



# The Spectral Presence: Representation of Ghosts in Shakespeare's Macbeth and Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost

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## ABSTRACT:

This research paper delves into the intricate and multifaceted representations of ghosts in William Shakespeare's tragedy Macbeth and Michael Ondaatje's novel Anil's Ghost. Through a comparative analysis, it seeks to explore how these spectral figures function within their respective narratives, reflecting the psychological, cultural, and political contexts of their times. Ghosts have long been a powerful and evocative element in literature, symbolizing the intersection of the supernatural with the psychological and the moral. Their presence often serves to externalize the inner turmoil of characters, embody unresolved traumas, or comment on societal issues. In Macbeth, Shakespeare utilizes ghosts to underscore themes of guilt, ambition, and fate, while Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost employs spectral figures to navigate the haunting legacy of civil war in Sri Lanka, addressing memory, loss, and the search for truth. The historical and cultural contexts of these works are crucial to understanding their ghostly representations.

**KEYWORDS :** Conscience, Guilt, Memory, Trauma.

## INTRODUCTION:

Macbeth, written in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, reflects Jacobean beliefs in the supernatural and the era's preoccupation with witchcraft, influenced by King James I's fascination with the occult. The appearance of Banquo's ghost and the witches highlights the period's anxieties about power and legitimacy. Conversely, Anil's Ghost is set against the backdrop of the late 20<sup>th</sup>-century Sri Lankan civil war, where the ghosts are metaphorical, representing the missing and the dead whose stories remain untold. This setting underscores a society grappling with the pervasive presence of violence and the quest for justice. In Macbeth, the ghost of Banquo serves as a pivotal symbol of Macbeth's guilt and paranoia. Banquo's ghost appears at a banquet, visible only to Macbeth, disrupting the feast and symbolizing the inescapability of Macbeth's murderous actions. This spectral visitation is not just a supernatural event but a manifestation of Macbeth's conscience, driving him further into madness and highlighting the psychological consequences of his ambition. Additionally, the witches and their apparitions play a significant role, propelling Macbeth's fate and illustrating the theme of predestination versus free will. The witches' prophecies entangle Macbeth in a web of fate, where the ghostly elements underscore his inevitable downfall. In contrast, Anil's Ghost features spectral elements that are more metaphorical and symbolic. The title itself suggests the pervasive presence of ghosts in the narrative, referring to the unburied bodies and the unresolved past that haunt the characters. Anil, a forensic anthropologist, encounters these 'ghosts' through her work,

as she seeks to identify the remains of victims of political violence. The ghosts in Ondaatje's novel are not seen but felt, representing the collective trauma of a nation and the personal grief of individuals. Characters like Sarath and Gamini are haunted by their pasts and the losses they have endured, symbolizing the lingering impact of violence and the search for redemption. The comparative analysis reveals how both authors use ghosts to explore themes of guilt, memory, and the impact of past actions on the present. In Macbeth, the ghost of Banquo is a direct, visual representation of guilt and retribution, while in Anil's Ghost, the specters are more abstract, representing the pervasive, haunting memories of a violent history. This difference reflects the cultural contexts of the works: the immediate, supernatural interventions in Macbeth versus the lingering, unresolved trauma in Anil's Ghost. Both works use ghosts to comment on the human condition and societal issues. In Macbeth, the ghostly elements underscore the destructive power of unchecked ambition and moral corruption. The play suggests that guilt and conscience are inescapable, with Banquo's ghost serving as a constant reminder of Macbeth's crimes. In Anil's Ghost, the spectral presences highlight the consequences of political violence and the importance of acknowledging and addressing the past. The novel suggests that justice and reconciliation are necessary for healing, with the 'ghosts' representing the need to remember and honor those who have been lost. Ghosts, as supernatural entities that transcend the boundary between life and death, have long been a compelling and versatile motif in literature. They serve not only as elements of horror and mystery but also as profound symbols reflecting the inner psyches of characters, unresolved historical traumas, and societal tensions. The depiction of ghosts in literature offers a unique lens through which we can explore complex themes of guilt, memory, morality, and the quest for justice. This paper examines the representation of ghosts in William Shakespeare's Macbeth and Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost, analyzing how each author utilizes spectral figures to address personal and collective anxieties within their respective cultural and historical contexts.

## RESEARCH OBJECTIVES :

1. The Enduring Power of Ghosts in Literature
2. Psychology behind experiencing Ghosts

## DISCUSSION :

The fascination with ghosts spans across cultures and epochs, manifesting in various forms and serving different purposes depending on the societal beliefs and literary conventions of the time. In some cultures, ghosts are considered malevolent spirits that seek vengeance or justice, while in others, they are viewed as benign or protective entities. In literature, ghosts can be literal apparitions that haunt characters, metaphorical representations of past traumas, or symbolic embodiments of unresolved issues. Ghosts often symbolize the inescapable presence of the past in the present, acting as reminders of actions taken, wrongs committed, or truths ignored. Their appearances typically invoke a sense of fear or unease, serving as catalysts for character development or narrative progression. By examining the representations of ghosts in Macbeth and Anil's Ghost, we can gain insight into how different authors harness this motif to explore the psychological and moral dimensions of their characters and the broader socio-political contexts of their narratives.

### 1. The Enduring Power of Ghosts in Literature

#### Macbeth: The Supernatural and Psychological Hauntings

Written in the early 17<sup>th</sup> century, Macbeth is a quintessential example of Shakespeare's exploration of the supernatural. The play's ghostly elements are deeply intertwined with the psychological landscape of its characters, particularly

Macbeth himself. The ghost of Banquo, the witches, and the apparitions conjured in the witches' cauldron all serve to propel the narrative forward and delve into themes of ambition, guilt, and fate.

### Banquo's Ghost: Manifestation of Guilt and Paranoia

Banquo's ghost is one of the most striking supernatural elements in Macbeth. After Macbeth orchestrates Banquo's murder to prevent the witches' prophecy of Banquo's descendants becoming kings from coming true, Banquo's ghost appears at a royal banquet, visible only to Macbeth. This haunting serves as a potent manifestation of Macbeth's overwhelming guilt and escalating paranoia. The ghost's presence disrupts the banquet, symbolizing the disruption of the natural order caused by Macbeth's regicide and subsequent murders. The spectral visitation is not just a supernatural occurrence but a psychological projection of Macbeth's tormented conscience. Banquo's ghost embodies the inescapability of guilt and the psychological consequences of Macbeth's ambition and moral corruption. Unlike other characters who may see visions or hallucinations, Macbeth's interaction with Banquo's ghost is a public spectacle that reveals his inner turmoil to the other characters and the audience, thus heightening the dramatic tension and underscoring the play's themes of retribution and moral decay.

### The Witches and Apparitions: Agents of Fate and Doom

The witches in Macbeth are central to the play's supernatural atmosphere. Their prophecies ignite Macbeth's ambition and set him on a path of destruction. The witches embody the theme of predestination versus free will, as their prophecies both predict and influence Macbeth's actions. The apparitions they conjure further complicate Macbeth's perception of reality and fate. For instance, the vision of a line of kings descended from Banquo underscores the futility of Macbeth's efforts to alter his destined downfall. These spectral elements serve as narrative devices that explore the tension between destiny and agency. They reinforce the idea that Macbeth's tragic end is both a result of his own choices and the inevitable fulfillment of the witches' prophecies. The interplay between the supernatural and the psychological in Macbeth highlights the complex interplay between external forces and internal motivations in shaping human destiny.

### Anil's Ghost: Haunting Memories and the Quest for Justice

In contrast to the overt supernaturalism of Macbeth, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* employs a more metaphorical and subtle approach to ghostly representation. Set against the backdrop of the Sri Lankan civil war, the novel explores themes of memory, identity, and the search for truth through the lens of forensic anthropology. The title itself, *Anil's Ghost*, suggests the pervasive presence of the past and the unresolved histories that haunt the characters and the nation. The title "Anil's Ghost" is rich with metaphorical implications. It refers to the 'ghosts' of the missing and the dead in the context of the civil war, whose stories remain untold and whose bodies often remain unidentified. These spectral presences symbolize the collective trauma and the lingering impact of political violence on individuals and society. Anil Tissera, a forensic anthropologist, returns to Sri Lanka to investigate human rights abuses and identify the remains of victims. Her quest is not just a scientific endeavor but a moral and emotional journey to confront the past and seek justice for the nameless dead.

## 2. Psychology behind experiencing Ghosts

### Ghosts as Metaphors for Unresolved Trauma

The ghosts in Anil's Ghost are not literal apparitions but metaphorical representations of the unresolved trauma and the pervasive sense of loss experienced by the characters. The novel's narrative is haunted by the memories of those who have disappeared or died, and the living characters are constantly confronted by the absence and silence of the dead. Sarath, a local archaeologist assisting Anil, is haunted by the death of his brother Gamini, reflecting the personal grief and the collective mourning of a nation. These metaphorical ghosts serve to highlight the psychological scars left by the war and the difficulty of achieving closure in the face of ongoing violence and political instability. The novel suggests that the dead are never truly gone; their presence continues to shape the lives of the living, demanding recognition and remembrance. The comparative analysis of ghost representations in Macbeth and Anil's Ghost reveals how each author uses spectral figures to explore different dimensions of human experience and societal issues. Despite the differences in their narrative techniques and cultural contexts, both works employ ghosts to address themes of guilt, memory, and the impact of past actions on the present.

### Guilt and Conscience

In Macbeth, the ghost of Banquo is a direct and visual embodiment of guilt, serving as a constant reminder of Macbeth's moral transgressions. This spectral presence forces Macbeth to confront his conscience, illustrating the inescapable nature of guilt. In Anil's Ghost, the ghosts are more abstract, representing the lingering effects of unresolved trauma and the need for acknowledgment and justice. Anil's forensic work is driven by a moral imperative to give voice to the silenced dead, reflecting the broader societal guilt and the quest for redemption.

### Memory and History

Both works use ghosts to explore the relationship between memory and history. In Macbeth, the ghosts and supernatural elements are tied to the characters' memories and the prophecies that shape their actions. The play suggests that history is a continuum where past actions influence the present and future. In Anil's Ghost, the metaphorical ghosts symbolize the suppressed histories of the war and the need to remember and honor the victims. The novel underscores the importance of confronting and acknowledging the past to understand and heal the present.

### Psychological and Political Dimensions

The ghostly elements in Macbeth are primarily psychological, reflecting the internal struggles of the characters, particularly Macbeth. The supernatural serves to externalize his inner fears and guilt, driving the narrative toward its tragic conclusion. In contrast, Anil's Ghost uses spectral imagery to address political and social issues. The ghosts in Ondaatje's novel represent the broader political violence and the human cost of conflict, highlighting the need for justice and reconciliation in a divided society.

**Conclusion:**

In examining the representation of ghosts in literature through the lens of Shakespeare's "Macbeth" and Michael Ondaatje's "Anil's Ghost," several key themes and functions emerge that reveal the multifaceted role of spectral figures. In "Macbeth," ghosts serve as manifestations of guilt and the psychological turmoil of characters. The appearance of Banquo's ghost at the banquet is a pivotal moment that reflects Macbeth's internal struggle and growing paranoia. The ghost symbolizes Macbeth's realization of the moral consequences of his murderous actions and foreshadows his eventual downfall. Shakespeare uses the ghost to explore themes of power, guilt, and the supernatural's impact on the human psyche. Conversely, in "Anil's Ghost," the ghosts represent the unresolved trauma and the collective memory of a society ravaged by civil war. Ondaatje uses the metaphor of ghosts to highlight the pervasive sense of loss and the need for justice and closure. The spectral presence in the novel is not literal but metaphorical, illustrating the lingering impact of violence and the quest for truth in a nation struggling to heal. Both texts utilize ghosts to delve into the deeper emotional and moral complexities of their characters and settings. In "Macbeth," the supernatural elements underscore the personal consequences of unchecked ambition and moral corruption. In "Anil's Ghost," they serve to emphasize the broader societal wounds and the imperative of confronting and acknowledging past atrocities for reconciliation and healing. In conclusion, the representation of ghosts in "Macbeth" and "Anil's Ghost" underscores their powerful role in reflecting psychological states and societal issues. These spectral figures act as conduits for exploring guilt, trauma, memory, and the search for justice, revealing the enduring and versatile nature of ghosts in literature as symbols of the unseen forces that shape human experience.

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