile hands, which [his] utmost efforts could not confine” as we read that he martials “all
the strength, skill, and courage that [he] possesse[s]” (31). The ghost-seer, Harry, seeks to see his
assailant in the light: “never losing my hold for an instant, I slipped from the bed to the floor,
dragging my captive with me…holding the creature in a grip like a vice…quick as lightning I
released my grasp with one hand and let on the full flood of light” (31-2). Harry turns to view his
assailant which leads to a horrific realization of the supernatural nature of this assault. Harry
reflects that he “cannot even attempt to give any definition of [his] sensations the instant after
[he] turned on the gas…I saw nothing! Yes; I had one arm firmly clasped round a breathing,
panting, corporeal shape” (32). Harry cites that his other hand “gripped with all its strength a
throat as warm, as apparently fleshy, as my own” (32). Under the gaslight, Harry recalls that
“this living substance in my grasp, with its body pressed against my own…absolutely beheld
nothing! Not even an outline,—a vapor!” (32). Harry is thrown into a sense of disarray and
confusion which is typical for ghost-seers; he reflects that he does “not, even at this
hour…imagination in vain tries to compass the awful paradox” (32). The rational world appears
to be foreclosed to the ghost-seer in this moment, as the “creature” is described by Harry as “it
breathed. I felt its warm breath upon my cheek. It struggled fiercely. It had hands. They clutched
me. Its skin was smooth, like my own. There it lay, pressed close up against me, solid as stone,—
and yet utterly invisible!” (32). Harry ascribes some supernatural strength of his own “in place of
loosening my hold on the terrible Enigma…and tightened my grasp with such wonderful force
that I felt the creature shivering with agony” (32).
Harry calls Hammond and the others into the scene to assist him which poses several problems as communal ghost-seeing often does. Harry calls them in and reflects that he “can understand why the appearance of a man struggling violently, as it would seem, with an airy nothing, and calling for assistance against a vision, should have appeared ludicrous” (33). This is, after all, a crisis point for Harry, and he pleads with them: “I can hold the—the thing but a short while longer. It is overpowering me. Help me! Help me!” (33). This earnest plea is met with Hammond’s rational skepticism: “‘Harry,’ whispered Hammond, approaching me, ‘you have been smoking too much opium’” (33). It is at this point that the Doubting Thomas narrative returns as a touchstone for the ghost story. Harry replies to Hammond’s accusation: “don’t you see how it shakes my whole frame with its struggles? If you don't believe me, convince yourself. Feel it,—touch it.” We read that Hammond “advanced and laid his hand” upon the ghost which arouses “a wild cry of horror” from him as “he had felt it!” (33). Both ghost-seers engage in a prolonged manual act of binding the ghost. The narrative describes Hammond with “a long piece of cord, and was the next instant winding it and knotting it about the body of the unseen being that I clasped in my arms” (33). After the ghost is bound, Hammond states “you may let go, old fellow, if you're tired. The Thing can't move” which ends the prolonged struggle as Harry, “utterly exhausted,” had “gladly loosed [his] hold” (33). The narrative offers the image of “the ends of the cord that bound the Invisible, twisted round his hand, while before him, self-supporting as it were, he beheld a rope laced and interlaced, and stretching tightly around a vacant space” (33).

O’Brien, like many ghost story authors, posits an alternative explanation of the supernatural in opening up the possibility that this encounter is the product of an opium-induced vision. Both Harry and Hammond use opium. We read that they “were linked together by a vice,” they “both smoked opium,” they “knew each other’s secret, and respected it,” and they “enjoyed together that wonderful expansion of thought, that marvelous intensifying of the perceptive faculties” (27-8). Harry’s condition is significant as both had smoked opium prior to retiring for the night.
Harry and Hammond accomplish what few ghost-seers ever do: capturing the ghost. This raises the obvious, yet puzzling question: what does one do with a ghost? To this end, what follows in the latter half of “What Was It?” is best dealt with in the second ghost-hand function of confirmation. Notably, three of these examples code this as the ghost choking the living which is a hyperviolent means of dramatizing the struggle between life and death (a trope which informs all of these ghost stories.) The ghost-hand combat function which is offered in “The Cold Embrace”, “A Passional Karma” and “Ingwa-Banashi”, and “What Was It?” is noted through the violent contests between dead hands and living bodies. All of the ghost story authors discussed within this section code the primary exchange between dead hands and living bodies with the violent act of choking.
Chapter 2: The Ghost-hand Confirmation Function

In “This Living Hand,” Keats offers an example of the ghost-hand function as the poet describes his own spectral hand that is “now warm and capable / of earnest grasping” (lines 1-2). Keats engages in spectral speculation in furthering the image of his own ghostly hand, speculating that “if it were cold / and in the icy silence of the tomb”, this hand would “so haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights” that the listener would wish for the dead speaker and themselves to switch places (2-4). The real curiosity and driving force of the poem is not revealed until the final turn where the listener would finally be “conscience-calm’d – see here it is – / I hold it towards you” (ln. 7-8). It is unsettling, to say the least, that Keats’ ghostly hand seems to reach out from beyond the grave and beyond the lines to be issued to the reader; the affect of supplication that seems to be suggested in this conclusion is one that differs greatly from how the hand haunts in the beginning of the poem. It is vampiric in the sense that the hand is brought back to life by the speaker’s threat and listener’s (presumed) desire “that thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood / so in my veins red light might stream again” (ln. 5-6). Daniel Novak calls this “the conflation of hand and handwriting” in that “it serves as a way of thinking about the strange temporality of literary posterity”; the critic further reads this final gesture as “potentially participat[ing] in both present and future” with the “it” either denoting the temporal present or the atemporal hand and text. While Novak does not state outright the ghostly or spectral implications of this, he argues that Keats “offers a theory of literary reception and even of the archive—the future site in which the hands of authors and the hands of readers meet in ‘earnest grasping’” (Novak 245). Katherine Rowe acknowledges the “ghost of his poem, which itself remains always in the present, performative of its own reified agency” and further that this “uncanny hand” of the ghost “holds itself out to us in the binding gesture of a gift” (47).
difference between the speaker and listener is similar to the dynamic between the ghost and
ghost-seer, and while Keats’ poem does not detail a specific tactile exchange – the implication of
it is certainly present if not demanded by the speaker. Keats’s poem shows the emotional register
of the ghost-hand confirmation function as Keats’s ghost-hand is not one that seeks to
maliciously assault the living in the fashion of the revenants described in chapter one; Keats
alludes to more significant affective dimensions of these interactions between living bodies and
dead hands.

Unlike the ghost-hand combat function, the confirmation function traces the tactile
exchanges outside of conflict or antagonistic structures. Where the malignancy of the dead is
hyper-present and realized within the combat function’s assault against the living, this iteration
of the ghost-hand function is more expansive toward a wide array of emotions. The ghost stories
discussed here are ones that reject the popular genre’s conceit of the dead as adversarial. In fact,
these ghost stories problematize such an old combat narrative as the living are often viewed as
the real agents of evil and the ghost is reconfigured as more human than perhaps we’d be
comfortable believing them to be. This section will survey the ghost-hand confirmation function
in the remainder of Fitz-James O’Brien’s “What Was It?” (1859), Wilkie Collins “Mrs. Zant and
the Ghost” (1885), and Margaret Oliphant’s “The Open Door” (1882) and “Old Lady Mary”
(1884).

“Second-hand Indications of the Terrible Writhings”: O’Brien’s Negative Epistemology

The second half of Fitz-James O’Brien’s “What Was It?” (1859) offers a unique continuation
and reframing of the ghost-hand function where the combat function is dropped after the living
ghost-seer, Harry, becomes the victor of the struggle with the ghost. With the ghost no longer an
adversary (as Harry and Hammond have engaged in the odd, almost Biblical binding of the ghost
as a means of restraining it), the ghost-hand function is resituated to be one of confirming that this entity is real. As such, the narrative shifts to ways of manually understanding the ghost and dealing with the consequences of its material reality.

O’Brien’s ghost-seers engage in a series of manual methods of understanding the invisible ghost which they have bound. The invisibility of the ghost poses serious problems for the ghost-seers to accept it and integrate it into their material reality, and they use hands and tactility as a means of establishing and confirming the existence of the ghost. This suggests an epistemology of the ghost which is primarily manual that underwrites the ghost story’s poetics. Visual epistemologies in ghost stories are often convoluted, problematized, and easily ascribed to hallucination. Yet the tactile epistemology of the toucher and touched is not so susceptible to the ways in which vision can be faulty, and ghost story authors are keen to employ it within the ghostly encounters they create. To pick up where the last section left off, Harry and the members of the boarding house “beheld the pantomime of binding this struggling Something” and Harry finds relief in his “task of jailer was over” (34). He and Hammond “begged of some of the men to come near and convince themselves by touch of the existence in that room of a living being which was invisible” (34). While ultimately this is too frightful an experience for the others to undertake, they ask “how could a solid, living, breathing body be invisible” (34).

Harry and Hammond take it upon themselves to try and understand what this ghost is in a physical sense through manual acts. Harry reflects that they conquered their “fearful repugnance to touch the invisible creature—lifted it from the ground, manacled as it was, and took it to [his] bed” citing that “its weight was about that of a boy of fourteen” (34). This launches into a description of the ghost’s “solid, ponderable body, which, nevertheless, you cannot see” (34). They lift the ghost’s body and “let the creature fall” which elicits “a dull sound of a heavy body
alighting on a soft mass” – and further that “the timbers of the bed creaked [and] a deep impression marked itself distinctly” upon the bed and pillow (34). Harry and Hammond watch “the rustle of the bedclothes as it impotently struggled to free itself from confinement” (34). Harry and Hammond discuss Hammond’s theory that this is not “theoretically impossible” because both air and glass are substances that are “tangible and transparent” (35). Harry summarily dismisses Hammond’s idea citing that “glass does not breathe, air does not breathe. This thing has a heart that palpitates,—a will that moves it” (35). Having his first theories rejected, Hammond attempts to explain another as he relates that it could be similar to the phenomenon “at the meetings called ‘spirit circles,’ invisible hands have been thrust into the hands of those persons round the table,—warm, fleshly hands that seemed to pulsate with mortal life” (35). Both are puzzled; they cannot logically conclude that this creature is not a ghost.

Thus, Harry and Hammond continue to keep watch over the ghost and try to come to grips with the new reality it poses for them. We read that they “smok[ed] many pipes, all night long, by the bedside of the unearthly being that tossed and panted until it was apparently wearied out” (35). Harry notes that “the creature was awake” as “evidenced by the convulsive manner in which the bedclothes were moved in its efforts to escape” and in “those second-hand indications of the terrible writhings and agonized struggles for liberty which themselves were invisible” (36). This passage is significant as it points to how O’Brien frames the ghost epistemologically; it is not a matter of presence as the faculties of vision are thwarted by its invisibility and tactility can only afford a part and not the whole of the ghost’s physicality. Thus, O’Brien poses the possibility of using negation to gain knowledge of the ghost’s form. These “second-hand indications” of the impressions upon the bed foreshadow the epistemological method the ghost-seers choose to pursue. This is to say that the ghost-seers must create a negative of the ghost’s
form in order to visualize its positive form. This final point resonates with two important
discourses surrounding the nineteenth century ghost story: the development of photography and
the highly popular (and controversial) trend of spirit photography.

The ghost, now within the hands of the living, forces the ghost-seers into a sort of crisis.
They engage in a series of manual acts as a means of understanding the ghost, from the laying on
of hands to the chloroforming and plaster-casting of the ghost’s body. The manual means of
understanding the ghost are expressed in Harry’s reflections that “as we could make out by
passing our hands over the creature's form, its outlines and lineaments were human” which detail
that the ghost had “a mouth; a round, smooth head without hair; a nose, which, however, was
little elevated above the cheeks; and its hands and feet felt like those of a boy” (36). Here the
ghost-hand confirmation function is fully operative in the tactile understanding of the ghost’s
physical form. Harry’s laying on of hands upon the ghost (a gesture which is not without a
certain amount of violence in its own right) is one that affords sensory knowledge – yet this is
ultimately still limited. Harry and Hammond resolve that they must see the form (which is
reflective of an anxiety of invisibility that the ghost thrusts them deeper into.) They come up
with a scheme to create “a cast of it in plaster of Paris...[that] would give us the solid figure, and
satisfy all our wishes. But how to do it?” (36). After all, the ghost is their prisoner and one that is
in a constant struggle to liberate itself from its binds. Yet genius strikes for our ghost-seers:
“Why not give it chloroform?” Harry muses and argues that “once reduced to a state of
insensibility, we could do with it what we would” (36). Thus, they administer the chloroform and
“in three minutes afterward...were enabled to remove the fetters from the creature's body, and a
modeler was busily engaged in covering the invisible form with the moist clay” and after “five
minutes more we had a mold, and before evening a rough facsimile of the Mystery” (36).
The facsimile reveals that the ghost was “shaped like a man—distorted, uncouth, and horrible, but still a man” adding “it was small, not over four feet and some inches in height, and its limbs revealed a muscular development that was unparalleled” (36). Harry relates that this is “the physiognomy of what I should fancy a ghoul might be” and “looked as if it was capable of feeding on human flesh” (37). Having been satisfied by a visual representation of this invisible ghost, Harry and Hammond take up the question of what they are to do with this ghost now; they find it both impossible to keep in the boarding house and impossible to “be let loose upon the world”, Harry confesses “I would have gladly voted for the creature's destruction. But who would shoulder the responsibility? Who would undertake the execution of this horrible semblance of a human being?” (37). Note here also that the now confirmed material reality of the ghost bears consequences that are unforeseen. The ghost-seer’s perception of reality and their ability to accept the ghost as read is problematized by how human the ghost appears to be. Harry’s questions demonstrate how his perceptions of the ghost shift and how he extends a sense of humanity towards the ghost. He refers to killing the ghost as an execution which denotes the termination of human life not bestial. This further complicates their ability to treat the ghost as a monstrosity or infestation warrants eradication. The shared sense of humanity here is rare when compared to other representations of the ghost in the ghost story genre.28

27 O’Brien’s use of ghoul and that is capable of eating human flesh is freighted with meaning. Erin Janosik argues that this use of “ghoul” and the potential for cannibalism are vastly significant; she cites the OED definition for ghoul as “an evil spirit supposed (in Muslim countries) to rob graves and prey on human corpses.” She also relates that the etymology of ghoul “derives from ‘Arabic ‘ghūl’, from a verbal root meaning ‘to seize.’” Janosik’s keen observations on the root of O’Brien’s term here is illuminating as the ghoul in question began this entire ghost-encounter by violently seizing the ghost-seer. Janosik also goes to great lengths to contextualize O’Brien’s evocation of cannibalism. She writes that O’Brien left for New York a few years after the Great Famine which Janosik argues haunted him deeply; she points out that within “the context of the famine, cannibalism was often rumored to have been a recourse taken in Ireland” (223-4).

28 The haunted house poses obvious economic problems for landlords and owners, and O’Brien does not fail to include a humorous (if not slightly subversive) description of how the landlord responded to this ghost-encounter. We read that “Mrs. Moffat was in despair, and threatened Hammond and [Harry] with all sorts of legal penalties if
While the ghost-seers find manual confirmation of the ghost through these acts, they are faced with the consequences of material reality which results in the death of the ghost and its funeral. The ghost has been manually and materially confirmed as part of their observable reality, and this bears consequences which are equally real for the ghost-seers. Harry describes that they were “entirely ignorant of what the creature habitually fed on” and that all sorts of food were “placed before it, but was never touched”; Harry laments and empathizes with the ghost in stating that “it was awful to stand by, day after day, and see the clothes toss, and hear the hard breathing, and know that it was starving” (37). The ghost-hand confirmation function here takes on a new register that is not directly addressed, yet can be reasonably extrapolated from Harry’s description that “the pulsations of the heart, however, were daily growing fainter, and had now nearly ceased” (37). This is a creature that was described as horrific and possibly cannibalistic (if the signifiers of the ghost’s humanness are taken to their logical conclusion). While Harry is described as a learned man, he is not a man of science or of medicine. Thus, we can reasonably assume that the manner of checking the ghost’s pulse was one not sited upon the chest or neck – but the ghost’s wrist. The manual act of feeling the ghost’s pulse grow weaker and weaker is an incredibly intimate and tactile moment between the ghost-seer and the ghost. This sense underwrites the curious sympathy that Harry begins to express experience that “horrible as the creature was, it was pitiful to think of the pangs it was suffering”; this ultimately leads to Harry’s reflection that “at last it died” as they “found it cold and stiff one morning in the bed” (37). We read that the ghost-seers “hasten[ed] to bury it in the garden,” and that it “was a strange funeral,

[they] did not remove the Horror.” We read their humorous reply: “we will go if you like, but we decline taking this creature with us. Remove it yourself if you please. It appeared in your house. On you the responsibility rests” (37).
the dropping of that viewless corpse into the damp hole” (37). The oddity of “the cast of its form [Harry] gave to Doctor X—, who keeps it in his museum in Tenth Street” reaffirms the truth-statement by relating that he has now concluded drawing “up this narrative of an event the most singular that has ever come to my knowledge” (37-8). O’Brien takes the material reality of the ghost to an extreme that is rarely paralleled within the ghost story tradition as evidenced by the paradox of an already-dead ghost dying once again. This ghost story is also notable for being one of the earliest representations of invisibility in literature.

Kathryn Bird argues for an evolutionary discourse embedded within O’Brien’s text. She notes that “this story was published in the same year as The Origin of the Species” which is “when these ideas about humans’ animal being were already in circulation” (422). Bird observes that “like the hominoid apes of the eighteenth century, the ghostly creature in O’Brien’s story thwarts attempts at taxonimization which would obliterate its uncanny proximity to the figure of the human” and that these notions began to permeate the genre (423). Bird writes that “Darwinism ‘haunted the Victorian cultural imagination’” (Lewdon qtd in Bird 423); and she points out that this had “a profound effect on the ghost story in the period of its ‘golden age’ in the latter part of the nineteenth century,” and she provides an account of

29 Janosik’s work establishes a narrative of how O’Brien’s works formulate a discourse of mourning and the historical context of the Great Famine which occurred during his final years in Ireland. O’Brien spent his formative years predominantly in the south of Ireland before attending university in Dublin, and Janosik reads this “strange funeral” as “reminiscent of the burial pits in Skibereen in O’Brien’s youth” (228).
30 The works of Bird and Capuano offer insights into how O’Brien’s creaturely ghost story is in conversation with Darwinism. In Origin of Species, Darwin is cautious to make any explicit reference to human beings and that in one of the few references in which he does – it is in the comparison of the human hand as similar in bone structure to that of “lower” animals such as the bat’s wing, porpoise’s fin, and horse’s leg as Capuano indicates; he points out that “aside from this sentence, Darwin famously excluded humans from his original formulation of natural selection, yet their conspicuous absence from the text only made the subject more prominent to Victorian readers” (132). Capuano describes the Darwinian shockwaves registered in nineteenth century periodicals that “in the late 1850s [reports] dramatized how the gorilla attacked not with its formidable teeth, but rather with its bare hands” (132). These scientific developments and the ways in which they were reported to the public were clearly influential for O’Brien, who wrote for periodicals throughout the 1850s.
Lewdon’s distinctions between pre- and post-Darwinian ghosts. The former “points the way towards a higher plane of existence and haunts individuals for a particular reason”, and the post-Darwinian ghost is often more closely aligned with nonhuman or subhuman classifications (423). This isn’t a mutually exclusive issue as O’Brien’s ghost is at once creaturely and human (which suggestively underscores the radical notion that the two might not be that different after all.) Bird argues that these creaturely ghost stories “seek to strip away the supposed trappings of human exceptionalism – reason, intellect, self-control – and to work on the reader primarily as a physical being capable of experiencing visceral, uncontrollable fear” (424).

“It Touched Me Gently”: Wilkie Collins’s Marital and Martial Ghost-hands

Wilkie Collins’s “Mrs. Zant and the Ghost” (1885) humanizes the ghost, and this is yet another example of how both iterations of the ghost-hand function can be present. Collins first published this text under the title “The Ghost’s Touch” which serves to show his initial inclinations about the role of tactility in the ghost story he produced, and it appears that the change in title was more a convention of collecting this text alongside other stories (many of which bear similar naming conventions). In this text, the ghost’s hands interact with Mrs. Zant’s living body first as a means of confirmation and reassurance and later of warning (and eventually of protection which recalls the earlier ghost-hand combat function.) Collins observes the ghost story generic mark of the truth-statement through an odd variation; Collins himself seems to be the one issuing the truth-statement, not the protagonist or any of the ghost-seer characters to follow; Collins relates that tale to follow “describes the return of a disembodied spirit to earth, and leads the reader on new and strange ground”; he relates that this encounter is “not in the obscurity of midnight, but in the searching light of day” and that this was “neither revealed by a vision, nor announced by a voice, it reached mortal knowledge through the sense which is least
easily self-deceived: the sense that feels” (172). Collins metafictionally ushers out this ghost-like author to return “to the shadow from which he has emerged, and leav[ing] the opposing forces of incredulity and belief to fight the old battle over again, on the old ground” (172).\(^{31}\)

The ghost-hand functions that Collins offers in this text are two-fold. First, the ghost-hand confirmation function is present in the ghost establishing its presence and confirming its identity to Mrs. Zant. This confirmation is one that is reassuring to Mrs. Zant as the ghost is that of her late husband. The materiality of mourning is established in Mrs. Zant’s initial description where she is seen to be “dressed in the deep mourning of a widow” (175). Rayburn, the protagonist, and his daughter encounter Mrs. Zant in the park; the child is startled by widow, who is in a ghost-like reverie herself. Rayburn and the girl approach Mrs. Zant, who asks “‘did I feel it again?’… as if perplexed by some doubt that awed or grieved her” before raising her arms “slowly, and opened with a gentle caressing action—an embrace strangely offered to the empty air!” (176).\(^{32}\)

This chance meeting propels the ghost story forward as Rayburn follows Mrs. Zant to her apartment to see if she is in distress. During their interview, Rayburn is moved by Mrs. Zant’s plight of being a widow (a status he also shares), and he learns that she is under the care of her brother-in-law, Mr. John Zant (179). Rayburn then seeks out Zant to discuss his concerns for Mrs. Zant’s mental and physical health; once there, Zant unfolds her unfortunate history to Rayburn in “that dreadful calamity struck her down” that had taken place “before my brother had been committed to the grave, her life was in danger from brain-fever” which for Rayburn only raises further concerns and suspicions for Mrs. Zant’s welfare (182).

\(^{31}\) The “old ground” which Collins alludes to recalls Samuel Johnson’s remark that “five thousand years have now elapsed since the creation of the world, and still it is undecided whether or not there has ever been an instance of the spirit of any person appearing after death. All argument is against it; but all belief is for it” (qtd in McCorristine 31).

\(^{32}\) Collins’s text confirms that dogs are ghost-seers as well. We read that her dog “showed none of the restless activity of his race. With his head down and his tail depressed, he crouched like a creature paralyzed by fear” (175).
Rayburn receives a manuscript from Mrs. Zant that details her ghost-seeing experiences. This manuscript, which is the product of a manual act (and anticipates James’ *The Turn of the Screw* in some respects) arrives at Rayburn’s table in an “unusually large envelope sealed with black wax, and addressed in a strange handwriting [and] the absence of stamp and postmark showed that it had been left at the house by a messenger” which his maid states was hand-delivered from a woman “in deep mourning” (184). Mrs. Zant’s manuscript elucidates the mystery about her that has been inaccessible to Rayburn.33 Her manuscript relates that one of her mourning practices has been to return to the park to think about her late husband as it is a place that holds special meaning to her from being one of their “favorite walk[s]” to being the site where he asked her for her hand in marriage, and to where she “felt the rapture of our first kiss.” This leads Mrs. Zant to reflect that it is only natural for her to “wish to see once more a place sacred to such memories as these” (185). Gagné reads this through the sense of tactility that is at the heart of the ghost-encounter; she argues that tactility as theorized by “Charles Bell and other later theorists like Merleau-Ponty” helps to convey how touch “is epistemological and gives mortal knowledge” (99). Mrs. Zant details her ghost encounter: “it was not to be seen, and not to be heard. It stopped me…in that dazzling light, in that fearful silence, I felt an Invisible Presence near me [and] it touched me gently” (186). She describes that “at the touch, my heart throbbed with an overwhelming joy [and] exquisite pleasure thrilled through every nerve in my body” as “I knew him! From the unseen world—he himself unseen—he had returned to me. Oh, I knew

33 In criticism of women’s ghost stories, there is a curious dearth of commentary on Mary Shelley’s “On Ghosts” (1824) aside from Edmundson’s work. Shelley theorizes about spectrality in general before delving into “real” accounts of ghosts which she has become familiar with. She writes after her first two examples that “such are my two stories, and I record them the more willingly, since they occurred to men, and to individuals distinguished the one for courage and the other for sagacity” (Shelley, emphasis mine). At the outset of the nineteenth century ghost story tradition, Shelley foresaw the gendered issues surrounding ghost stories that feature female ghost-seers.
him!”; she recounts that “I felt my lips touched, as my husband’s lips used to touch them when he kissed me” and “felt myself held in a gentle embrace, as my husband’s arms used to hold me when he pressed me to his breast. And that was my answer” (186). She laments that “the touch of his lips, lingered and was lost; the clasp that was like the clasp of his arms, pressed me and fell away” as the “the garden-scene resumed its natural aspect” and sees a “little girl looking at me” (186). Gagné observes that she is “aware that this touch, and the proximity and care it provides, will not last, that this is not to be a sustaining touch but rather a fleeting one.” The critic terms this “the tactile residue and memory of her husband’s touch” and argues that this “is what allows her to feel care [over] fear” in this ghost-encounter (100-1).

The ghost-hand confirmation function develops beyond just establishing contact between the ghost and the widow; the ghost comes bearing a warning to her of his living (and nefarious) brother. While this ghost-hand confirmation function is seen to establish presence and identity, it is important that Collins inscribes the ghost-touch as something that can both warn and protect. Mrs. Zant’s manuscript continues to relate that in her next ghost encounter in the park, she “longed for the protection of the Invisible Presence” and she “prayed for a warning of it, if danger was near” (188). She describes that the ghost’s “touch answered me” and that “it was as if a hand unseen had taken my hand—had raised it, little by little—had left it, pointing to the thin brown path that wound toward me” and that “the unseen hand closed on my hand with a warning pressure: the revelation of the coming danger was near me” (188). Her manuscript reveals this danger to be the approach of her brother-in-law, John Zant. She reflects in the moments before he makes his way to her that she felt “the consciousness of myself as a living creature left me. I knew nothing; I felt nothing. I was dead” (188). Ann Gagné observes that the ghost’s touch “seems to anticipate danger and wants to demonstrate care and protect her” and that the tactile
interactions between Mrs. Zant’s living body and her husband’s ghost-hands “are described as touches that support, warn, and caress tenderly [as] the ghost seems to have respect for her and does not violently infringe on her corporality” (100-1). Rayburn goes to see Mrs. Zant to inquire about this, and during their conversation she makes a reference: “a dreadful doubt arose about my husband’s death” which she details as one of her husband’s doctors’ “thought that he might have taken an overdose of his sleeping drops, by mistake.” Rayburn surmises that Zant’s “is associated with a secret sense of guilt which her innocence cannot” fathom (191-2).

Lastly, Collins’s use of the ghost-hand function returns to the earlier combat function as a means of protection for the living. The ghost-hand confirmation function also extends to the protection of the living as seen in the ghost of Mrs. Zant’s husband protecting her from his brother. In a gothic inspired twist, Rayburn and the maid of Mr. John Zant conspire to spy on the two when they are alone in the adjacent room. As the two listen behind a curtain, the narrative relates that John Zant appeals to his sister-in-law with a “rouse yourself!...my darling, come to me!” and as he attempts “to embrace her—at the instant when Mr. Rayburn rushed into the room—John Zant’s arms, suddenly turning rigid, remained outstretched”; he lets out a “a shriek of horror [and] he struggled to draw them back—struggled, in the empty brightness of the sunshine, as if some invisible grip had seized him” (202). He protests in disbelief: “what has got me?...who is holding my hands? Oh, the cold of it! the cold of it!” (202). The ghost’s hands and Zant’s hands grapple as his “features became convulsed” before falling “prostrate with a crash that shook the room” (202). The ghost’s hands have thwarted these nefarious plans, and the text concludes with inklings of a possible courtship between the widowed Rayburn and Mrs. Zant (which the lack of ghostly intervention suggests the approval of the late Mr. Zant.) Mrs. Zant offers the reflection that ghost-readers are certainly privy to that “no mortal hand held the hands
of John Zant [but] the guardian spirit was with me” (203). Gagné argues that the ghost’s “touch protects and demonstrates an embodied care for his widow, and simultaneously ensures her protection through an unethical paralyzing and death of his brother” that Collins employs to convey “the tensions and dangers that women face in society” (101). By the 1880s, ghost stories rarely included ghosts “incapable of communicating with the living, and the place of one’s death rarely imposed limits upon” haunting as Bann points out, and the persistence of these ghost tropes shows a trajectory that “is not a linear progression from gothic revenants to spiritualist entities” but instead a bricolage of spiritualist notions of the ghost and other competing nineteenth century ideologies (675).

“The Bitterness of Death”: Margaret Oliphant’s Ineffectual Ghost-hands

Elizabeth McCarthy writes that Margaret Oliphant’s “literary output was, by any standards, immense” citing the 98 novels, 26 books of nonfiction, and other publications of “more than fifty short stories, over 300 articles and reviews, in addition to twenty-five volumes of personal correspondence, four volumes of diaries, and a posthumously published autobiography” (106).³⁴ Her financial burdens were also immense. After only seven years of marriage, her husband died bankrupt in 1859. Widowed at 30, Oliphant was “left with three young children to raise (another three died in infancy)” and she supported “herself and her children as well as her brother Willie and her brother Frank and his family through her writing” (McCarthy 106). In light of the loss and hardship that so often punctuated her life, Oliphant reflects “if I had not had unbroken health, and a spirit almost criminally elastic, I could not have done it. I ought to have been worn out by work, and crushed by care, half a hundred times by all

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³⁴ These numbers are conservative estimates due to what Elizabeth McCarthy points out in her work on Oliphant. She writes that there is some credibility to theories “that [Oliphant] burnt some novels and that her ne’er-do-well brother, Willie, published some of her earlier novels in his own name” (106).
rules, but I never was so” (182). Oliphant’s personal history offers context to how grief and mourning function in her ghost stories. While she lost three children in their infancy, all “six children predeceased her” as McCarthy writes, and her “experience of loss is tragic but by no means exceptional in this time period” (107). As available data suggests “the death rate of infants during the second half of the nineteenth century was nearly ten times as high as that in industrialized nations of the present day” (107). While this was a more common occurrence during the nineteenth century, McCarthy writes there “was very little professional or formal acknowledgement of its emotional impact on parents, apart from religious consolation literature” and that such literature often framed such loss as a test of faith (107). Oliphant remarks in her autobiography: “I keep on always upbraiding and reproaching God. I can’t help thinking of the question somebody once asked a grieving woman, Have you not yet forgiven God?” (42).

Oliphant’s personal relationships with grief and mourning inform how she reshapes the figure of the ghost in her stories. McCarthy takes this into account as she argues that “this collusion between memory and the act of creation is echoed in the figure of the ghost described by Derrida as being the memory of something which has never been present” (114). McCarthy notes that the “contesting doctrines of eternal damnation for a more liberal concept of the afterlife, Spiritualism could offer solace to those mourning the death of a loved one” (111). Melissa Edmundson points out that Oliphant “never took Spiritualism quite seriously”, and that Oliphant’s relationship to Spiritualism was not one of passive acceptance or outright skepticism.

35 Nineteenth century death rates offer a cultural context about grief and mourning that appears to be a world apart from our current moment. Using available data from 1840 onwards, McCarthy observes that “although overall death rates declined from the mid-century onwards, infant mortality rates remained constant” (107).

36 Oliphant continually sought to explore the dynamics between the bereaved and the departed in cases (especially in cases of parent and child) within her ghost stories. McCarthy notes that “Oliphant’s writing is filled with a tension between earthly and divine parentage” which she offers a counterpoint to in mother/child dynamics within her stories. McCarthy argues that this can be seen as “one bereaved mother cries out in Oliphant’s novel Agnes, her child’s death is ‘nobody’s fault—except God’” (110).
Edmundson cites Elisabeth Jay’s work on Oliphant, relating that the author “experienced contact with her dead son, Tids, and wrote about the episodes in her autobiography, calling them a ‘great comfort’ to her, though also admitting that they could have been caused by ‘some trick of the mind’” (Women’s 119). McCarthy describes Oliphant’s relationship to Spiritualism and its “ethereal manifestations [which] seemed to have proved equally unsatisfactory in offering Oliphant that sense of closeness and vitality her children had for her when they were alive” (111). As Oliphant speculates in her autobiography: “if heaven was ignorant of the bonds of nature it surely would be no heaven for the spirits of men” (39). McCarthy argues that notions like this help to inscribe “emotional potency” in her ghosts (114).

Oliphant’s ghost stories “Old Lady Mary” (1884) and “The Open Door” (1882) are two examples of the ghost-hand confirmation function that deeply reflect the larger changes which the ghost story tradition underwent during the late nineteenth century. In both stories, the ghost is reconfigured as human in ways that exceed prior attempts within the tradition. “The Open Door” is the most popular of Oliphant’s ghost stories, yet “Old Lady Mary” offers a profound affective dimension to the ghost-hand confirmation function that should not be overlooked. Edmundson observes that “Old Lady Mary finally succeeds in connecting with her goddaughter, if only for a brief moment” and even though “no words are exchanged, both Marys feel that they have seen one another and this momentary connection” (Women’s 124). McCarthy notes that Oliphant’s text “complicates this formula by presenting two quite different narratives simultaneously: namely, a supernatural ghost narrative and a narrative of natural (non-supernatural) illness, death, and mourning” (108). Edmundson notes one of the most striking aspects to Oliphant’s text as “it is one of the few ghost stories actually told through the point of view of the ghost” (Women’s 123). In an 1884 letter to John Blackwood, her publisher, Oliphant wrote that ghost
stories “are not like any [of the] others. I can produce them only when they come to me” (qtd in McCarthy 107). Oliphant’s remarks suggest that the ghost story was almost a sacred form in that her production of them differs from her other fiction.37 McCarthy notes that Oliphant only began writing ghost stories at age fifty and that these endeavors culminated in the publication of Stories of the Seen and Unseen (1881) which collected her major ghost stories (107).

In “Old Lady Mary” (1884), Oliphant offers a typical metaphor of the will as the dead hand. Lady Mary, who has no children and whose rich nephew stands to inherit her property and wealth, takes in a young girl (also named Mary) that is the daughter of a distant relation. She brings up the child to be a young lady in her home. In the twilight of her years, she is pressed by Mr. Furnival, her lawyer, to allow him to draw up her will. She refuses and opts to write it herself from which she takes no small amount of thrill and satisfaction in depriving Furnival of his “six-and-eightpences” in fees (88). She hides the will in a secret drawer of her prized Italian cabinet (which only she knows of). Lady Mary courteously declines Furnival’s legal pressings, and she plans to brandish the will at a later point to flummox the lawyer. Oliphant stresses this metaphor of will as dead hand in how she frames these interactions between Lady Mary and Furnival; Lady Mary “lifts “her hand defensively, with a laugh” and tells Furnival that he speaks “as if you expected me to take the law in my own hands” (85-6). Edmundson notes that Lady Mary inadvertently “resign[s] Little Mary to a life of destitution” by leaving her will within a secret location at the time of her death (Women’s 123).

Oliphant describes Lady Mary’s change in status from living to dead which is a rare trope within ghost stories. We read that “Lady Mary was not accustomed to be ill, and did not bear it

37 cf. Oliphant’s critique of “the commonplace ghost-stories which are among the ordinary foolishness of Christmas” offered by her narrator within her ghost story, Earthbound (qtd in McCarthy 107). Yet, McCarthy observes that in practice “her stories do employ many elements that are part and parcel of the Victorian ghost story formula” (108).
with her usual grace...she saw a group round her bed, the doctor,—with a candle in his hand, (how should the doctor be there in the middle of the night?)” and “this strange scene, which she did not understand, seemed to make itself visible all in a moment out of the darkness, and then disappeared again as suddenly as it came” (95-96). In the ethereal plane, Lady Mary decides to return to the living in order to resolve the issue of the hidden will, yet the other spirits there warn her that “they have forgotten you living. You are to them one who is dead. They will be afraid of you if they can see you. Oh, go not back!” (109-10). This does not deter Lady Mary, who considers “a hundred stories she had heard of those who had gone back. But not one that spoke of them as welcome, as received with joy, as comforting those they loved” (110). She reflects “ah no! was it not rather a curse upon the house to which they came?” because the material reality ghosts are greeted with is one where “the rooms were shut up, the houses abandoned, where they were supposed to appear” and “those whom they had loved best feared and fled them” (110). Lady Mary describes this as a “vulgar wonder,—a thing that the poorest laughed at, yet feared. Poor, banished souls! it was because no one would listen to them that they had to linger and wait, and come and go” (110). Edmundson writes that Oliphant’s use of haunted domestic spaces contributes to the Female Gothic in how her stories “complicate notions that the Female Gothic is fundamentally conservative” which is seen through how Oliphant “intentionally disorder[s] their literary houses in an attempt to question women’s place within, not just the house, but in society as a whole” (Women’s 130).

38 This passage speaks to a perspective about haunting that underscores how the ghost as a literary figure develops over the nineteenth century. The spirits that address Lady Mary speak to the fears that ensure when a ghost’s returns to the living; this aligns the ghost more closely to an older, revenant model of spectrality. Yet Lady Mary’s expressed purpose is one to right a wrong she inadvertently committed (not to reveal the wrong of another as revenants typically do). Edmundson observes Oliphant’s ghosts “have a mission to help mortals in some specific way, or attempt to bring humans to a clearer understanding of the inevitable consequence of their present way of life” (Women’s 123). This ghostly imperative is not unlike those articulated by the Dickensian ghosts as well.
As the story develops, the ghost-hand confirmation function can be seen in Lady Mary’s attempts and use of ineffectual ghost-hands. The first examples of this are offered soon after her ghostly status change where she attempts to first touch the living upon the arm and later when she attempts to reach for a child in his cradle. Once returned and coming across a neighbor she knew in life, the ghost of Lady Mary reaches to “put her hand timidly upon the woman's arm, who was thinking of nothing but her boys, and calling to them, straining her eyes in the fading light. ‘Don't be afraid, they are coming, they are safe,’ she said, pressing Catherine's arm. But the woman never moved. She took no notice” (123). This causes Lady Mary great distress which McCarthy notes is typical for Oliphant’s ghosts; the critic writes that her ghosts are often “brought to a state of despair and dejection in the realization that their materialization in the world of the living makes little to no difference, be they seen or unseen” (108).

After failing to be recognized by her neighbor, Lady Mary reenters her home in a state of despair. We read that Lady Mary wonders “what if she should be condemned to wander forever among familiar places that knew her no more, appealing for a look, a word, to those who could no longer see her, or hear her cry, or know of her presence?” (124, not unlike Marley). She is seized by terror and “a chill and pang of fear beyond description” which turns into “an impulse to fly wildly into the dark, into the night, like a lost creature; to find again somehow, she could not tell how, the door out of which she had come, and beat upon it wildly with her hands, and implore to be taken home” (124). Yet as she looks about her, she finds that she is “lost and alone

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39 Oliphant’s text inverts the usual gothic tropes that often influence the ghost story genre. Edmundson notes “in earlier Female Gothic plots, the pursued and persecuted heroine seeks to escape the stifling confines of the patriarchal house” and that “the characters in nineteenth-century ghost stories written by women, however, do not want to escape their homes, but instead want to re-enter them, want to regain houses and property (and thereby identity) that have been denied through the socioeconomic mismanagement (symbolized through the hauntings) that drives them out” (Women’s 130-1).
and that “she was as if she had never been” (124). We read that Lady Mary “went in silently, and the darkness was as day to her” to find “her own rooms…all shut up, yet were open to her steps, which no external obstacle could limit” (125). Lady Mary finds Mrs. Prentiss in the rooms below, discussing the plight of the younger Mary with the other women in service to hear her lament: “not a penny, nor a friend, nor one to look to her? Oh, you selfish old woman! oh, you heart of stone! I just hope you are feeling it where you're gone” (126). Mrs. Prentiss’s remarks are ironic as Lady Mary spends this entire sequence feeling it while trying and failing to make her own presence felt. Lady Mary “with wide, wistful eyes, [held] out her hands in appeal, receiving every word as if it had been a blow” although “she knew it was useless” (127). Lady Mary cries out to them “with a keen anguish in her voice, which seemed to be sharp enough to pierce the very air and go up to the skies”, but as Oliphant adds it “never touched the human atmosphere in which she stood a stranger [as] Hopgood was threading her needle when her mistress uttered that cry; but her hand did not tremble, nor did the thread deflect a hair's-breadth from the straight line” (127).40

Lady Mary sees a child in the cradle in the corner and reaches out to him; Oliphant writes that “though she was not of this world, she was still a woman, and had nursed her children in her arms” (128). Lady Mary “bent over the infant by the soft impulse of nature, tenderly, with no interested thought. But the child saw her; was it possible? He turned his head towards her, and

40 This passage that further develops the dearth of recognition which the ghost of Lady Mary faces is punctuated by an exception. Oliphant affirms that dogs are ghost-seers, and this trope is a rare example of consensus among nineteenth century ghost story authors. Yet, Oliphant takes dogs as ghost-seers a bit further than most in offering the ghost’s perspective in being acknowledged by the dog. We read that “only the little dog Fido, who had been basking by the fire, sprang up, looked at her, and retreating slowly backwards till he reached the wall, sat down there and looked at her again, with now and then a little bark of inquiry. The dog saw her. This gave her a curious pang of humiliation, yet pleasure” (129).
flickered his baby hands, and cooed with that indescribable voice that goes to every woman's 
heart” which brought a thrill to her. Oliphant describes this as “she put out her arms to him as his 
mother snatched him from his little bed; and he, which was more wonderful, stretched towards 
her in his innocence, turning away from them all”; Lady Mary “held out her hands, she spoke to 
them, telling who she was, but no one paid any attention” (128-9). McCarthy describes Lady 
Mary’s failed haunting as “she remains unseen and unacknowledged by those still in the living 
world” and she suffers from “her inability to break through to them” (112).

The ineffectual use of ghost-hands further complicates the ghost-hand confirmation function 
in the ghost of Lady Mary’s attempt to retrieve her secret will from her cabinet. Lady Mary “could do nothing, then,—nothing; neither by help of man, neither by use of her own faculties, 
which were greater and clearer than ever before” and “she sank down upon the floor at the foot 
of that old toy, which had pleased her in the softness of her old age, to which she had trusted the 
fortunes of another; by which, in wantonness and folly she had sinned, she had sinned!” (131). 
Lady Mary reflects that “there had been no bitterness in passing from earth to the land where she 
had gone; but now there came upon her soul, in all the power of her new faculties, the bitterness 
of death” citing that “the place which was hers she had forsaken and left, and the place that had 
been hers knew her no more” (131-2). She “went to the little Italian cabinet which stood against 
the wall, feeling now at least that she could do as she would” before becoming “baffled and 
vexed” as “she felt the polished surface of the wood under her hand, and saw all the pretty 
ornamentation, the inlaid-work, the delicate carvings” (129-30). She attempted to open the 
cabinet “yet the smooth surface resisted her touch; and when she withdrew a step from it, it stood 
before her solidly and square” as “she put forth her hands upon it, and could have traced the 
waving lines of the exquisite work, in which some artist soul had worked itself out in the old
times; but though she thus saw it and felt, she could not with all her endeavors find the handle of the drawer, the richly-wrought knob of ivory, the little door that opened into the secret place” (129-30). Oliphant relates Lady Mary’s ghostly labors in “how long she stood by it, attempting again and again to find what was as familiar to her as her own hand, what was before her, visible in every line, what she felt with fingers which began to tremble, she could not tell” (129-30).

Oliphant adds here that “time did not count with her as with common men” and that “she did not grow weary, or require refreshment or rest, like those who were still of this world” (130). The younger Mary is approached by a woman that has rented Lady Mary’s home; she asks Mary if she’s experienced anything supernatural in the home before adding: “I don't like the word ghost. It's disrespectful, if there's anything of the sort: and it's vulgar if there isn't” (138). Mary “looked round wistful with that strange consciousness which she had already experienced, that some one was there. The other stood so close to her that the girl could not move without touching her. She held up her hands, imploring, to the child of her love. She called to her, ‘Mary, Mary!’ putting her hands upon her, and gazed into her face with an intensity and anguish of eagerness which might have drawn the stars out of the sky. And a strange tumult was in Mary’s bosom. She stood looking blankly round her, like one who is blind with open eyes, and saw nothing; and strained her ears like a deaf man, but heard nothing. All was silence, vacancy, an empty world about her. She sat down at her little table, with a heavy sigh. ‘The child can see her, but she will not come to me,’ Mary said, and wept” (165). Edmundson point outs that while “the will is found and Mary’s health improves, the narrator never explicitly says that she gets any of the inheritance” and this leaves “the final emphasis…on Lady Mary and her final expatiation, which may give some hint as to Mary’s future as well” (Women’s 128). McCarthy writes that Oliphant’s ghosts “traverse an emotional world that never quite was or is; she argues that “like
the living, these ghosts mourn for something that cannot be restored, at least not in the way they had remembered it” which “does not mean the ghosts in Oliphant’s stories have failed [but] more accurately, in their interactions with the living and their attempts to relive or amend their own pasts, they have encountered the vagaries of their own memories and desires” (114). McCorristine concludes that this text affirms “that the dead returned, but that the dead did not necessarily return to communicate with the living” (223-4).

Oliphant’s “The Open Door” (1882) is decidedly the most popular of her *Stories of the Seen and Unseen* cycle. It was noted by M.R. James after the turn of the century as one of the premier examples of the ghost story tradition. The ghost-hand confirmation function here is also one that expands the notion of the ghost beyond merely an adversarial position. The specific scenes which convey most clearly this ghost-hand function invite readers to not only take into account the use of ghost-hands, but also the possibility of ghostly structures. This story observes a variation upon the truth-statement and begins with normative concerns regarding ghost-seeing. Yet one of the ways in which Oliphant’s ghost stories become distinct from others within the genre is the ardent empathy with the ghost that is inscribed within certain ghost-seer characters.

Instead of alluding to the supernatural events that follow, the somewhat muted truth-statement that begins this narrative delineates all of the personal details surrounding the Colonel and his family taking up the estate of Brentwood. This functions as a type of truth-statement in that it explicates salient points that prime the reader for the ghost encounter, yet this iteration does so without the ardent expression of believe what follows to be true. As the text opens, Mortimer is in the city and receives word that his son has taken dangerously ill; Mortimer rushes home by train and then horse “his pony panting and in foam, himself ‘as white as a sheet,’ but with the perspiration streaming from his forehead” (166). Once home, he receives details from
his wife and the doctor about the son’s condition (a frightful one that the son only wishes to speak to the father about the causes of.) This leads to Roland, his son, describing to his father the ghost encounter that brought this about. Roland relates that he heard a ghost crying and wailing while out on the property which shook him to his core. He explains to his father that he has kept this ghost encounter to himself lest his mother and the doctor begin treating him as a deranged ghost-seer. Roland pleads with Mortimer to go and investigate and help the ghost as he says it is “out there all by itself in the ruin, and nobody to help it. I can’t bear it, I can’t bear it!” (172).

Roland brokers a promise from Mortimer by appealing to his sense of fatherhood: “oh think, papa, think, if it was me!” (172). This exchange prompts Mortimer to relate that “of course, I do not believe in ghosts; but I don’t deny, any more than other people, that there are stories, which I cannot pretend to understand”; he further explains that his “blood got a sort of chill in [his] veins at the idea that Roland should be a ghost-seer” because that “means a hysterical temperament and weak health, and all that men most hate and fear for their children”. Thus, Mortimer resolves to “take up his ghost and right its wrongs, and save it from its trouble” though is “enough to confuse any man” (172). Edmundson observes that Mortimer benefits from this investigation. Through “making a sympathetic connection with this estranged family” Mortimer saves his son “from an early [supernatural] death” (Women’s 121).

Mortimer seeks counsel from Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis, who have long worked at Brentwood and are bearers of institutional memory in its service (174). Mortimer concludes that “Brentwood had lapsed into the hands of a distant branch of the family, who had lived but little there; and of

41 Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis are put in a precarious situation with regards to the ghost that haunts Brentwood. Edmundson notes that “if they scare away possible tenants, their own existence in the house becomes endangered,” and she argues that their “decision to keep the ghost story a secret has more to do with economic and social reasons than with any fear they have regarding the ghost” (Women’s 120).
the many people who had taken it, as I had done, few had remained through two Decembers.” He further reflects that no one “had taken the trouble to make a very close examination into the facts” (176). Jarvis explains that there is truth to the rumors of ghosts on the property, yet he rebuffs this with stating that “naebody believes in ghosts” and that such encounters are either “wind in the trees…or some effec’ o’ the water wrastlin’ among the rocks”; to the question of why this information was withheld from Mortimer, Jarvis further explains “what for should I have spoiled the bargain and hairmed the property for no-thing?” (176). This throws Mortimer into a frenzy as he relates “here I was with my boy in a brain-fever, and his life, the most precious life on earth, hanging in the balance, dependent on whether or not I could get to the reason of a commonplace ghost-story!” (177). Yet, as to whether or not Roland was influenced by the talk of those in service at Brentwood, Jarvis swears that “I took it upon myself to pass the word – ‘No a syllable to Maister Roland…no a syllable’” (177). Edmundson notes that the larger transformation through the text is one where “Mortimer begins to change his attitude about the ghost – and the working classes around him” and that he “is exorcized…of his narrow views towards the working classes by his encounter with the ghostly spirit” (Women’s 121-3).

The ghost-hand conflict function comes into full view once Mortimer investigates the haunted site; there the ghost is found to be calling, knocking against a ghostly door, and mourning the death of his mother. To investigate the matter firsthand, Mortimer goes to the haunted site of the open door where the ghost’s cries can be heard. Mortimer is filled with fright at the first instance of the unknown. We read that Mortimer “felt [his foot] knock against something solid. What was it?” (180). Yet, he is restored somewhat by the realization that this was just the brush along the path. We read that “the contact with hard stone and lime, and prickly bramble-bushes…[and] the rough feeling of stones” restores his senses (180). Mortimer
continues forward “grop[ing] about thus” in darkness and uncertainty before shaking “off [his]
visionary folly,” and we read that these concrete natural elements helped bring him “back to a
common existence” (180). Mortimer reflects that he feels “as if [he] had been shaken by a wise
hand out of all the silliness of superstition” (180). After hearing the cries of the ghost firsthand,
Mortimer feels “as firmly determined that there was something as Roland” (180). This offers
both a sense of confirmation of the ghost, and a suggestion that the ghost is human in the same
way that Roland is, which underwrites how Mortimer comes to understand the ghost. After this,
Mortimer fully encounters the ghost as we read that he hears the ghost cry “‘mother! mother!’
and then an outburst of wailing”, and the “uneasy, miserable creature was pacing up and down
before a closed door”; we read that Mortimer hears “a sound like knocking, and then another
burst, ‘Oh, mother! mother!’” (185).

         Mortimer attempts to understand the ghost as a real entity first and then as human in the same
ways he and Roland are human. One of the things that Mortimer must confront within this
attempt to understand and empathize with the ghost is to acknowledge why the ghost is haunting
Brentwood. According to Edmundson, Mortimer “tries to understand the terrible situation that
the ghost is in, wanting to be let in a door that does not exist by a loved one who is no longer
there” (Women’s 121). This suggests that the ghost’s attempts at mourning are impossible or at
least not accomplishable. The process of mourning which began in life is iterative and recursive
in death as evidenced by the ghost’s actions. Later, Mortimer tries to get Dr. Simson to
accompany him to the haunted site; he discusses his findings with Simson and invites the doctor
to join him in his investigation. Simson posits that he would be forever ruined “if it were known
that John Simson was ghost-hunting” (187). The doctor further explains that this is “not science – it’s common-sense” and that Mortimer is “encouraging an unwholesome tendency to even examine” such phenomena. Attempting to reason with Mortimer, he asks “what good could come of it? Even if I am convinced, I shouldn’t believe” (187). Bissell writes that “present[ing] doctors as well meaning but potentially arrogant in their logical worldviews” is a popular trope and that Simson “is one such archetype, blithely declaring that ‘apparitions’ are ‘all bosh’” (42).

After the ghost’s crisis has been resolved, the conclusion of the story devolves into a series of discourses surrounding the reality of ghosts that are significant and normative expressions of skepticism and anxieties. Accompanied by both a man of science and a man of the cloth, Mortimer takes them to the haunted ruins to wait and encounter the ghost. Dr. Simson continues to be highly skeptical of the entire ordeal, yet Dr. Moncrieff, the man of the cloth, is less inclined to outright dismiss these concerns. Simson issues several skeptical criticisms while they wait, yet once the ghost begins wailing and knocking upon the door – Mortimer reflects: “I confess that my only feeling was satisfaction” for “the scoffer could scoff no longer” (190). Mortimer is brought into a sort of ghostly reverie in listening to the laments of the ghost, and as it seems that the ghost throws itself upon the door, Mortimer “sprang forward to catch something in my arms that flung itself wildly within the door” as he describes that “the illusion was so strong, that I never paused till I felt my forehead graze against the wall and my hands clutch the ground – for there was nobody there to save from falling, as in my foolishness I thought” (198-9). This

42 Ghost story authors often include men of science and medicine in their narratives as a rational counterpoint to the supernatural occurrences at their core. Edmundson writes that numerous critics have observed the use of “the supernatural as a means to bring stalwart men of science and reason into a faith in another spiritual and unexplainable world” and that this “was a recurring theme in Oliphant’s writing, as she implicitly criticized the growing dependence on scientific reason at the expense of spiritual faith” (Women’s 122).
haunting elicits Dr. Moncrieff to deliver a sort of sermon that releases the ghost this state of
grief, and order is ultimately restored to the ruins.

Mortimer describes that as they walked from the ruins back to the manor, “Dr. Moncrieff put
his arm into [his]” as they walked: “it was as if we were coming from a deathbed” in that
“something hushed and solemnized the very air” (199). They both feel the “sense of relief in it
which there always is at the end of a death-struggle…as we returned into the ways of life” (199).
Mortimer arrives at a conclusion in stating that such a scene “might impress itself somehow upon
the hidden heart of nature” and that the repetition of the haunting “in its terrible strangeness and
incomprehensibility [was] almost mechanical – as if the unseen actor could not exceed or vary,
but was bound to re-enact the whole” (202). Edmundson notes that “the mysterious doorway in
the Brentwood house on the outskirts of the city immediately brings to mind a symbolic
‘doorway’ between two social classes” and argues that this is a separation not only between “the
living and the dead, but also between the wealthy and the working classes” (*Women’s*
119-21). McCarthy writes that Oliphant’s ghost stories are situated upon “human ties which connect the
living and the dead” that “are vividly actualized in the form of the ‘ghost’” (114). She writes
that “outside of the world of the supernatural, these ties are established and maintained *only* in
the act of remembering: in the living memory of those still alive”, yet in the case of Oliphant’s
*Stories of the Seen and Unseen*, “the supernatural and the natural are combined in such a way
that the figure of the ghost is always contingent on memory and mourning in the living ‘real’
world”; as such, she concludes that “memory is not a self-contained or ‘static thing’ – like a
stone monument – but rather an active process” (114). Bann concludes that ghost-hands
“represented not merely agency in itself, but the power of death to confer it” (670). The ghosts
which Oliphant offers in these texts negotiate the world with ineffectual ghost-hands, and the
ghost-hand confirmation function demonstrates the ways in which their agency extends beyond
death; they are still inscribed with the same affect which they had when living, and this affective
dimension is the motivating force behind their hauntings.

In Julia Briggs’s seminal work on the ghost story, she argues that the philosophical
problems at the heart “of whether apparently supernatural phenomena have any independent
existence or are created in the human imagination” are in fact already “implicit in the question
most basic to the ghost story, ‘was it real or imaginary?’” (Briggs qtd in McCorristine 65). This
is the common refrain of the genre, and it underwrites all the examples of ghost stories
discussed in this thesis as well as in the larger tradition. The ghost-hand functions which I argue
for are an answer to this question: ghosts are both real and imaginary. The way ghost-hands
interact with living bodies, especially in combat, are decidedly real. Gertrude’s cold embrace
chokes the young lover in Braddon’s text. Hearn’s ghost of O-Tsuyu chokes Shinzaburō, and
the daimyō’s dead wife haunts Yukiko by fusing her hands to her breasts. O’Brien’s
humorously excessive “What Was It?” offers an early example of ghost-hands assaulting living
bodies (in which the invisibility of the ghost assailant complicates the reality of the ghost-seer).
O’Brien focuses on how the ghost being an observable part of reality, offers a corporeality that
the ghost-seers must reckon with, which is why this text offers such a helpful bridge between
both functions.

The second half of O’Brien’s “What Was It?” switches from the ghost-hand combat
function to explore the ghost-hand confirmation function. Harry must move from literally
grappling with the ghost’s body to mentally grappling with the ghost’s reality. The ghost is
Eerily, the ghost is human in the same ways that Harry and Hammond are human, and this
shared sense of humanity ushers the ghost-seers further into crisis as they bear witness to the
ghost slowly dying of starvation. The paradox of an already-dead ghost dying (again) affirms how the ghost is in fact living and human in the same ways that the ghost-seers are. Collins’s “Mrs. Zant and the Ghost” also takes up this thread of the ghost’s agency and humanity in describing how Mrs. Zant is touched, caressed, and protected by the ghost of her late husband in ways that suggest that the bonds of love and affection persist beyond death. This is also one of the main conceits of Oliphant’s “Old Lady Mary” and “The Open Door”: in both, the ghost returns to the mortal realm not directed by malevolence but by grief and mourning. Oliphant’s ghosts mourn their actions (and inactions) in life and seek, in death, to redress them. The unnamed ghost in “The Open Door” was in life the prodigal son, yet in death he continues to mourn the loss of his mother and his inability to be with her before the hour of her death (Oliphant writes that he began knocking upon the open door only a day after his mother died.) The ghost of Lady Mary tries to redress the wrong of keeping her will secretly hidden, yet she is continually thwarted in her attempts to use her hands to negotiate a world she is no longer a part of. The ineffectual use of her hands begins at the failed touch of upon an arm, to the failed lifting of the child in cradle, to the ultimate expression of this in her inability to open the Italian cabinet that so easily and arbitrarily could leave Little Mary provided for.
Coda

To paraphrase Coya Paz, it is not a question of whether or not ghosts are real – what matters is that ghost stories are real. To that I would add, the ghost might only be real in ghost stories. Ghosts might only be definitively observed and studied in the textual plane of existence which is composed by the ghost story genre. Mid to late nineteenth century ghost stories are a highly generative category not only because of their abundance, but because of how they contribute to and engage with numerous discourses. Philosophical and theological questions are taken up by ghost story authors in the same spirit as the scientific and pseudoscientific. Spiritualism stands as a sort of culmination of all these concerns. Many ghost story writers associated certain spiritualist conceits (such as table-rapping) with skepticism. In the broad pursuit of understanding ghosts, ghost story writers often inscribed their ghosts with an increasing sense of agency over the second half of the nineteenth century, and metaphors of haunting would after the turn of the century become taken up by modernists and redefined in light of the mass losses of the First World War. The ghost did not disappear from this metaphor, yet the trends of the ghost as literary figure and its haunting of metaphors have expanded through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries far beyond the nineteenth century context discussed here. Notions of spectrality, especially as defined by Derrida, have saturated academic discourses.

Ghosts and stories about them recur. Technological progress only further complicates the basic questions the living have about ghosts. Bissell concludes that technological progress “fulfil[s] a dual function, providing fresh means through which such revenants can take form and contributing to rendering everyday life uncanny”; in a larger sense, the leaps and bounds made by scientific progress over the nineteenth century was “expected to explain or eventually eradicate both real and fictional spectres” as Bissell relates, and in the words of one fin de siècle
observer’s remark that the “electric light was death on ghosts” or at least it was supposed to be (47). Even now, as Susan Owens concludes, “in our brightly lit, connected age, ghosts continue to give ghost-hunters the slip, maintaining their thrilling elusiveness” (269). Belsey argues that ghost stories counter the threat of death and mortality, and that they “ward off the finality of loss, or at least hold it at bay” while these texts also “register a resistance to the limits that stout common sense imposes on thinking, stretching speculation beyond the maps culture provides and allowing a brief engagement with undiscovered countries” (32). These unknown territories to which Belsey alludes, resonate with anyone that has suffered loss, and the ghost story is implicated in how authors represent grief.

Whether it is blatantly addressed as in the ghost stories of Margaret Oliphant or convoluted as in O’Brien’s “strange funeral” for the ghost, this genre stands within the grasp of grief and mourning. The living’s experience of loss often has a way of forcing them to consider their own mortality. In the case of ghost stories, this forces them to confront how similar they are to the ghost. The ghost was, after all, human in the same ways as the ghost-seer is human. Ghost encounters routinely force ghost-seers to perform a death calculus where they reckon with their own mortality like Casaubon’s realization that death is not an abstract concept. While death is rather commonplace in its representations within literature, representations of grief are far more rare and far more precious. Ghost stories allow us to see a side of grief that is often unaddressed. Grief is not a series of linear stages one passes through consecutively and neatly as Kübler-Ross has theorized. Grief produces a panoply of emotions in mourners that are iterative. Mourning involves cycles of angst, despair, and rage. Yet, it also involves clarity, joy, and grace. Grief is a form of grievance and not just etymologically. It is a grievance against time, against death, against the entropy that we must bear witness to in our lives. In this light, ghosts and stories
about them are expressions of disorder and desire. Ghost stories posit that existence continues beyond terminus of corporeal life; these stories also posit that ghosts are able to make their grievances known and to do something about them in death. In hauntings, ghosts use their hands to mete out justice. Ghost stories often articulate the ghost’s grievances that persist after death. Ghost story authors inscribe their own personal grievances within how they configure the ghost and why it returns to haunt the living; this might explain why finding consensus about ghosts is such a thorny task across the genre.

Oliphant’s work helps us see the relationship between authorial grievances and ghost stories. She considered ghost stories to be an almost sacred form that stood high above the commonplace stories and novels she wrote to financially support herself, her children, and her extended family.43 Ghost stories often force ghost-seers and readers to confront and acknowledge their own mortality. Acknowledging mortality involves a reckoning with one’s own living agency and the legacy one leaves behind. Reflecting on her “criminally elastic spirit” and how she will be remembered, Margaret Oliphant reckons with these ideas and writes:

When I die I know what people will say of me: they will give me credit for courage (which I almost think is not courage but insensibility), and for honesty and honourable dealing; they will say I did my duty with a kind of steadiness, not knowing how I have rebelled and groaned under the rod. (44)

Oliphant’s remarks underscore the toll grief exacts from those in mourning. Spared by what she terms insensibility, Oliphant reflects on the ceaseless labor that grief foisted upon her. Yet, her claims about legacy contradict this notion of insensibility. Oliphant’s reflections are acutely

43 Both McCarthy and Edmundson cite Oliphant’s remark about the precious nature of ghost stories. Oliphant’s reflection that she was only able to write them when they came to her suggests that ghosts and stories about them were special visitants in her generative and routine mode of writing (McCarthy 107, Edmundon Women’s 119).
sensitive to memory which is the gift and curse bestowed by grief. In memory, mourners are
ghost-like themselves. Displaced in time and space, mourners haunt and are haunted by their
memories. In her autobiography, Oliphant recounts the fond memories she and her son, Cecco,
shared at a neighbor’s home in years gone by. Cecco was her last surviving child.
Remembering him, Oliphant muses:

I wonder sometimes if what has been ever dies. Should not I find them all round the
old whist-table, and my Cecco, with this bright face and the great blue vein that showed
on his temple, proud to be helping to amuse the old people, if I were but bold enough to
push into the deserted house and look for them now? I have so often felt, with a
bewildered dizziness, as if it might be. (172)

Many have noted how the dying often speak of going “home” and returning to
something that exists in the past as they consider the end of their own life. This metaphor is a
powerful one, and Oliphant’s remarks cut to the quick of it. She considers if what has been ever
dies which underscores how the finality of death might not be so final. This sense of finality is
the most basic issue of the ghost’s ontology. This line of speculation leads one up the garden
path of ghostly thinking as it raises more questions than answers. Is death truly final? Is death
only a corporeal event? Are the dead really gone if they continue to exist in memory? These
questions easily digress into the bewildering sense that Oliphant notes. In a Freudian paradox,
ghosts and memory somehow involve both the heimlich and unheimlich at once.

Such paradoxes notoriously mark the ghost story genre, and their dizzying effects can
be curbed by focusing on how the hands of the ghost are being used. There are numerous other
examples of ghost stories that express the ghost-hand function from the mid nineteenth century
onwards. My thesis has only scratched the surface, and this line of inquiry can be pursued in the
following ghost stories that have not been discussed here. Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse's Story” (1852) and J.S. Le Fanu’s “Ghost Stories of the Tiled House” (1861) both follow Brontë’s trope of a ghost-hand pleading for entry at a window; Le Fanu’s example takes this to an extreme where the ghost-seers only ever see the hand of the ghost. Grant Allen’s “Our Scientific Observations on a Ghost” (1864) offers a satire of trying to empirically prove the existence of ghosts. Charles Dickens’s “No. 1 Branch Line: The Signal-Man” (1866) uses the hands and gestures of the ghost as an omen for disaster; this Dickensian ghost story examines the horrors of alienated labor and explores the spectrality of the working class under capitalism. Henry James’s “The Romance of Certain Old Clothes” (1868) explores how the ghostly hands of a dead first wife can return to haunt and harm her successor. Like Oliphant’s ghosts, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps “Since I Died” (1873) offers examples of the ghost attempting to make themselves known to the living using manual acts. Mary Elizabeth Braddon’s “The Shadow in the Corner” (1879) is an example of an ambiguous and indefinable ghost that is able to force the ghost-seers that encounter it to take manual acts to end their own lives. A.C. Doyle’s “The Brown Hand” (1899) uses the hand as a site of a problematic colonial discourse where the English ghost-seer reunifies an Indian ghost with a non-white hand that is not his own.

Ghost stories that employ the ghost-hand function extend into the twentieth century as well. M.R. James’s “Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad” (1904) is an unsettling example of a ghost that cannot see and must use its hands to find and touch the ghost-seer. W.F. Harvey’s “The Beast with Five Fingers” (1919) reconfigures the hand of the ghost into a self-contained monstrosity that no longer needs a whole body; the monstrous dead hand haunts all on its own. H.D. Everett’s “Fingers of a Hand” (1920) also takes up this type of configuration, yet it does so to a much less antagonistic end; Everett’s ghost is one of warning that urgently
writes out notes to the ghost-seers to save them from disaster. Elizabeth Bowen’s “Hand in Glove” (1952) continues this trope as well when a young niece attempts to take a pair of her recently deceased aunt’s gloves and is choked by them. The ghost-hand function can also be seen through many examples of film and television through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While metaphors of haunting and spectrality have shifted greatly in the last two centuries, the ghost-hand function helps readers understand how ghosts use their hands to negotiate the spaces and living bodies they haunt. This trope of hands that haunt brings us back to the most basic issue of what motivates the ghost in literature. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, ghost stories became frequently marked by this type of haunted handiwork of the ghost. Ghosts return to harm the living but also to offer solace to them, and ghost stories continue to offer narratives of both revenge and comfort to readers and writers in the modern world.
Works Cited and Consulted


[https://doi-org.jpllnet.sfsu.edu/10.1007/978-3-030-40866-4_13](https://doi-org.jpllnet.sfsu.edu/10.1007/978-3-030-40866-4_13)


