

Ghostly Apparitions as Props – Exploring Scientific Debates within the Fantastic

Dr. Deepthi.S

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Government First Grade College

Channapatna

Abstract

The paper explores the role of props in science fiction emphasizing on the debates surrounding the use of props as a decisive factor in defining the genre, taking recourse to various studies and definitions of science fiction. The function and nature of props in science fiction, the paper claims, plays a crucial role in defining it as a distinctive genre – different from other fantasy literature including ghost stories, fairy tales etc., although with several overlapping.

The paper then moves on to problematise the relationship between the ghost story and science fiction arguing that the ghost can be seen as a prop and therefore several ghost stories come under the category of science fiction. This is driven from the observation that in several ghost stories, especially the ones written during the Victorian age, the ghost served a specific function and was there in the story with a particular purpose. The paper attempts to arrive at this purpose and tries to link it to the larger debates of colonization, spirituality, science and religion within Victorian society. The ghost is explored as a prop and is also set alongside and in opposition with science fiction and its other props. Through an examination of a few Victorian ghost stories, the paper will attempt to elucidate its contention that the ghost story and the ghost provided an unobtrusive entry for scientific debates into the spiritual domain, sometimes questioning and at times strengthening science and scientific endeavours.

Keywords: ghost story, science fiction, science and religion, Victorian society

There is very little consensus among sci-fi aficionados about the premises that help define science fiction. Nevertheless, most of them agree that they will know one when they see it. SF texts have space ships, time machines, robots, aliens, and computers etc. as subjects, trappings, themes or props. This paper adds another prop to these existing ones and that is the ghost or the ghostly apparition. Ghostly apparition would be a more appropriate term within this context since an apparition also connotes the sense of seeing or sight and in science, we all know 'seeing is believing'. Through an examination of ghost stories written during the Victorian era, the paper shows how these stories reflect the concerns and beliefs that fashioned the genre of science fiction.

The fact that both science fiction and the ghost story share common ancestry is something that helps one posit the ghost as a prop within science fiction. Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* SF writers claim is, if not the origin of SF, a pioneering work in the field of SF. *Frankenstein* is also claimed by gothic fiction theorists as the first gothic novel. The fact that Mary Shelley started writing a ghost story and ended up with a science fiction novel shows the many areas of convergences between these two genres and legitimises the space accorded to the ghost story within the genre of science fiction. (Science fiction slowly replaced the ghost story in the late nineteenth and early 20th century)

In her essay on the trouble with ghost-seeing, Smajic argues that although the ghost story was the last place where one would search for evidences of Darwinism, industrialization, colonial expansion or even scientific study, the genre was directly informed by contemporary philosophical and scientific debates about vision and knowledge. It is in articulating these contemporary debates related to science during the century that the ghost story makes itself a part of science fiction. I do not argue that the ghost story in itself is SF but there are ghost stories which by articulating debates regarding science and scientific knowledge function as props for science fiction and this paper looks at those stories.

Fitz-James O'Brien's "What was It¹?" is often found in anthologies of ghost stories. The story has in it all those aspects which place it within the genre of the ghost story. There is no logical explanation of the machinery in the story - a characteristic very crucial to the definition of a ghost story (M.R James). There is fear in it, the perfect setting in a haunted house and an element of suspense till the end. However, it is in the logic that the story upholds, that its affinity with SF gets established. In defining science fiction, Suvin says that it is not the 'truth' of science that is important to science fiction; it is the scientific method, the logical working through of a particular premise. Suvin asserts, "Science fiction is distinguished by the narrative dominance or hegemony of a fictional novum....validated by cognitive logic". In a discussion of an SF writer Larry Niven's work titled "Ringworld", another critic Jones discusses how the book had to be withdrawn and rewritten since some people were unhappy with and objected to the unscientific descriptions in the book. Jones says that "the actual challenge was not to Niven's scientific accuracy but to his appearance of command over the language of science". Thus it follows that SF's success depends on the writer's ability to make things appear logical and probable through the use of language. Unlike the internal logic within the ghost story which follows that the ghost is an entity within the world of the dead, a dissatisfied spirit returning to avenge its untimely death, this ghost story upholds SFs internal logic of making the story appear scientific. This is achieved by focussing the attention on the ghost-seer and not the ghost, valorising the rationality of physiological scientific premise which privileges sight over all the other senses. Hence what becomes a crucial question in the story is not whether the ghost exists but whether it can be verified or explained within the rational and epistemological premise of scientific knowledge. Smajic argues that during the nineteenth century, research in physiological optics gave rise to a new type of scientific literature on the subject of ghosts in which the ghost was described as a perfectly normal optical effect rather than a dream vision or bizarre product of an overactive, unhealthy imagination. This physiological argument explained how ghosts could appear to persons of sound mind and vision, thus "propounding a new theory which not only undermines the Enlightenment's imperative for absolute scientific objectivity by foregrounding the subjective nature of sensory perceptions, especially sight, and the ensuing uncertainties of all knowledge derived from empirical investigation".

Science fiction, Scholes points out, offers us a world clearly and radically discontinuous from the one we know, yet returns to confront that known world in some cognitive way. In the story, there is a parallel world, the world of the dead which is explained within the logical world of sense experience of physical science. The narrator of the story claims to talk of an experience which in the annals of physical science is unparalleled. He and his friend who is incidentally called Dr. Hammond, clearly establishing him as a man of science, have an encounter with an invisible assailant whom they capture and bind to the bed without being

¹ Irish born American settled, story published in 1859

able to see it. And it is in using scientific language to establish the veracity of their story that the narrator privileges vision over other senses like touch and sound. There are references in the story to solid ponderable body, which nevertheless one cannot see. The narrator says that he felt a sort of scientific pride in the affair, which dominated every other feeling. The whole experience of them being able to touch the body but not being able to see it is very scientifically compared to pure glass which is tangible but transparent. Hence the whole experience of seeing the ghost is made theoretically possible. Within the same story and in the same breath the narrator draws parallels between this experience and the experience of séances arguing that at several spirit circles, spirits are known to touch the living. It is interesting to note that within the same story, there is an effort made to make both these experiences similar- one is the experience of science and the other the world of the spirits. Not satisfied with merely touching the invisible being, the narrator and his friend go on to make of cast of plaster of Paris to capture the shape of the invisible being. As Suvin says, more than the probability of the scientific experiment or the event, what constitutes SF is the logical and rational explanation of an event even if it is only theoretical. This story attempts to collect evidence to support the existence of ghosts.

The Victorian era was the age of science and also the séance. Victorian fascination with the occult was reflected in almost all the texts of the time which included science. The society for psychical research (SPR) was established and spiritualism as a movement gained ground even as scientific knowledge was establishing its supremacy. The spiritual movement was patronized by several scientists even. In 1885, the peak period of the spiritual movement, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps writes in the North American Review,

It has been widely felt that the present is an opportune time for making an organized and systematic attempt to investigate that large group of debatable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, psychical, and spiritualistic. From the recorded testimony of many competent witnesses, past and present, including observations recently made by scientific men of eminence in various - countries, there appears to be, amidst much illusion and deception, an important body of remarkable phenomena, which are prima facie inexplicable on any generally recognized hypothesis, and which, if incontestably established, would be of the highest possible value. "

In ghost stories of the time, there is an effort to study the phenomenon of the ghost within the knowledge base of physical sciences. Phelps' advice to scientists willing to study the phenomenon of spirits is to practice honesty and candour since she says that science is not all that objective and honest as it appears. She says that, "there were scholars among the contemporaries of Galileo who never would consent to look through a telescope, lest they should be compelled to admit the existence of the stars which he had discovered". Within this story too we have the narrator providing proofs of the ghost's existence, the sinking of the bed in which it lies, the sounds it makes, but they are unwilling to even go through the evidences since it cannot be explained within the scientific premise of seeing is believing. This was a period during which the metaphysically and the theologically informed debates about spiritual vision fought along with the investigative methods of philosophical scepticism and evidential rules of materialist science. One can see these debates being played out in the ghost stories of the times, especially in this story which tries to reinstate the importance of science by undermining the power of sight and emphasizing other senses like the sense of touch and hearing. There are stories in which the ghost is made visible through a scientific

method which included spirit photography and other modes. One sees within ghost stories written during this period a long drawn battle between two forms of knowledge- the intuitive and the empirical. The theological and the metaphysical strand of knowledge sought to look at the spiritual vision, at a world unknown to the frontiers of science. Science, on the other hand privileged the scientific method of inquiry, an empirical evidence based approach to knowledge. The power to imagine, some of these vociferous supporters of the spiritual movement argued, is a crucial element within the scientific process too. It is in the ghost story that both these debates were played out, at times limiting the ghost story to mere fiction and at other times including it within the domain of science fiction.

References

Antoni Smuszkiewicz, Elizabeth Kwasniewski and R. M. P. "Props and Their Function in Science Fiction" *Science Fiction Studies* 14: 2, Critical Approaches to Science Fiction: Retrospects & Prospects (Jul., 1987), pp. 222-229.

Cox, Michael and R.A. Gilbert, eds. *The Oxford Book of Ghost Stories*. (Oxford: OUP, 1989).

Dalby, Richard, ed. *The Virago Book of Ghost Stories*. (Great Britain: Virago Press, 2006).

Todorov, Tzvetan. *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*. Trans. Richard Howard. (Cornell University: USA. 1975).