

## GOTHIC AND THE SHORT STORY: REVOLUTIONS IN FORM AND GENRE

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THE SHORT STORY has frequently been defined as epiphanic, as the dramatisation and transformation of ‘a single incident’ (Allen 1981: 7) with the potential to suggest that ‘there is more to the world than can be discovered through the senses’ (Rohrberger 1966: 11). Defined as such, the form has a particularly apposite relationship to the Gothic’s generic tendency to invoke the inexplicable, the uncanny, the irrational and the otherworldly. In addition to formal sympathies between Gothic and the short story, Edgar Allan Poe has been integral both to the birth of American Gothic and the emergence and formal definition of the short story. This chapter details shifts in the Gothic short story from the form-defining work of Poe to the innovative tales of Helen Oyeyemi that transform the closed or ‘well-made’ story with a polyphonic sequence that places a variety of characters and worldviews in dialogue. Moving from the Gothic short story’s nineteenth-century origins in the US and the UK, through a series of ruptures engendered by the joint forces of capitalism and colonialism at the turn of the twentieth century, to contemporary iterations in collections and anthologies, I explore the cosy relationship between Gothic and the short story through the shifting sociopolitical circumstances that serve as backdrop and theme. Perhaps perversely, I refuse to define the short story any further by tying it to a particular formal style, or to a word count. Instead, I follow in the footsteps of leading short story critic, Paul March-Russell, who argues via Hans Robert Jauss that ‘literary forms evolve in relation to our constantly shifting “horizons of expectation”’ (March-Russell 2009: 104). This manoeuvre places the burden of interpretation on individual readers, while acknowledging that the short story is a shape-shifting form, adapting to new contexts, styles, and sub-genres.

Though stories that are short (as it were) found representation much earlier than the historical remit of this chapter, it is widely understood that there was a shift in the interpretation, production and consumption of such literature in the latter half of the nineteenth century, leading to the ‘neologism of the “short story”’ (March-Russell 2009: 1). The short story as a newly defined form<sup>1</sup> emerged as a populist and commercial literature that coincided with the explosion of magazine culture in late nineteenth-century America. While in Britain the short story played second fiddle to the dominant form of the realist novel, it flourished and was celebrated as the ‘national literary form’ in the US at the same time, its championing effectively functioning as a declaration of ‘literary independence’ (Myszor 2001: 12). Poe laboured

as cheerleader and practitioner of this emerging form, defining and retrospectively claiming responsibility for the cultural zeitgeist:

I had perceived that the whole energetic, busy spirit of the age tended wholly to the Magazine literature – to the curt, the terse, the well-timed, and the readily diffused, in preference to the old forms of the verbose and ponderous & the inaccessible. (Poe 1948: 268)

Poe was also responsible for an early definition of what has become known as the ‘well-made’ short story, which then functioned for editors as ‘both a model and a standard by which to judge the work of writers’ (March-Russell 2009: 35). The formula proposed that ‘the unity of effect or impression is a point of the greatest importance’ and ‘there should be no word written, of which the tendency, direct or indirect, is not to the one pre-established design’ (Poe 1984: 571, 572). Though what is now understood as Poe’s manifesto for the ‘well-made’ short story was originally put forward in his 1842 review of Nathaniel Hawthorne’s *Twice-Told Tales*, it did not gain currency until the end of the nineteenth century. As such, though this chapter is structured in roughly chronological sections to reflect shifting social and political contexts, the formal development is not so straightforwardly linear: before Poe’s definition gained currency many early short stories manifested the formlessness and open-endedness often associated with later iterations, while early precursors in fairy and folk tales recur as theme and variation in later works, such as Angela Carter’s *The Bloody Chamber* (1979), rendering it both a haunted and haunting form.

Leading definitions of the Gothic and the short story demonstrate their compatibility, accounting in part for the proliferation of Gothic short stories. Concluding his study of the short story, March-Russell suggests that it ‘has acted at various times as a resource for writers to contest the dominant beliefs in social progress and formal cohesion’ (March-Russell 2009: 222). Building on this, I suggest that the Gothic has comparable concerns that make it a cosy bedfellow for the short story form, emerging as it did in response to the rationalism of the Enlightenment period and concerned with ‘antiquated tyrannies and dynastic corruption’ and ‘a set of “historical fears” focussing on the memory of an age-old regime of oppression and persecution which threatens still to fix its dead hand upon us’ (Baldick 2009: xxi). Thematic preoccupations with haunting, fragmentation of the self, social decline and monstrosity make it the ideal genre to partner a form concerned with countering utopian notions of progress and cohesion. Working from the other direction, Chris Baldick’s recipe for the Gothic tale – that it ‘should combine a fearful sense of inheritance in time with a claustrophobic sense of enclosure in space, these two dimensions reinforcing one another to produce an impression of sickening descent into disintegration’ – is particularly apposite to the short story form, in which the limited space and necessary concertinaing of time through foreshadowing once again make the short story the ideal form for the Gothic genre (Baldick 2009: xix).<sup>2</sup>

Beyond the happy marriage of form and genre, there are similarities in the consumption and preoccupations of Gothic and the short story. Both have traditionally been gendered feminine through a popularity and commercial nature that renders them ‘low’ art; March-Russell describes ‘the typical reader of short stories [as] a light,

usually female, reader of magazine fiction' (March-Russell 2009: 56), while women have conventionally been regarded as the main writers and consumers of Gothic fiction, leading some to warn women against the potentially deleterious and morally repugnant effects of reading such fiction (see Rimelli 2000: 309–10). On the level of character, the short story's 'predisposition towards outsiders' (March-Russell 2009: 122) mimics the Gothic's fascination with the Other (see Khair 2009). This is frequently embodied as a monstrous outsider threatening the borders of the self or nation such as in E. F. Benson or H. P. Lovecraft's iterations of the weird, in which amorphous predators pose undefinable threat, or internalised and engendering the dissolution of character, be it through the psychological breakdown of the protagonists of Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher' (1839) or Charlotte Perkins Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper' (1892), or the doppelgänger that provokes existential threat as in Poe's 'William Wilson' (1839) or L. P. Hartley's 'W. S.' (1954).

### Nineteenth-Century Beginnings

Taking first the emergence of the short story as a burgeoning form in the US, Poe's tales can be interpreted as exemplary of the form that he had laid out, conspiring to a 'unity of effect or impression' reminiscent of poetry (Poe 1984: 571). This unity of effect, when coupled with a Gothic narrative, intensifies the fatalistic impression that the reader is trapped and circumscribed by the role created for them in the story. 'The Tell-Tale Heart' (1843) is exemplary in this respect: it is quickly apparent that the singular impression evoked is one of 'uncontrollable terror', as the reader is quickly made cognisant of the fact that the first-person narrator-character is a dangerous madman who is convinced of his own sanity (Poe 1982: 188). This impression is created through the combination of plot, style, language and narrative address. The plot engenders uncontrollable terror, as the narrator recounts having slowly and cold-bloodedly killed and concealed the dismembered parts of a guest, for the singular offence of having a displeasing 'vulture eye' (Poe 1982: 188). Claiming to harbour sharpened senses that enable him to hear 'all things in the heaven and in the earth' and 'many things in hell' (Poe 1982: 186), the narrator reveals his guilt to policemen who call by, driven to distraction as he is by the apparently audible beating of the victim's heart concealed beneath the floorboards. The terrifying effect is consolidated by the writing style. The story opens as follows: 'True! – nervous – very, very nervous I had been and am; but why *will* you say that I am mad?' (Poe 1982: 186). The cataphoric reference to the narrator before his proper introduction functions as an 'extreme form of *in medias res*' (Myszor 2001: 61); this serves to pull readers directly into the action with the disarming effect of being accosted in the street. The heavily and erratically punctuated opening sentence creates an impression of urgency and anxiety that stands at odds with the subsequent instruction to 'observe how healthily – how calmly I can tell you the whole story' (Poe 1982: 186). The narrator's ultimate lack of control is confirmed through the repeated use of exclamation marks in the closing sentence, the belligerent punctuation gesturing to a collapse in the capacity of language to convey the narrator's desperate plight: "'Villains!" I shrieked, "dissemble no more! I admit the deed! – tear up the planks! – here, here! – it is the beating of his hideous heart!"' (Poe 1982: 190). There is emphasis placed on the interpretative powers of the reader through the repetition of questions and a direct form of address: 'why *will* you say that I am mad?'; 'How then,

am I mad?'; 'would a madman have been so wise as this?' (Poe 1982: 186). Character traits evocative of madness such as inappropriate responses to events – the narrator smiles and chuckles at various instances – and dissociative gestures that render 'Death' as having 'enveloped the victim' or passively describe the deed as 'so far done' (Poe 1982: 188), provide further reason for terror at a narrator so dangerously deluded. The language of terror is ascribed to both narrator and victim and, through the spatial and temporal proximity enabled by the mode of address, the reader becomes a further recipient of terror, uncomfortably confronted with a madman who is a self-confessed killer. The 'well-made' short story form and Gothic subject matter combine to entrap the reader in a manner typical of Poe's *oeuvre*, which David Faflík describes as favouring the 'captivity narrative' in which the reader abdicates 'interpretive freedom' and becomes subject to the Machiavellian workings of the author, their responses resting with 'the creator of the "impressions" that incited the initial response' (Faflík 2016: 2, 3). The predetermination and foreshadowing evoked by the claustrophobic short story form reinforce the tale's Gothic effects.

Poe's tales are timeless in their capacity to terrify through their recourse to existential horror and the frailty of the human condition. His near-contemporary and fellow American, Nathaniel Hawthorne, however, drew his subject matter more from the social ills of relatively recent US history. Living in Salem and a direct descendent of John Hathorne, an unrepentant judge in the witch trials of the late seventeenth century, Hawthorne's repression of this personal tie is evident in his subtle name change, while the religious hypocrisy of Puritan New England haunts short stories such as 'Young Goodman Brown' (1835). The capacity of the Gothic short story to address contemporaneous social ills was also manifest across the Atlantic, as some of the most renowned social realist novelists of Victorian Britain turned to the ghost story as an alternative means of representing and addressing the inequalities and injustices addressed otherwise in their realist offerings.

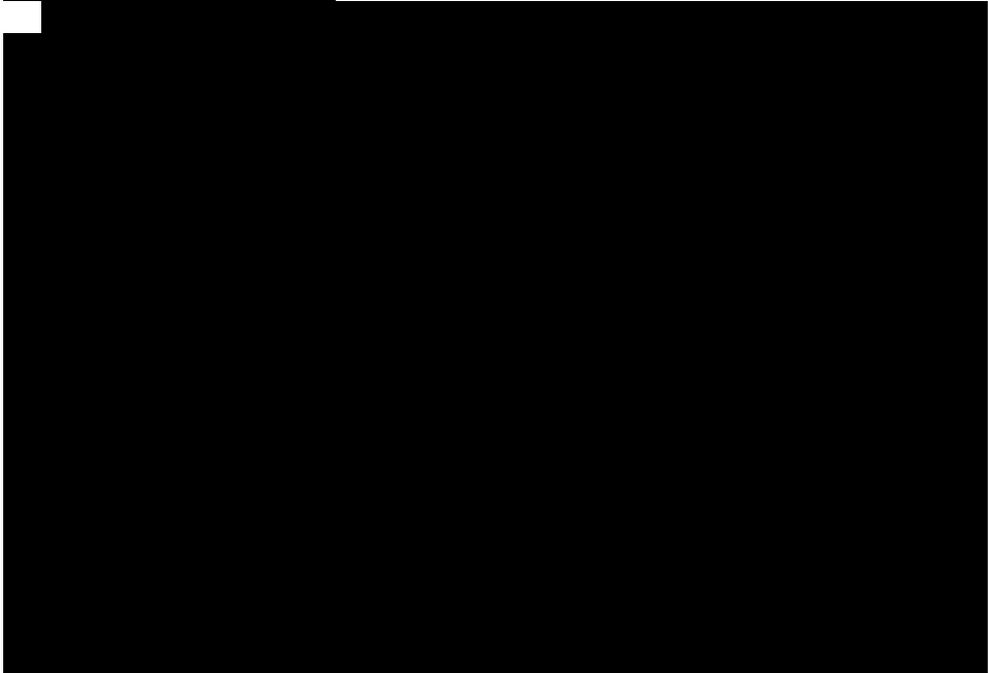
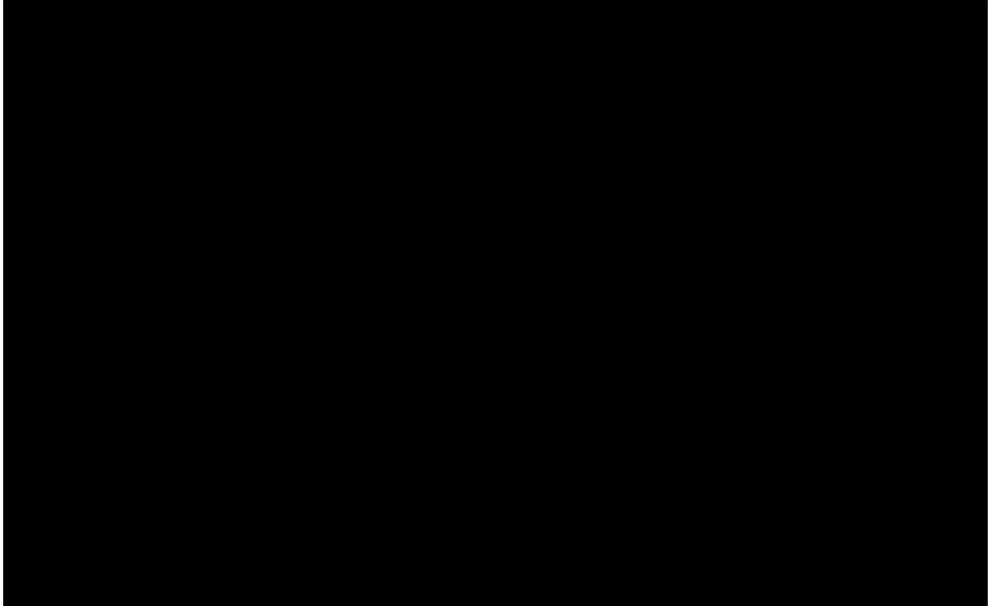
Comparable to Charles Dickens's novella *A Christmas Carol* (1843) in its employment of ghosts to return what is repressed by Victorian society ('Ignorance' and 'Want' personified as children and hidden under the cloak of the portly and genial Ghost of Christmas Present (Dickens 1960: 56–7)), Elizabeth Gaskell's 'The Old Nurse's Tale' (1852) similarly uses the framework of an individual moral tale to raise wider social questions through the motif of haunting. The tale revolves around the titular 'old nurse' looking back on a period spent with her young, orphaned charge, Miss Rosamund, at the stately and imposing Furnivall Manor House. The charge's youth and beauty signify her innocence and moral blamelessness in contrast to her distant aunt, the elderly Miss Furnivall, whose soured youthful beauty functions as testament to moral corruption. The nurse describes her horror at finding Miss Rosamund freezing almost to death on the Fells, having followed a ghostly child 'so pretty and so sweet' (Gaskell 2008: 14). The spectre is feared by the residents of the house as a harbinger of evil for all but Miss Rosamund, who wishes to go to the forlorn, beckoning, infant ghost. The tale climactically reveals that the spectral child is the daughter of Miss Furnivall's sister, begotten in a secret marriage to a 'dark foreigner' (Gaskell 2008: 19). Her posthumous exile from the house repeats her earthly existence, in which she had been turned out along with her 'disgraced' mother, accompanied by Lord Furnivall's prayers that 'they might never enter heaven' (Gaskell 2008: 21). While the tale ostensibly focuses on the elderly aunt's jealous complicity in her sister's and niece's expulsion, there is pity

created for the individual who has for so long suffered under this guilty burden, and the nurse teaches her charge to 'pray for one who had done a deadly sin' (Gaskell 2008: 22). The pathos engendered for the aunt leads me to suggest that the tale functions as a wider social critique of the treatment of women considered fallen and of the implied xenophobia or racism (veiled in the reference to the 'dark foreigner') that meant that the couple could not divulge their marital status. The spectre haunts and appears to threaten all who are present, regardless of their direct involvement in the specific event that has provoked the haunting, implying that this is a collective repression rather than an isolated haunting of a guilty individual. I follow March-Russell's claim that the 'ghost story became an effective means for nineteenth-century writers to register their unease with the apparent progress of society in ways that the dominant form of the novel – social realism – could not encompass' (March-Russell 2009: 181): the ghost provides a voice for the unspoken social ills of Victorian Britain.

The ghost story was also the favoured form for popular fiction authors of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain, such as Algernon Blackwood, M. R. James and W. W. Jacobs. Their supernatural tales fall largely into the 'well-made' category, neatly and chillingly arriving at a climax that has been foreshadowed throughout. The relative simplicity of the plots points to the fact that the ghost story was often designed to be read aloud at intimate gatherings. Though critics such as Brander Matthews have attempted to define the short story with reference to those 'more "important" tales known as Novels' (Matthews 1901: 32), its origins in fairy and folk tales are more widely acknowledged and nowhere more apparent than in the orality of Victorian and Edwardian ghost stories. The dialogism of the oral tale is frequently referenced in classic ghost stories, such as M. R. James's 'Oh, Whistle, and I'll Come to You, My Lad' (1904), wherein the narrator diligently recounts the conversation between 'rude Mr Rogers' and the 'rather hen-like' Professor Parkins, in order to recreate 'the impression which it made' for 'the reader', who is directly addressed (James 2007: 66–7).

Legacies in such written short stories of the orality of earlier tales is also evident in the scene-setting that harks back to what March-Russell describes as the '*context-sensitive*' nature of the oral tale (March-Russell 2009: 2). E. F. Benson's 'In the Tube' (1923) is faithful to the conventions of the ghost story, diligently setting the scene and thus evoking the intimacy of an oral delivery. Roughly a quarter of the short story is devoted to the preamble, as the first-person narrator describes his host settling him down by the fireside for the evening before beginning his tale: 'Comfortable? Got everything that you want? Here goes then' (Benson 2012: 75). The effect of the long frame narrative is that readers are equipped with the tools with which to interpret the supernatural portion of the tale: in this case, readers (aligned with the narrator) are invited to dwell on the paradox of eternity as being more comprehensible than the temporary. This creates a philosophical rationale for the recurrent figure of the ghost, whose hauntings of the host begin prior to his death. The intimacy created by the scene setting and dialogue of the short story through the narrator-foil means that the reader is made to feel physically present in the scene, making the climactic appearance of 'a soul in hell' in the very room in which the tale is being recounted a moment of greater terror for the reader (Benson 2012: 89). Through the mechanisms of the Gothic short story, the reader's imagined physical proximity to danger renders

them accomplice and/or victim, either party to – or under threat from – the horrors presented therein.



The short story – its form, categorisation, collection and dissemination – is shifting and transient, and Gothic authors have bent it to their own purposes since its boom in the nineteenth century. Reflecting dramatic changes in society and in dominant literary styles, the short story has been deployed to mirror Gothic effects that have ranged from the claustrophobic and entrapping ‘well-made’ form exemplified by Poe, to an open and ambivalent modernist form that expresses unease with contemporary society reflected in a fragmented sense of self, to the rhizomatic structures of Helen Oyeyemi’s collected tales that point to contemporary and historical influences that extend beyond the conventional categorisation of Gothic as an Anglo-American genre while registering the horrors wrought by globalisation. So the short story, as an evolving and elastic form, continues to provide Gothic authors with an apposite means of expressing the horrors of the worlds with which they are confronted.

### Notes

1. March-Russell notes that the ‘*Oxford English Dictionary* dates the earliest recorded reference to the term “short story” to 1877’ while ‘In the United States [. . .] the term only gained currency during the 1880s’ (March-Russell 2009: 1).
2. I should note that for Baldick the Gothic is a specifically Euro-American phenomenon, distinguished from ‘the generality of fearful narratives’ and marked by a specific location and history, a categorising manoeuvre that I resist in considering the Gothic short story’s adaptation to disparate times and places, shedding the specifics of ‘dynastic corruption of an aristocratic power’ (Baldick 2009: xx, xxi) in order to consider other ways in which national memories of historical oppression similarly threaten in ways that I deem distinctly Gothic.
3. See Chinua Achebe’s critique of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899) (Achebe 1988).

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