



EXPLORATION OF THE HIDDEN TREASURE IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S "A HAUNTED HOUSE"

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ABSTRACT

There are many short stories which dwell upon ghosts and other specific horror elements. Reading such stories people experience raise of adrenalin and gush of excitement. Therefore, the title The Haunted House, incites an expectation to experience horror in a house. However, The Haunted House by Virginia Woolf is an absolutely different story, it does not horrify anyone, rather it tries to deliver simple joy and happiness to people. It is really strange to read a description full of soul satisfaction and significance of simple human values in the story titled The Haunted House. In a bungalow, a living couple encounters the apparition of a deceased couple who had inhabited the same house, a century ago. They seem to be diligently searching for something that they had lost. They ransack every nook and corner of the house and finally find the Treasure which is the 'Light in the Heart'.

KEYWORDS: Horror, Apparition, Couple, Haunted, Treasure etc.

PAPER

Virginia Woolf was one of the first writers who tried to portray usual things for people from another, strange perspective. The Haunted House by Virginia Woolf focuses on the expression of the human feelings presented as the centre of discussion which seems to be forgotten, but there is always someone who can remind about the priorities in this world. The story opens with the indefinite phrase 'Whatever hour'. This, considered alongside the narrator's use of the past continuous tense — 'there was a door shutting' — indicates that it is not set within a specific time frame; the haunting is an on-going occurrence. It has been happening for quite some time now. This sentence is also interesting because it potentially implicates the reader — 'Whatever hour you woke' (my emphasis added). Although appearing to address us directly, the narrator could, of course also be referring to the living couple. The ambiguity of this address therefore immediately links us with these characters, a device which Woolf continues to use throughout the text.

Virginia Woolf was one of the first writers who wanted to change the vision of literature, who had a desire to change the perception of a written word as the description of the seen objects and shift to the description of the feelings and perceptions. Working in the trend of modernity, Virginia Woolf wanted to change human vision of

the world literature. In *The Haunted House*, it becomes obvious that she managed to do it. A short story *The Haunted House* makes people interfere into the inner world of the main characters, but not to search for the reasons why people experience such feelings. Virginia Woolf writes with the purpose to remind people about the feelings which exist and how people experience those.

A ghost couple in *The Haunted House* is a great example. It is really essential to make sure that people have not forgotten such human virtues as happiness, kindness, sympathy, guilt, responsibility, and many other ones which people experience but sometimes forget about it. Working in the modern direction, Virginia Woolf tried to show people that it is possible to think differently. In 1921 Virginia Woolf published her first collection of short stories, titled *Monday or Tuesday*, which included “A Haunted House” as the opening piece. Just 10 paragraphs long, “A Haunted House” depicts an unnamed, ungendered character who perceives (or perhaps dreams) that a loving but long-deceased couple haunts the country house he or she inhabits. Centuries ago, a woman died there, and her lover left for faraway lands, returning only in death. Reunited, the pair now wanders around the rooms and the surrounding gardens, reminiscing to each other about the past, searching for “their joy.” This search disturbs the contemporary couple currently in residence: As they try to sleep or read, they sense movement—doors opening and shutting, the ghosts walking, the house throbbing as if it were a human heart.

Virginia Woolf’s “A Haunted House” is a short story which shows two couples sharing the same centenary house. The live couple try to sleep while listening to the eerie invisible couple who keep wandering from room to room to seek “their hidden joy” (117). It is a story of friendly ghosts who cohabit with human beings, and it reflects monologues of early twentieth-century modernism which pushed the boundaries of how reality is represented, and is characterized by experimentation, stream of consciousness, fragmented ideas, interior monologue, distortions in time, symbolism, and multiple or shifting perspectives.

Even though ghosts are (seemingly) situated at the very core of Woolf’s *A Haunted House*, the story deals with love, loss, connection, confusion, movement, and death. People’s belief in the afterlife and together with it ghosts, exists for a long time, and goes back to pre-literature traditions and cultures. Ghosts were not a popular source of entertainment in old and Middle English literature, since people were still afraid of them, but once people stopped believing in them, ghosts became a subject of many authors’ writings, and people started reading ghost stories for pleasure and amusement. The existence of ghosts is interwoven with fantastic and gothic elements, darkness, horror, etc. Still, in modern literature, ghosts are often represented as friendly, not posing any threat to human beings.

The narrator confides that one could never see the ghosts, just reflections of apples and leaves in the sunlit windows. The house itself seems to be speaking, saying something about buried treasure. The light is fading, and the rooms are darkened. The narrator imagines the male ghost leaving the female one behind for some reason. It is now night-time, and the ghostly coupling continue to ‘seek their joy’. They appear to reminisce over the bed where they once slept, centuries ago and where the living, couple sleep now.

The narrator then imagines the ghostly couple standing over her as she sleeps, and, holding a lamp over the bed of the living couple, the ghosts pause, still seeking ‘their hidden joy’. The narrator wakes up and feels that she

has solved the mystery, and now understands what this 'buried treasure' is what the ghostly couple have been seeking: 'the light in the heart'.

Formally, the story resembles a prose poem more than a traditional narrative. Several repeated lines ("safe, safe, safe") act as refrains, and repeated phrases ("treasure buried") serve as poetic conceits and unifying metaphors. The action, however, occurs not in the plot but in the thematic amalgamation. Concerns more fully explored in later works of Woolf, including sensual perceptions of the natural world, the relationships between individuals, and a preoccupation with mortality, gestate in *A Haunted House*. Our inability to decide conclusively persists whether the narrator imagines, dreams, or actually witnesses any supernatural phenomenon.

The *Haunted House* by Virginia Woolf is such a story which makes people look at simple and ordinary things in a different perspective. It is the story written in the modern trend. Feelings and emotions is the main focus of the story. The ghosts in this story are not terrifying. They are full of nostalgia and memory about their happy past. There are not any horrifying moments in the story, the soul is shown as the main priority for mankind. Reading the story, it is possible to see the ghosts who are presented as the connection between the past and the present life of the house.

It is significant that the life of people is not the centre of the story. The moments and the feelings people experience there are really important in the writing. The story has history content. This is the end of the World War I and people are apprehensive. They trust in nothing and do not believe that something good may happen. The ghosts in the story step silently trying not to wake others up.

They are looking for a treasure. The treasure in this story is the happiness, the moments of joy, a ghost couple experienced when they lived there. They found what they were looking for, "Here we slept," she says. And he adds, "Kisses without number." "Waking in the morning—" "Silver between the trees—" "Upstairs—" "In the garden—" "When summer came—" "In winter snow time—" "The doors go shutting far in the distance, gently knocking like the pulse of a heart (Woolf, 2009, p. 7). Going further, the couple finds those who are living in the house now and they see the light in the heart. The greatest pleasure in human life is to understand that people have not lost that specific gift to love and to be loved, to value the moments they spend together.

Reading the story, it becomes obvious that the ghost couple is the messenger from the past aimed at bringing the values from the past and reminding about loyalty, dedication, and the respect for the past. The story is the reminder that no matter what happens now and what difficulties one experiences, there should always be a way out. The main idea of this story is to show that we live in the world where all people have difficulties, however, it is important to remember and value the moments when we are happy. Having read this story, there is a great desire to go and embrace those who you love as these are people who make us happy. *The Haunted House* by Virginia Woolf is another story which everyone relishes to read. It is impossible to retell the stories by Virginia Woolf as they do not dwell upon objects; it is the reflection of human feelings which may be just perceived, not described. Words seem redundant in this case.

Looking at a couple who have died and who search for the best moments they had when they were alive reflects that there is not better treasure than life and people who we love. A Haunted House seems to be Woolf's attempt to convey the feeling of sensing something just on the edge of hearing or on the edge of sight: something that cannot be seen head-on but which can be sensed in the house, just on the periphery of vision. Probably all can relate to the experience of being alone in a house and feeling that every creak, every hum, every far-off sound betokens something – a ghost, or an intruder, for instance. Woolf's story seeks to encapsulate that experience. That title, 'A Haunted House', is ripe with potential irony. And it is only 'potential' – for all of us know, there may have been a ghostly couple in the house with the story's narrator.

But it's suggestive that the narrator seems most attuned to the presence of the 'ghosts' when she is in states of semi-consciousness or when her mind is somewhere else: just waking up, or engrossed in a book, for instance. Consider the very first sentence of the story: 'Whatever hour you woke there was a door shutting.' Three things suggest themselves here, at least. First, the use of the second-person pronoun 'you' attempts to involve us in the narrator's experiences, as if to suggest that we have all felt something similar to this, things on the margins of our conscious experience. Second, the fact that she begins by talking about just waking from sleep – something that will come again at the end of the story – suggests waking from a dream. Third, the fact that she mentions waking at any hour is indicative of someone who might fall asleep at any moment – someone who daydreams in the most literal sense, falling asleep during daytime, and therefore (arguably) more prone to confusing dreams with reality.

Analysis of this text reveals that A Haunted House is neither a conventional ghost story, nor a conventional love story. Woolf manages to permeate the boundary between the genres. When looking at its title, the reader presumes that this is going to be an explicitly scary narrative. However, through her experimental narrative style and poetic devices, Woolf completely undermines this expectation. She allows the reader an insight into the thoughts and feelings of the ghosts themselves; those characters that are usually denied a voice.

By the end of the text, the reader is less concerned with the ghosts themselves, and more concerned with the meaning of what they are hunting for. Thus, in A Haunted House, Woolf uses the pretext of the 'ghost story' to write implicitly about the importance of love. Woolf sought to do this with 'A Haunted House', a story which is both a ghost story and a riposte to, or analysis of, the conventional ghostly tale. But, given that final phrase, 'The light in the heart', it is also a love story. It immortalises the universal feeling of love.

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