

Post-intermediate



C1 (Effectiveness)

R A I N B O W S

Great Ghost Stories

Isabella Bruschi



edisco

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INTRODUCTION

THE SHORT STORY

The short story as an independent genre originated in the U.S.A. where, from the beginning of the 18th century, tales (often anonymous) of different lengths and styles were regularly published in magazines.

A famous American short-story writer, Edgar Allan Poe, played an important role in giving importance to the short story as a separate literary genre. In his essay *Twice-told Tales by Nathaniel Hawthorne. A Review* (1842) Poe wrote:

The initial consideration was that of extent. If any literary work is too long to be read at one sitting, we must be content to dispense with the immensely important effect derivable from unity of impression. It is clear that the brevity must be in direct ratio of the intensity of the intended effect. [...] For, if two sittings be required, the affairs of the world interfere and everything like totality is at once destroyed. [...]

My next thought concerned the choice of an impression or “effect”, to be conveyed. [...] I say to myself, in the first place, “Of the innumerable effects, or impressions, of which the heart, the intellect, or (more generally) the soul is susceptible, what one shall I, on the present occasion, select?” [...]

My next question referred, then, to the “tone” of its highest manifestation. [...]

Then I looked for something that might serve as “key-note” [...] some pivot upon which the whole structure might turn. [...]

The next point to be considered [...] was the “locale”. For this [...] it has always appeared to me that a close “circumspection of space” is absolutely necessary to the effect of insulated incident: it has the force of a frame to a picture. It has an indisputable moral power in keeping concentrated the attention. [...]

In another important essay, *The Philosophy of the Short Story* (1884), the American critic Matthews Brander affirms that the most prominent feature of a short story is its “symmetry of design” that a writer can build up concentrating on a single character, emotion or event.

In other words short stories are rarely complex in so far their setting

is circumscribed in space and time, their plot usually develops according to a regular pattern, which leads the reader from the initial situation (a single circumstance or event in the life of the character) to the climax and eventually to the conclusion, where a solution of some kind is given to the situation presented.

The key-note (as Poe defines it) is the point around which the whole story revolves, giving it unity and contributing to create involvement in the reader. The character (or characters, never many) in short stories are portrayed in a specific moment of their life (particularly critical or anyway meaningful) rather than being shown in a progressive process of growth and maturation.

GHOST STORIES

Ghost stories share most of the characteristics of the short story and it's not by chance that Edgar Allan Poe, the theorist of the short story, is also the well-known writer of famous and celebrated mystery tales. Ghost stories became very popular in English and American literature in the period between the mid-19th century and World War II. The interest in ghost and mystery stories developed from the previous gothic tradition; it had produced novels set in dark abbeys or isolated castles, based on complicated plots revolving around supernatural or mysterious events, where a virtuous hero (more often a heroine) was persecuted by a villain and where an atmosphere of oppression and terror dominated.

Ghost stories also gave rise to further developments in the second half of 19th century. The most meaningful sub-genre was the "sensational novel" whose ingredients were, besides a touch of gothic, realism and fantasy, melodrama, domestic and exotic elements.

Nowadays ghosts are no longer fashionable in literature and those who have taken their place in the readers' fantasy are probably the aliens of science fiction.

NARRATIVE PATTERNS IN GHOST STORIES

Ghost stories focus on the relationship between the living and the dead. They are based on mysterious apparitions that usually arouse disquieting feelings ranging from fear to anxiety, from horror to apprehension, from terror to alarm and despair. The narrative pattern of ghost stories can be represented by a rising line progressing to a climax, that is to say the apparition of the spirit. The climax is gradually built up using a series of elements that contribute to rouse expectation and to create suspense in the reader; this generates the "effect" discussed by E. A. Poe. The apparition of the spirit, that is the supernatural event, comes to break a pre-existing balance and allows the passage from the

initial to the final situation; in other words it is the narrative device that gives life to the ghost story itself, its very essence. The supernatural events always occur in a “natural setting”: place and time are always “real” (however disquieting they might be) and topical, they belong to the realm of everyday life, as do the characters, who are usually common, rational people; all this allows the readers to identify with the events narrated. H. P. Lovecraft, (a ghost-story writer himself) in his essay *Supernatural Horror in Literature*, referring to another famous ghost-story writer, M. R. James, wrote: “A ghost story, he believes, should have a familiar setting in the modern period, in order to approach closely the reader’s sphere of experience. Its spectral phenomena, moreover, should be malevolent rather than beneficent, since fear is the emotion primarily to be excited.”

In spite of these common features, ghost stories may differ greatly from one another. Let’s consider the mystery element first. Most of the stories presented in this book can have opposite interpretations: the apparition can be seen either as “real” or as the result of the character’s imagination or of the delusion of his senses. This “hesitation” between two different interpretations is generated by the fact that only the protagonist actually sees the ghost but there is no further proof of its existence; this is the case of *The Phantom Coach* and *To be taken with a Grain of Salt*. In *Dickon the Devil* and *The Judge’s House*, the “actual” apparition is mixed up with strange rumours or old tales. In the remaining two stories, *the Moonlit Road* and *The Monkey’s Paw* instead, the mystery element is treated in a different way: in *The Moonlit Road* the existence of the dead woman’s spirit is given for granted, as the ghost itself becomes in turn one of the narrators; it explains to the reader the events that led to her death and her present condition through a medium. *The Monkey’s Paw* is more similar to a fairy tale and its mystery side relies on a “magic gadget” (a charmed monkey’s paw) as often happens in the stories narrated by Scheherazade in *The Arabian Nights*.

The stories collected in this book also differ in the narrative techniques adopted. Edwards, Dickens, Le Fanu chose a first person-narrator, which on one hand makes the narration less reliable (a first person narrator is also one of the characters and as such his/her point of view is more restricted and biased than that of an external narrator), but on the other hand it makes the identification between the reader and the narrated events easier and more immediate.

The Moonlit Road is quite an interesting case as the narration is entrusted in turn to the three characters (one of whom is the ghost itself) of the story; the three of them give the reader their personal point of view on the event occurred. All the other stories are told by a third person narrator, who supplies the reader with his “authoritative” external point of view.

As for the setting, all the stories collected here share the same characteristic presented before: they all take place in a “real”, “common” setting, no exotic or distant places, no uncommon or extraordinary situations. In spite of this some of the stories (namely *The Judge’s House*, *Dickon the Devil*, and partly *The Phantom Coach*) owe much of their disquieting atmosphere to the buildings to which they are connected, buildings that we can define as “haunted houses”.

Finally also the reasons why the dead appear to the living are very different. The spirits of the dead may haunt someone because they want to reveal a crime (*To be taken with a Grain of Salt*); sometimes ghosts come to this world because something they wanted in life hasn’t been accomplished (*Dickon the Devil*); they may re-enact the tragedy that caused their death (*The Phantom Coach*); they might simply wish to keep in touch with their dear ones, or be called back by them (*The Moonlit Road*, *The Monkey’s Paw*); they might also be evil spirits, haunted themselves by their past lives (*The Judge’s House*).

The authoress Amelia Ann Blanford Edwards



Amelia Ann Blanford Edwards (1831-1892) enjoyed three separate careers: as a journalist, a novelist, and an Egyptologist. She was also an active supporter of the suffrage movement, serving at one time as Vice-President of the Society for Promoting Women's Suffrage.

She was born in 1831 in London. Her father had been an army officer before becoming a banker. Her mother, of the Irish nobility, educated Amelia at home. She published poetry, stories, and articles in a number of magazines including *Chamber's Journal*, *Dickens's Household Words* and *All the Year Round*. She also wrote for the newspapers, the *Saturday Review* and the *Morning Post*.

Her first full-length novel was *My Brother's Wife* (1855). Her early novels were well-received, but it was *Barbara's History* (1864), a novel of bigamy, that solidly established her reputation as a novelist. Her last novel, *Lord Brackenbury* (1880), was very successful.

Yet it is not her novels that are reprinted nowadays, but her traveller's tales. At the age of 30, following the death of her parents and thanks to the proceeds of her writings, Amelia embarked on a series of intrepid expeditions, of which she wrote. Her accounts are notable for her knowledge of her surroundings, her interest and openness towards the people and customs of other countries, and not least for the humour and enthusiasm which enliven many of her experiences.

At a time when male chaperonage was considered socially, if not physically, essential for a woman traveller, she chose to travel and live with a woman companion. Their first trip was chronicled as *Sights and Stories: A Holiday Tour Through Northern Belgium* (1862). A challenging journey through the Dolomites, a mountainous area almost unknown to tourists at that time, is recounted in *Untrodden Peaks and Unfrequented Valleys* (1873). Together the two women braved difficulties, privations and resistant or hostile male servants and villagers. It is clear that part of the attraction of travelling for Edwards was the challenge of reaching areas that were almost entirely untouched and inaccessible. It was her third journey, however, that substantially changed the direction of Edwards' life. In 1870, she travelled to Egypt and sailed up the Nile to Abu Simbel. There, she spent six weeks excavating at the Temple of

Rameses II. Her animated and engaging account of the trip was published as *A Thousand Miles Up the Nile* in 1877. By the end of the trip, Amelia had developed a passion for Egyptology that would become the major work of the rest of her life.

When she returned to England, Edwards was determined to promote the cause of Egyptian archaeology. She began planning and promoting the founding of an Egyptological Society. With her expertise in journalism, Edwards was well-placed to arouse public interest in supporting excavation work. She wrote letters soliciting possible supporters, and campaigned for the society by undertaking strenuous lecture tours through England and the United States. A series of such lectures were rewritten and published in book form, as *Pharaohs, Fellahs, and Explorers* in 1891. Her work was generally respected. She received three honorary degrees: from Columbia College, New York; Smith College, Massachusetts; and the College of the Sisters of Bethany, also in Massachusetts. She also received an English civil list pension for “her services to literature and archaeology.” However, as the field of archaeology increasingly became the province of professional males, her influence decreased.

Although saddened, Amelia continued to dedicate herself to the Egypt Exploration Fund. Her happiest and most productive period, however, was over. Her health began to deteriorate after the breaking of an arm during a lecture tour in America, in 1889-1890. Then, in January 1892, she suffered a personal loss: the death of the woman who had travelled with her and shared her West Country home for nearly thirty years. On April 15 of that year, Amelia, too, died, the immediate cause of her death being severe influenza.

She left an extensive library of Egyptology and a collection of Egyptian antiquities to University College, London. With it went a bequest of £ 2,500, to establish the first English chair in Egyptology. The rest of her library was given to Somerville College, an early women’s college at Oxford.