

Raising Crime from the Dead: Revenge and Retribution in 'Real' Ghost Stories

Ruth Heholt

Falmouth University

ruth.heholt@falmouth.ac.uk

I am thy father's spirit,
Doom'd for a certain term to walk the night,
And for the day confined to fast in fires,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away.

Hamlet. Act 1 Scene 5.

Thus speaks Hamlet's father's ghost, demanding revenge and retribution for his murder.

In an act of extreme emotional blackmail, the ghost appeals to Hamlet saying:

'If thou didst ever thy dear father love ... Revenge his foul and most unnatural murder'.

This idea of crime returning, of 'no crime going unpunished' of course, has a history.

Colin Davis cites Pliny the Younger writing nearly 2000 years ago.

In one of his ghost stories there is disturbance in a deserted house:

The ghost of an old man appears. Intrigued, a philosopher waits for the apparition, notes where it disappears, and has the spot exhumed. There, a man's bones are discovered (Davis, 2).

The bones are buried and the ghost disappears.

Maurizio Ascari argues that Victorian ghost stories in which revenge for a crime is sought, present 'the supernatural as a form of psychological policing' (56).

Crime will out; the murdered will never rest in peace; the damned spot will not wash out.

This paper traces this idea of unearthing or uncovering of crime to the Victorian period and the ghost tales documented by Catherine Crowe.

In 1848, Crowe published her most famous text: *The Night Side of Nature* subtitled: *Of Ghosts and Ghost Seers*

Her ghost tales are unusual for Victorian ghost stories in that they claim to be real. The Victorians were of course used to ghost stories but these were invariably fictional and written merely for purposes of entertainment.

Stretching the boundaries of the idea of the 'ghost story' Crowe's tales come from accounts of personal experience.

As Gillian Bennett notes,

She gathers together a huge number of narratives from respectable people who have actually had psychic experiences and hopes that the stories will speak for themselves. (Bennett 12–13).

Amassing a vast amount of material, she published people's tales of poltergeists, prophetic dreams, ghost sightings and uncanny coincidences in two books: *The Night Side of Nature* (1848) and *Ghosts and Family Legends*.

This paper examines the latter text - the less well known of the two.

Positioning itself within the oral traditions of Christmas ghost stories, with the subtitle "A Volume for Christmas" *Ghosts and Family Legends* begins thus:

"It happened that I spent the last winter in a large country mansion" where, "In short, we began to tell ghost stories" (1-2).

Crowe says: "The substance of these conversations fills the following pages, and I have told the stories as nearly as possible in the words of the original narrators" (2).

This however, by-passes the veracity of the tales set down and of course calls in to question not only the 'reality' of the events narrated, but questions the idea of the origins of the tales.

We are left with a complicated palimpsest of narrative layers.

The ghost story and the crime fiction narrative are both always comprised of layers which question truth, origin and narrative point of view.

Michael Cook claims that 'Detective fiction [has] an underlying affinity with the ghost story' (2014, 1).

The affinity between the Gothic text and crime narratives has been explored many times.

And there are certainly cross-overs too between the detective and crime narrative and the ghost story.

Both for example, involve a 'reading backwards'.

Cook calls this 'one of the cornerstones of the classic detective narrative: the backward progression of the logic from effect to cause' (19).

For the ghost story it is from ghost, backwards to death and the cause of death.

A surprising amount of ghost stories (fictional or not) involve crimes that have been committed.

Ghost stories often tell us that ghosts come back for a reason.

Owen Davis looks at the change over the centuries where 'purposeful' ghost of the early modern period gives way to those ghosts who act as 'silent self-absorbed memorials of the fate and activities of the former living' (8).

The ghosts in the stories I am going to look at combine both of these elements.

They are 'purposeful' yet also 'silent' 'memorials' to what has happened to them.

These ghosts exist because of a crime: the crime *created* the ghost.

In these cases the ghost is a signifier of trauma.

We begin with a tale in *Ghosts and Family Legends* called 'The Swiss Lady's Story'.

In this tale a young soldier called Louis is murdered by his brother who wants to steal his inheritance.

A family move into the house where, unbeknownst to them, he was killed and some of the women of the house see his ghost as it lingers on the stairs.

Crowe tells us what happens to a maid who saw the ghost for the first time:

as she got to the foot of the stairs, she saw an officer in uniform, going up before her. He had his cap in his hand and his sword at his side; and

supposing he was some friend of her masters, she was going to follow him up, but when he reached the landing, to her surprise and horror, he disappeared through the wall (*Ghosts and Family Legends* 87).

The ghost appears in order for the murder to be uncovered and the mystery solved.

The heroine of our story sees the ghost and speaks to it:

I was not frightened! [...] and I stopt with one foot on the next stair, and looked at it steadily, that I might be sure I was not under a delusion. The face was pale, and it looked at me with such a sad expression, that I thought if it was really a ghost, it might wish to say something; so I asked it.

“Asked it! They all exclaimed. What did you say?”

“I said if you have anything to communicate, I conjure you – speak!”

“And did it?”

“No, answered Mary, but it gave a sign (88).

Pointing the way to a moral conclusion - the discovery of his body and the apprehension of the murderer – Louis is only present as a ghost-body.

Mary says: “It was as if it wanted the wall to be pulled down [...]. I shall never forget his face – never, to the day of my death and it looked at me so gratefully when I spoke to it, and then it disappeared into the wall (89).

They take down the wall and this “disclosed a fearful sight. There lay, huddled up, as if thrust there in haste, the bones of a perfect skeleton” (92).

The body is recovered and buried properly and the murderer runs away, and it is supposed, commits suicide.

The ghost is not seen again.

Colin Davis calls this the 'unfinished business model', whereby 'the ghost returns *in order to be sent away again*' (3-2).

Louis' ghost has been caused by the crime – no crime – no ghost.

It arises out of trauma.

Paul Ricoeur speaking about the theoretical concept of the trace cites it as being 'the impression as an affection resulting from the shock of an event that can be said to be striking, marking' (2004: 14).

Here the ghost arises out of the shock of an event: the most shocking of all: a murder.

And in a way this idea of an 'impression', perhaps an indelible impression, could be said to be the essence of the ghost story, but also the crime narrative.

Cook says, 'the culmination of a supernatural tale is the encounter with the ghost itself. Thus what might be the culmination of an investigation in a detective story, the solving [of the crime] is but a step along the way to the meeting of the ghost' (49).

In Crowe's tales though – it is meeting the ghost first that leads to the unravelling and finally the solving of the crime and the exposure of the criminal.

In 'The Italian's Story' a miserly old uncle murders his nephew in order to steal his £2000.

He invites his nephew to dinner and recommends that he drink the wine:

“The youth tasted [it] with much satisfaction. But strange! He had no sooner swallowed the first glass, than his eyes began to stare – there was a gurgle in his throat – a convulsion passed over his face – and his body stiffened” (57).

The uncle appropriates his money and buries his nephew under the floorboards.

After poisoning his nephew he recalls finishing his own dinner and he writes,

‘I could not help chuckling as I ate, to think how his had been spoilt’ (57).

But he continues,

the next day we were two of us at dinner! And yet I had invited no guest; and the next and the next and so on always! As I was about to sit down, he entered and took a chair opposite me, an unbidden guest. [...] I said to myself, I’ll eat and care not whether he sits there or no. But woe to him! He chilled the marrow of my bones (57).

Repetition

Having committed this terrible crime the uncle can no longer eat as whenever he sits down he sees the ghost of his dead nephew before him.

Eventually the old miser leaves Italy and goes to England with the purpose in mind of recompensing his nephew’s mother in order to rid himself of the ghost.

He cannot quite bring himself to part with the money though, and buries it.

Shortly after this, he himself is murdered, but the thieves cannot find the money.

From these circumstances, the old man himself becomes a ghost, known to the villagers as “the old gentleman that walks” (63).

Eventually the money is found, restored to the rightful heir and the old man's ghost is never seen again.

Here are three crimes: two murders and a theft.

And there are two ghosts.

Each ghost bears witness to the crime that killed them.

In both cases though, justice and retribution are demanded.

The ghosts are restless and continually appear, waiting for a resolution.

The ghost is both a repetition of the consequence of the crime, and the trace of the crime itself.

There is repetition, a re-calling and a reproducing of a past glut of emotion and an imprint of violence that cannot and will not be contained.

The trauma will leave an imprint: a trace.

And this trace will be repeated and reproduced over and over again.

Interestingly, in the same way that crime fiction has been decried, the ghost story genre has also often been criticised its 'uncritical repetition' (Freeman 2012: 98).

Michael Newton talks about 'the familiarity of the form's repeated situations' (xviii).

And in his introduction to *A Treasury of Victorian Ghost Stories*, Edward Bleiler berates mid-Victorian ghost stories as tending 'to be uniform in their ideas and literary techniques' (5).

Nicholas Freeman, claims that even the ghost stories of the best calibre produce 'work that is in some sense formulaic' (2012: 97).

Yet for our purposes here, far from this repetitious nature being a critical flaw, we can use it to illuminate the idea of the ghost story and the figure of the ghost within it.

The ghost represents a repetition of the consequence of the crime that created it.

The ghost body is tied to the scene of the crime – doomed to re-turn and re-turn and act out the trauma again and again.

The ghost-body bears witness to the crime and at the same time, its repeated presence gives testimony.

Maurizio Ascari comments on *Hamlet* “within this sub-genre detection is of vital importance, since the revenger cannot perform his retributive task without identifying the culprit beyond all doubt. The revenger is often helped in his investigation by the victim, who appears in the shape of a ghost or a dream” (22).

In Crowe’s tales, those who witness the ghosts are not ‘revengers’, rather they are witnesses of the testimony of the ghost itself.

The ghost body can also be seen as (paradoxically) material evidence.

It acts as a very different type of ‘silent witness’ to a corpse.

The ghost story itself is documented testimony.

And this testimony from the most first-hand of all witnesses: the murder victim, points the way towards the investigation.

Ricoeur speaks of ‘the concept of the document, made up of clues and testimonies, whose final amplitude rejoins the initial one of the trace’ and claims that ‘the notion of the trace can be taken to be the common root of testimony and clue’ (175).

The ghost in its multiplicity of being/non-being, purpose and involuntary action also becomes the body on which the crime is documented and acts as the ultimate clue.

We now turn to another story in *Ghosts and Family Legends*, 'The Sheep Farmer's story'.

In this tale, the family of a highland farmer, one son, two young male servants and an orphaned niece live in isolation in Scotland.

There is some rivalry over the niece, Annie.

One day the two farm-hands, Rob and Donald, leave the farm on different errands.

That evening Rob does not return, although after some time, Coullie, his dog does.

Over the next days and weeks, Rob still does not return and no-one knows where he is.

One evening the dog is snoozing by the fire when:

"Coullie started up, and began to show signs of uneasiness; while, almost at the same moment, something like a low whistle reached their ears, which seemed to proceed from the air, rather than the earth" (98).

Coullie rushes out, and only returns the next morning.

This happens several times, and sometimes the family hear footsteps and once when Coullie is whining and uneasy, wanting to get out, Annie looked up

"and saw to her astonishment, a man standing in the dusk in the passage" (99).

Of course there is no-one there.

One freezing, early morning when Coullie returns from his night's wandering, Annie sees his footsteps in the snow and follows them to an old quarry.

There, at the bottom is the corpse of Rob the farm-hand.

“they found the remains of poor Rob under circumstances that led to the conclusion that he had somehow gone out of his way, and fallen into the pit; for on medical examination, it appeared that both his legs were broken. As the quarry was abandoned and in a lonely spot, a person might very possibly die there under such circumstances without being able to make his distress known (100).

They take the body out and bury it.

Soon after, they take Coullie into the village where a group of men sit drinking outside the Inn.

Coullie bounds out of the cart “and with indescribable fury attacked one of the men” (101).

This is Donald the other farm hand who left immediately after Rob went missing.

Eventually, of course, it is found out that Donald killed Coullie’s master Rob as he was jealous of him being preferred by Annie.

In this story, Rob’s ghost is only seen once, but it is heard, and the dog is acutely aware of it.

And, at the end, it is the trace of the dog’s paw prints that leads to the scene of the crime.

The ghost appears in order to instigate an investigation again.

Ascari, discussing Martin Kayman’s work states that there is “a certain amount of interaction between detection and the supernatural in nineteenth-century literature” (55).

Ascari speaks about the “spiritualist vogue for seances and mediums” where there may well be “a ghost denouncing his own murder” (57).

And he cites an article from 1860 in Cassell’s *Illustrated Family Paper* called “Murder will out” in which such phenomenon as “the body of a victim [bleeding] if touched by its murderer” is discussed (62).

This too, is a body bearing witness, giving testimony and embodying evidence of its own murder.

In Crowe’s ghost stories, the detection of the truth of the crime also *proves* the existence of the ghost.

If the ghost hadn’t appeared, the crime would not have been detected and when the crime is proved to have taken place, the narrative comes full circle and bears witness itself to the veracity of the materialization of the ghost.

Conclusion

Michael Cook in his book: *Detective Fiction and the Ghost Story: The Haunted Text* looks at the ghost story *within* detective fiction.

This paper has examined the ghost story as crime and detective fiction.

In relation to Christie’s Golden Age crime fiction, Ascari says:

Christie reduced the supernatural to the subsidiary role of transitory explanation, but at the same time she also exploited it to conjure up an ominous atmosphere of mystery that lures the public into reading and its progressively cleared away by the investigation’ (8).

In the ghost stories we have been looking at, the ghostly is not 'cleared away by the investigation' in the manner of non-ghostly crime fictions.

The ghost disappears, but in doing so, the haunting is proved.

The ghost did exist, the crime was committed.

As we saw at the beginning of this paper, Crowe's ghost stories are supposedly 'real'.

The tales themselves relate to oral traditions of ghost stories and ideas of witnessing and testimony and multiple narratives.

Derrida claims:

The trace is not only the disappearance of origin – within the discourse that we sustain and according to the path we follow it means that the origin did not even disappear, that it was never constituted except reciprocally by a nonorigin, the trace. (61)

Oral tales too are repetitions, reproductions and embody 'nonorigin'.

As we know, crime and detection narratives invite polysemic readings, but there is always an element of re-reading, of reading backwards – from consequence to cause.

The type of ghost story we have been looking at also involves a re-reading, a revisiting of the past, with the ghost as consequence of the crime that *made* the living person into a ghost.

These tales of ghosts and crimes can therefore be seen to have an origin: the crime itself.

And, in the end it is the solving of the crime – the uncovering and exposure of what happened – that dispels the ghost and thus, perhaps, also the traumas of the past.

Thank you for listening.

Arias, Rosario. 2014. 'Traces and Vestiges of the Victorian Past in Contemporary Fiction.' *Neo-Victorian Literature and Culture: Immersions and Revisitations*. Nadine Boehm-Schnitker and Susanne Gruss. Eds, 111-125. New York: Routledge.

Ricoeur, Paul, 2004. *Memory, History, Forgetting*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Marcus, Laura, *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*

From other stuff I wrote:

It is not just that ghosts are seen, most ghosts *need* to be seen. Ghosts themselves are a phenomenological experience: a *sensory* experience. These most un-fleshly of beings can only be perceived *by* the flesh, be it merely a shivering, trembling feeling, an intuitive sense that something is there, or an actual vision. Ghosts do not exist unless they are perceived by a living person and the most effective/archetypal way of sensing ghosts is through sight; by *seeing* them. There are of course paradoxes here, not least the idea that ghosts come from the realm of the *unseen*; the Otherworld, the Beyond, from *elsewhere*. Ghosts re-turn from the place of the unseen and the unknown. However the very *raison-d'être* for a ghost must be to be sensed and ultimately to be *seen*. Ethereal, delicate or see-through as the ghost may be, it is the seeing, the *perceiving* of the phenomena that matters.

Crowe claims that it is often Other people who see ghosts. She states that this type of receptive seeing is 'more frequently developed in women than in men' (176) and she goes on to argue that 'it is usually the humble, the simple and the childlike, the solitary, the recluse, nay, the ignorant, who exhibit traces of these occult faculties' (201).

Maurizio Ascari *A Counter-History of Crime Fiction: Supernatural, Gothic and Sensational*, Palgrave Macmillan, 2007

On *Hamlet* "within this sub-genre detection is of vital importance, since the revenger cannot perform his retributive task without identifying the culprit beyond all doubt.

The revenger is often helped in his investigation by the victim, who appears in the shape of a ghost or a dream" (22).