The University of Southern Mississippi
The Aquila Digital Community

Master's Theses

Summer 8-2014

Haunted to Death: Subverting Genre and Reader Expectations in Lewis Carroll's Phantasmagoria

Elissa Anne Graeser
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: https://aquila.usm.edu/masters_theses

Part of the English Language and Literature Commons

Recommended Citation
Graeser, Elissa Anne, "Haunted to Death: Subverting Genre and Reader Expectations in Lewis Carroll's Phantasmagoria" (2014). *Master's Theses*. 47.
https://aquila.usm.edu/masters_theses/47

This Masters Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in Master's Theses by an authorized administrator of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

The University of Southern Mississippi

HAUNTED TO DEATH: SUBVERTING GENRE AND READER EXPECTATIONS IN LEWIS CARROLL'S *PHANTASMAGORIA*

by

Elissa Anne Graeser

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

Approved:

Dr. Alexandra Valint____________________
Committee Chair

Dr. Kate Cochran__ ____________________

Dr. E. Kay Harris_ _____________________

Dr. Maureen Ryan______________________
Dean of the Graduate School

August 2014

ABSTRACT

HAUNTED TO DEATH: SUBVERTING GENRE AND READER EXPECTATIONS IN LEWIS CARROLL'S *PHANTASMAGORIA*

by Elissa Anne Graeser

August 2014

This study of Lewis Carroll's *Phantasmagoria* argues that the poem failed to achieve critical and popular success due to unmet reader expectations. The poem is a haunted house or ghost story and in many ways follows the familiar formula of the Victorian ghost story. However, Carroll's political and generic satire alters various aspects of the anticipated structure, thereby creating a work that fails to satisfy readers on multiple levels. The failure of a work by a successful author writing within a popular genre is particularly significant for what it shows us about the relationship between genre, consumerism, and literary criticism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis adviser, Dr. Alexandra Valint, for her unfailing support and encouragement throughout this process. Her input and guidance were crucial to the ultimate success of this project. Further, Drs. Kate Cochran and E. Kay Harris provided significant insight and direction for the revision and publication of this work. Finally, Dr. Monika Gehlawat contributed a considerable amount of time and effort in helping me hone my argument and refine my writing. Also, I extend a special word of thanks to Dr. Mary Pharr for encouraging my love of the Gothic in the first place.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS iii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION 1

II. HISTORICAL CONTEXT 4

III. TEXTUAL ANALYSIS 16

Political Satire of the Victorian Class System
Generic Satire of Popular Ghost Stories

IV. METHODOLOGY 29

V. CONCLUSION 34

WORKS CITED 39

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Lewis Carroll's obscure poem *Phantasmagoria* (1869) subverts the traditional Victorian ghost story genre to critique nineteenth-century English social structure and the ghost story itself. Carroll presents a unique supernatural world that offers new explanations for many of the most unsettling aspects of hauntings—drafty rooms, rattling doorframes, moans and cries—while also mirroring and criticizing the class system of Victorian England. Although social satire, ghost stories, and Lewis Carroll were all popular at the time, *Phantasmagoria* failed to inspire interest from either casual readers or literary critics. In this essay, I explore the connection between specific genre expectations and the reception of a literary work. Specifically, I investigate why, in spite of Carroll's fame and the general success of Victorian ghost stories, *Phantasmagoria* was both a critical and commercial failure. I develop a theory for *Phantasmagoria's* failure by examining the relationship between generic reader expectations, the well-established ghost story genre, and literary success in the Victorian period.

Phantasmagoria,[1] published as part of a larger collection of poetry in 1869 and then again in 1883, is a comic poem written in seven cantos and consisting of 150 quintains, rhyming abaab. *Phantasmagoria* presents a conversation between a small ghost and Mr. Tibbets, the man whose house the ghost is assigned to haunt. The ghost explains

---

[1] The word phantasmagoria was relatively new at the time of the poem's publication but likely familiar to Carroll's readers. It was created to be a fanciful variation of "phantasm," and first appeared in London in 1802 as the title of an exhibition that featured a series of optical illusions (including ghosts) by way of magic lantern ("Phantasmagoria"). It has since come to mean a sequence of dreamlike images (either real or imaginary).

that as a Phantom, he operates within a unique family structure and ghost hierarchy. He also describes his early internship under a more experienced Phantom and laments the dreadful expense of the tools of his trade. With the exception of one minor altercation after which Tibbets finds himself temporarily unconscious, the majority of their conversation (and therefore the poem) is dedicated to polite discussion rather than to dangerous or thrilling supernatural activity.

Although we know much about the early critical responses to many of Carroll's other works, the same cannot be said for Carroll's ghost poem. What we do know, however, is that *Phantasmagoria* never achieved the critical or popular traction of either his *Alice*[2] novels or his well-known nonsense poem "The Hunting of the Snark" (1876). Furthermore, almost nothing has been written about *Phantasmagoria* in the nearly 150 years since its publication despite Carroll's continued popularity. In fact, in the introduction to the Literary Classics edition, Carroll scholar Martin Gardner admits that this poem has been "long neglected" and hopes that his introduction will help change that fact (15). In 2001, Ivor Davies published what appears to the only critical article about *Phantasmagoria*. Titled "Phantasmagoria: Lewis Carroll and the Victorian Ghost Story," this brief six-page article focuses primarily on how *Phantasmagoria* indicates that Carroll possessed an understanding of the ghost story genre but that the poem itself is an oddity (Davies 4). Neither Gardner nor Davies offers any insight into why *Phantasmagoria* has been and continues to be largely ignored by critics, scholars, and common readers alike.

[2] *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) and *Through the Looking Glass* (1871).

This paper consists of three primary stages of investigation into *Phantasmagoria*'s failure as both a critical work and a popular commodity. First, I establish the literary context within which Carroll wrote and published this poem. Chief points of interest include the Victorian Gothic movement and the extremely popular and formulaic Victorian ghost stories that were so pervasive in the latter half of the nineteenth century. After situating *Phantasmagoria* within this ghost story formula and the specific set of expectations that accompany it, I examine where and how Carroll breaks from this formula and these expectations. I also detail what he offers as substitutes, namely various forms of political and social satire. Once I establish this framework, I transition into the crux of my argument: how the combination of an influential readership and the surprisingly static Victorian ghost story genre led to *Phantasmagoria* becoming all but invisible. I argue that by assuming the ghost story mantel, Carroll triggered a set of reader expectations, and it is his failure to satisfactorily meet these expectations that eventually resulted in the widespread rejection of his poem.

CHAPTER II

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When Victorians heard the term "ghost story," they expected a specific reading experience. The most basic aspects of the classic Victorian ghost story formula include a mystery involving a death or crime that remains unsolved and is the direct cause of the haunting (and the key to ending it); a house with a prestigious name, a bad history, and sketchy owners (past or present); supernatural activity that slowly escalates until it becomes dangerous or life-threatening; and the fact that the humans' fear increases the strength or efficacy of the ghosts. Commissioned by Charles Dickens, Edward Bulwer-Lytton's "The Haunted and the Haunters; or the House and the Brain" (1859) is an early example of a popular Victorian ghost story that remains well-known and frequently anthologized today (Briggs 58-9). In it, a gentleman learns of a nearby house that is rumored to be haunted. Intrigued, the man leases it for one night and moves in with his manservant and his dog. Two distinct beings haunt the house, one of which is a large black form with an evil intent. The gentleman is initially amused by the footsteps and moving objects he witnesses, but after getting locked in an empty room, being abandoned by his previously steadfast servant, and watching his dog die, he realizes his situation is very serious. Eventually, he comes face-to-face with the black presence and, in spite of his fear, stands his ground: "I was still equally conscious that if I gave way to fear I should be in bodily peril; and I concentrated all my faculties in the single focus of resisting, stubborn will" (Bulwer-Lytton 25). His refusal to succumb to panic is essential to his ultimate survival. He launches an investigation into the lives of the previous owners of the house and eventually hires builders to break down a wall to reveal a hidden

room, which contains "a very singular apparatus" left by the reincarnated warlock who used to live there (Bulwer-Lytton 40). This device acts as a supernatural magnet to draw various types of spirits to the house. By discovering the device and removing it from the house, the gentleman solves the mystery and releases the spirits. Most Victorian ghost stories follow this recognizable plot formula and end with the resolving of the haunting, the combination of which provides them with both plot structure and thematic content. Julia Briggs claims that readers sought out these stories of "the terrific unknown" in order to "exorcize, in controlled circumstances, fears which in solitude or darkness might become unmanageable" (12). The warmth and familiarity of home is held in stark contrast to the cold and unfamiliar apparition, creating in the reader a frightening combination of anxiety and vulnerability that can be resolved along with the haunting. Victorian readers actively sought these experiences, relishing the resulting thrill and subsequent relief.

The Victorian ghost story owed much of its popularity to the success of the Victorian Gothic movement from which it stemmed. The earliest examples of the Gothic date as far back as the Golden Age of Rome and Greece, but the genre only found a title[3] in the latter half of the eighteenth century with Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto*[4] before finally reaching a second pinnacle of fame with the oft-haunting tales of Victorian England. Gothic literature is, according to Romanticism scholar Mary Pharr, a form of "dark romanticism" that "emphasizes the demonic rather than the numinous" (1). In these

---

[3] Based on European architecture of the same name.

[4] *Otranto* is considered by many scholars to be both the first Gothic novel and the first "haunted castle" story, and therefore it paved the way for the combination of the two in Victorian ghost stories.

stories, the shadows are more important than the light and provide a home for beasts, creatures, and spectres that threaten in the corners of our minds' eyes. For G. R. Thompson, the term Gothic "evokes images of ghosts, demons, trapdoors, castles," common aspects of the original European Gothic texts that were also popular in Victorian Gothic works, with some adjustments for taste and decorum (1).[5] Bradford Morrow and Patrick McGrath explain, "[d]ark forests and dripping cellars, ruined abbeys riddled with secret passages, clanking chains, skeletons, thunderstorms, and moonlight" all have a home in earlier Gothic fiction and in the later Victorian version (xiv). Writers of Victorian ghost stories adopted many of these popular and familiar Gothic elements to help create a sense of foreboding in the reader, but also to invoke a sense of the past. Briggs notes that "[t]he combination of modern skepticism with a nostalgia for an older, more supernatural system of beliefs provides the foundation of the ghost story" (19). By utilizing Gothic imagery and language, Victorian ghost story writers were able to quite literally set the stage for their readers to explore and ultimately let go of the past.

While he initially invokes this traditional ghost story structure, Carroll dismisses the most powerful and weighty elements, the pieces that carry the significance and deeper meaning of the stories that resonated so deeply with the readers of his time. Gone are the forays into loss and memory and the need to resolve the past in order to have a future. Absent is the very real fear of the unknown and the unknowable that strikes deep into readers' darkest places and provides a not unpleasant shiver of fear. In their places are

[5] Victorians, while enchanted with the thrills Gothic literature delivered, were not as comfortable publicly relishing the overtly sexual and perverted morality that ran through many (though certainly not all) of earlier Gothic works. These themes are still present, but are presented in more restrained, suggestive ways.

political parodies and loosely veiled social observations. And though he may have been attempting to utilize the established ghost story tradition to address prevalent political issues of his time—primarily class immobility and the great social and economic distance between the upper echelon and the rest of the nation—Carroll's manipulations of the established genre go too far, and the poem ultimately fails to satisfy the expectations that likely drew his readers to the poem in the first place.

Carroll first evokes the traditional ghost story genre by beginning his poem with gloomy Gothic imagery. These opening lines suggest to the Victorian reader that something unsettling or supernatural is about to happen: "One winter night, at half-past nine / Cold, tired, and cross, and muddy, / I had come home, too late to dine" (19). By setting his tale in the chilly darkness broken only by a fire and candlelight so prevalent in the Gothic mode, Carroll mirrors the popular "fireside tale" aspect of Victorian ghost stories. While many authors preferred to frame their narratives as legends or somewhat true stories that are told by a group of people sitting around a fireplace on a winter evening, others simply included those elements in the story itself. Therefore, when Carroll presents the reader with a man returning home in the dark of night, in the winter cold, to a house that is no longer as familiar as it was when he left it, he is making a promise in terms of the excitement to come.

The Victorian Gothic genre in the nineteenth century functioned in much the same way that popular[6] or genre fiction does today: it was extremely widely read and

[6] Popular fiction generally focuses more heavily on exciting plot elements, fitting into a specific genre, and appealing to a particular genre-based audience. This type of fiction is often held in contrast to literary fiction, which focuses more on literary merit and often contains more realistic and everyday-life plotlines.

financially rewarding for those writers fortunate enough to become fashionable, but literary critics often stood in direct opposition to the majority of readers: "Gothic fiction was depicted as prostituting itself to popular taste and as embodying aesthetic diseases capable of infecting the body politics" (Mudge qtd. in Berthine 64). However, this gelid reception from critics did not dampen readers' enjoyment of these works or lessen authors' interest in publishing in this lucrative area:

> By 1819 Gothic horror was so much in vogue that Leigh Hunt could declare in his introduction to "A Tale for a Chimney Corner," "a man who does not contribute his quota of grim story nowadays, seems hardly to be free of the republic of letters. He is bound to wear a death's head as part of his insignia. If he does not frighten everybody, he is nobody. If he does not shock the ladies, what can be expected of him?" (Briggs 33)

The general understanding among authors and readers alike was that scary stories were the thing to read and write. Famous writers like Elizabeth Gaskell, H. G. Wells, Rudyard Kipling, and Charles Dickens—all of whom also wrote successful works unrelated to haunted houses or ghosts—made notable contributions to the genre.[7] Ghost stories soon became a regular part of Victorian life, which included the telling of familiar ghost stories round the fire on cold winter nights as well as reading new ones in popular magazines and periodicals as they became available, with Dickens' special Christmas editions being among the most favored (Briggs 41).

---

[7] In fact, some well-known authors collaborated for Christmas editions of periodicals. See "The Haunted House" (1859) by Charles Dickens, which features framed stories by Wilkie Collins, Elizabeth Gaskell, and others.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the ghost story was well established as a genre that dealt in both fears and solutions. According to Briggs, the ghost story genre drew even the most serious literary authors "largely because it invited a concern with the profoundest issues… man and his universe and the philosophical conditions of that universe" (23). These stories excited readers, certainly, but they did so at least partly because they addressed very real and very deeply held issues:

> Haunting is primarily the unconscious transmission of an unsayable, unnameable secret, which, like the secret of an unnameable, unacknowledged child, is passed from generation to generation. Most ghost stories are centered on the theme of family inheritance and dynasty, with the ghost, a vestige from another time, haunting the castle, either in the role of claimant or protector of the title. (Berthine 9)

Ghost stories allowed writers the rare opportunity to explore dark and dangerous topics without sacrificing the pleasure and enjoyment of their audience. The supernatural elements provide a necessary buffer while writers (and their readers) confront their fears through the solving of the underlying mystery. At first, *Phantasmagoria* seems to fulfill this promise of supernatural excitement: "There was a strangeness in the room, / And Something white and wavy / was standing near me in the gloom--" (Carroll 20). A protagonist arriving home late at night only to discover an unexpected ghostly visitor (or worse, new occupant) would have sent familiar chills down the collective spines of Carroll's readers as they settled themselves in for a creepy tale, yet very quickly Carroll enacts a shift in tone that reminds us that this poem is meant to be humorous: Mr. Tibbets observes the shivering, sneezing ghost and, rather than shrinking away in fear and horror,

tells it to be quiet: “Less noise there, if you please!” (20). He fails to realize that the ghost is, in fact, a ghost, and the moment of suspense and anxiety dissipates. The ghost then reveals that he has come down with a cold from standing out on the landing, which both demystifies the ghost and constitutes a major break from traditional Victorian representations of ghosts.

By the time Carroll wrote and published *Phantasmagoria*, the existence of ghosts (both in literature and in popular conception) had been thoroughly established as being the result of a now-dead person remaining in or returning to the world of the living. According to Briggs, in medieval literature, “[w]hen the dead return it is in the form, not of spirits, but of mouldering corpses, their lips ‘clay-cold,’ their breath ‘earthy-strong’. They cannot eat the food set before them, their kiss is death, and cock-crow summons them back to the ‘channerin worm’” (28).[8] The physicality of ghosts had changed significantly by the nineteenth century, however, and they were now far more wispy and ethereal (though still potentially dangerous) and generally lacked fully physical bodies. The inability to eat and the tendency to come out at night remained. Carroll’s visual representation of his ghost (“white and wavy”) fits the expected standard, but his description of the ghost’s physical illness and enjoyment of eating and drinking is decidedly contradictory to the common ghost. Furthermore, rather than Mr. Tibbets, it is the ghost who is initially frightened and hides: “He trembled when he caught my eye, / And got behind a chair” (Carroll 21). The Phantom explains that ghosts are afraid of light in much the same way that humans sometimes fear the dark (22). Whereas Gothic tales

[8] Shakespeare’s *Hamlet,* for example, followed this formula very carefully in its representation of Hamlet’s father’s ghost.

tend to focus on supernatural beings' affinity for darkness, Carroll suggests here that it is actually an aversion to the light, turning tradition upside down and further removing the reader from any potential suspense or fear. *Phantasmagoria* simply is not scary.

Carroll further undermines the eeriness of his ghost poem by providing humorous and light-hearted explanations for some of the more harrowing aspects of traditional hauntings. According to Briggs, "The main aim of a ghost story is to scare its readers, willing victims of that 'strange human craving for feeling afraid,' as Virginia Woolf termed it…In literature ghost stories satisfy this appetite most directly, making no attempt to explain away their terrors in plausible terms" (11). Yet Carroll appears to do just that in this next section of the poem. The second Canto contains the five "Maxims of Behaviour" that all ghosts must follow when haunting a house. Rule One, according to the Phantom, involves how to initiate the haunting:

> Is—if your Victim be in bed,
> Don't touch the curtains at his head,
> But take them in the middle,
> And wave them slowly in and out,
> While drawing them asunder; (28)

The idea, says the ghost, is to get the "Victim" to initiate a conversation. If the waving of the bed curtains fails (if the Victim falls back asleep, for instance), then the ghost must try "a hollow groan" or moving candles or other objects around the room (29). Rule Two provides additional guidelines for "ceremonious calls," in which the ghost must "burn a blue or crimson light" and "then scratch the door or walls" (29). Here, Carroll invokes ghostly tropes that were exceedingly popular at that time, but ignores or denies (or

perhaps even mocks) their usual meaning. Traditionally, this type of ghostly manifestation pushes the haunted person toward or scares them away from the underlying mystery that has caused the haunting in the first place. The only way to make these unsettling things stop is to solve that mystery. In *Phantasmagoria*, however, these same occurrences are not intended to scare and serve only as a form of polite introduction.

This element of a mystery that must be solved or a dark past that must be confronted is key to the traditional Victorian ghost story. In Horace Walpole's pioneering work *The Castle of Otranto,* a huge helmet, an enormous sword, a giant hand, sighing portraits, and a ghost or two all work together to force evil king Manfred into conceding the throne to the rightful heir and prince, Theodore. Once Theodore's identity is revealed and he is given his proper recognition, all paranormal activity ceases, marking the solving of the underlying mystery. In Bulwer-Lytton's "The Haunted and the Haunters," the narrator experiences similar supernatural happenings: a chair moves across the room by itself, the doors open and close on their own, the narrator hears footsteps, scratching noises, and other odd sounds, and he even sees a strange light periodically. According to Carroll's ghost, these occurrences would seem to indicate a job well done on behalf of the resident ghost, as he would have followed the proper protocol for politely engaging with his host. For Bulwer-Lytton, however, these actions are meant to be threatening, and the narrator eventually finds himself in a battle for his life as he tries to survive the night. In the end, however, he does succeed in uncovering the truth about the history of the house and removing the magnet device, thereby banishing the ghosts and resolving the haunting. The exact nature of the underlying mystery varies from ghost story to ghost story, but it often includes some kind of wrongdoing, secret, or victimization that has

resulted in a ghost's inability to leave. In contrast, Carroll offers no deeper meaning for the haunting beyond it being the Phantom's current job assignment.

While Carroll's poem does not focus on an underlying mystery, it does offer an explanation for a darker type of haunting. In *Phantasmagoria*, ghosts are supposed to function in the best interests of the house's occupants, and therefore any type of terrible or violent outcome would necessarily be the fault of the "Victim":

> If you address a Ghost as 'Thing!'
>
> Or strike him with a hatchet,
>
> He is permitted by the King
>
> To drop all formal parleying –
>
> And then you're sure to catch it! (33)

Essentially, if the haunted person is rude, violent, or otherwise unwelcoming, he or she has broken faith with the ghost and must face the consequences. The Phantom does not specify exactly what this ghostly retaliation would entail, but suggests that all rules are off should the Victim become offensive or aggressive.

Although *Phantasmagoria* does acknowledge the ghost story formula and certain expectations that go along with it, Carroll spends more time within the poem replacing these anticipated elements with his own substitutions. The most significant exchanges involve humor in the place of suspense and socio-political satire in the place of the more traditional explanations for hauntings. While the infusion of humor into a typically unnerving genre might seem like an interesting concept, the result is a ghost story that lacks the hallmark gravitas of the genre. Carroll's satirical substitutions, while apt and at times entertaining, are not satisfactory replacements for the original elements. They trade

in the excitement of the unexplainable and the supernatural for the mundanity of the Victorian class system and the over-exposed nature of the ghost story genre itself. And while Carroll's satire in *Phantasmagoria* was apparently not well received, the issues he addresses were in keeping with the major socio-political conversations of his day and would have been familiar to his audience. According to biographer Morton Cohen, "Lewis Carroll remains an enigma, a complex human being who has so far defied comprehension" (*Lewis* xxi). He was an author, a poet of uneven quality, a university don, an acclaimed mathematician, and an adult who seemed often to prefer the world of children (Cohen, *Lewis* 3-5). Though labeled a political conservative, Carroll was not a typical Tory,[9] as he supported several causes that were considered liberal and perhaps even radical,[10] and his creative works reflect this individualized approach to party politics (Cohen, *Lewis* xxi). He publicly supported fellow Tory Benjamin Disraeli, who remains the only Jewish Prime Minister in England's history and who rose to the highest political office in spite of middle class origins and what biographer J. H. Plumb dubbed the "established, deeply status-conscious society that was by and large unthinkingly anti-Semitic" (Plumb x). In fact, Disraeli broke with tradition in almost every way, from his unlanded status to his early associations with reform platforms and the political

---

[9] Sir Robert Peel defined the Tory party as one of conservatism—"defence of Crown, Church and Constitution"—and the party as a whole was primarily interested in preserving the power of the royal monarch, maintaining the authority and independence of the House of Lords, and securing the ongoing union between the Church and the State (Bloy 1). These major concerns translated into conservatism on more everyday issues as well, many of which Carroll did not share with his fellow Tories.

[10] For example, Carroll supported vaccinations and argued in support of their health benefits, especially for children. He defied religious opposition to the theater and supported it as "wholesome, uplifting and educational," and he even went so far as to help establish the school that later became the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (Cohen, *Lewis* xx).

radicalism in his writing (Plumb *x*). This was the literary and political environment in which Carroll came of age and began writing: an environment in which the most powerful political figure had based his rise to success on the foundation of popular, politically-focused, novels. It stands to reason, then, that Carroll's readers (aristocratic and otherwise) would be very familiar with the idea of class mobility as one of great national significance and debate, which would then impact their perception of *Phantasmagoria*.

CHAPTER III

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Political Satire of the Victorian Class System

In Canto Four, Carroll presents the majority of his satirical commentary while continuing to thwart reader expectations with his descriptions of the ghost. Briggs notes that in the Victorian Gothic tradition the "patterning of the ghost story normally implies that there must be a reason (if not a strictly logical one) for supernatural events. If a ghost walks, it is because its owner has not been buried with due ceremony, because he has to atone for some great sin, or perhaps to warn, or provide information concealed during life" (Briggs 15-6). Carroll's ghosts, however, are born and not made. They do, as noted previously, have a hierarchical society that closely resembles the class system in nineteenth-century England. Ghosts, like Carroll's contemporaries, are under the authority of both a monarch and the "ruling class" of Spectres. The ghost begins by relating his immediate family history:

> My father was a Brownie,[11] Sir;
> My mother was a Fairy.
> The notion had occurred to her,
> The children would be happier,
> If they were taught to vary. (Carroll 43)

Carroll describes a ghost world in which some variety is possible based on choice or education, but with distinct built-in limits. This type of limited choice categorization was

---

[11] A kind of benevolent elf that haunts houses and secretly helps with the housework.

a topic of much discussion in England during Carroll's lifetime, especially as it related to a lack of upward mobility for people in the lower classes. Working class Victorians had very few opportunities to improve their situations due to long workdays and low wages that left little room for private endeavors. Middle-class Victorians, however, could choose to change careers, better themselves through education, and perhaps even improve their financial situations to some degree, but actually leaving the middle class was essentially unheard of. Carroll also uses the Phantom to represent these different class experiences at various points in the poem. By using one character to represent both classes, Carroll blends the middle and working classes together. This conflation suggests a kind of naïve universalism on Carroll's part, but is a concept his middle-class readership might well have resisted. Ultimately, his humorous parallel between the ghost social categories and the Victorian class system is clear, but Carroll also fails to offer any strong criticism of or solution to the situation.

In keeping with the Victorian model, Carroll's ghost hierarchy allows for some variation in job or haunting role, but not in actual class position. In *Phantasmagoria*, the ghost claims that his mother then "Brought us all out in different ways," resulting in a Pixy, two Fays,[12] a Banshee,[13] a Fetch,[14] a Kelpie,[15] a Poltergeist, a Ghoul,[16] two Trolls,

---

[12] A type of fairy.

[13] A female spirit that warns of an impending death within a home.

[14] A doppelganger ghost whose presence predicts death.

[15] A water sprite that often takes the form of a horse and drowns unwary travelers.

[16] An evil ghost that robs graves and steals bodies to feed on.

a Goblin, a Double,[17] an Elf, a Phantom, and a Leprechaun. Rather than treated as distinct species or creatures, these different types of supernatural beings (many of which Carroll borrowed from Irish and Scottish folklore) are instead presented as the various job options available to those within the same class of ghost. In fact, the ghost claims his Phantom apprenticeship began when he was only six years old—"I went out with an older one— / And just at first I found it fun"—but admits that it really is a hard life with lots of bad assignments in dreary places. He also claims to have tried working as a Double for a while, but soon found it to be too expensive (Carroll 46-7). The ability to seek various types of education or training to hold a different job or position (within limits) mirrors the middle-class Victorian experience more than that of the working class. Yet Carroll also describes a level of physical discomfort and financial peril that is more commonly associated with working class factory and mill life, once again drawing no real distinction between the two social classes. Here, Carroll also departs completely from any traditional definition of not only ghosts, but of other mythological creatures with which his readers would have been familiar, as well. These alternative definitions serve as part of his satirization of the Victorian class system as they further demystify the supernatural and align ghost stories with the mundane and everyday. However, whatever satirical benefit is gained from redefining these well-known types of supernatural beings as career options rather than species is dwarfed by the resulting loss of excitement for the reader. Swapping creepy creatures of fable for intellectual and mildly amusing political metaphor

---

[17] Similar to a Fetch, but without the threat of impending death.

is a difficult substitution to make, and one Carroll's *Alice*-loving readership did not seem to appreciate.

Although most of his ghosts are situated squarely in the working and middle classes as described above, Carroll extends his satirical re-imagining of the Victorian class system when the Phantom recounts the first time he saw members of the upper echelon when he was young:

> One day, some Spectres chanced to call,
> Dressed in the usual white:
> I stood and watched them in the hall,
> And couldn't make them out at all,
> They seemed so strange a sight. (44)

The Phantom admits that he did not even know what they were at first, because they "looked all head and sack" (44). The anatomical joke implied by this description immediately sets the tone for Carroll's mocking of the upper classes through the guise of the Spectres. The two greatest differences between the Spectres and the other ghosts are the fact that they are born into their roles as Spectres and that they hold positions of leisure and authority. In spite of the variety amongst his ghost-siblings, there are no Spectres in the Phantom's family, as they are apparently different from birth: "Since then I've often wished that I / Had been a Spectre *born*" (emphasis mine, Carroll 44). The Phantom concedes that his wishes to become a Spectre were in vain, however, because "what's the use? (He heaved a sigh.) / *They* are the ghost-nobility, / And look on *us* with scorn" (Carroll 44). Not only is he destined for a lower class by the lottery of birth, but he feels the great distance between his position and that of the Spectres in their treatment of

all non-Spectres. The Phantom admits to looking up to them, but he also explains that the Spectres looked down on him and other ghosts like him. Here, more clearly than anywhere else in the poem, Carroll explores the great social distance between the aristocracy (Spectres) and the professional-workers of the middle class and the day-labourers of the working class (Phantom et al.).

Whereas the Phantom and his siblings had all been born alike but assigned different training that determined their specific haunting roles, Spectres are considered a separate class altogether and hold positions of power and luxury without mention of any qualifications other than their Spectre status. Not only are the non-Spectres born irrevocably different in both identity and lifestyle, but like their working class human counterparts, their lives are rife with physical discomforts and an imbalance between effort and recompense (Carroll 46-7). Spectres, in contrast, over indulge in food and drink, come and go as they please, and are rather corpulent, while the Phantom is small and bony. For example, the Inn-Spectre earned his name because he lurks around inns looking for (and drinking) the best port-wine, but he also has the authority to dictate what kind of ghost haunts a particular location (Carroll 37). The other Spectre Carroll mentions by name is the Knight-Mayor who regulates nighttime food intake by sitting on his Victims, while his physical description suggests overindulgence: "He is immensely fat, and so / Well suits the occupation" (Carroll 54). The Knight-Mayor is also, as his name indicates, the mayor of his city (Carroll 55-6). Like those of their Victorian counterparts, the upper class ghosts' positions differ greatly from those of the two lower classes (which are treated as one in *Phantasmagoria)*, in that they can include pleasurable activities like eating or drinking and involve wielding authority without any apparent concern for

financial stability or job performance. In fact, unlike the Phantom, there is no mention of remuneration for the Spectres' positions, and they report only to his "Royal Whiteness," the king (Carroll 33). The disparity between the working life of the Spectres and that of the other ghosts is in keeping with major political conversations in Carroll's time, but his choice to group the working and middle classes together remains somewhat surprising.

Carroll's poem also tackles other Victorian social problems, including the lack of upward mobility for working class men and women, the hardship of getting and the expense of maintaining their current jobs, and the still-prevalent discrimination against immigrants. In describing his Phantom training, the ghost (who is sick due to standing out in the cold) explains the more unpleasant aspects of haunting, including that dungeons and castles and towers all tend to be very damp and chilly (45). He had to go wherever he was sent, which meant he "often sat and howled for hours, / Drenched to the skin with driving showers, / Upon a battlement," merely because it was his job to do so (45). Also, according to Carroll, these struggling ghosts find their jobs to be costly to maintain: they spend years developing the necessary skills in moaning and squeaking, yet are still required to spend a great deal of money on skulls, crossbones, colored fire and lights, chains, the fitting of robes, and other expenses (47). His descriptions here mirror the hardships associated with factory and mill life in the Victorian period. Working class Victorians often endured terrible working conditions that threatened their physical health and safety, exposing them to potentially deadly diseases such as tuberculosis or pneumonia (Thompson 319). Many of these "desperate and distressed workers" were also trapped in an inescapable cycle where their jobs were nearly too costly to keep (especially in terms of income to cost-of-living balance) but certainly too valuable to quit

altogether (Thompson 204). According to the Phantom, ghosts also must meet the standards of the Haunted House Committee, who "make a fuss / Because a Ghost was French, or Russ, / Or even from the City," and who look down on certain dialects such as the Irish brogue (Carroll 47). In addition to being "unconsciously anti-Semitic" as mentioned above, Victorian England was also rife with a certain degree of distrust of any non-English peoples, and many viewed the Irish as second-class citizens. According to Donald MacRaild, the most blatant examples of anti-Irish sentiment could be seen in the NINA ("No Irish Need Apply") clauses tacked on to the end of many advertisements and job postings (271). By aligning these prejudices with the Spectres, the titled and snobby upper class ghosts, Carroll appears to be offering a (albeit mild) criticism of these biases under the guise of humor.

Carroll's choice to use the ghost story genre as a medium for satire is actually appropriate, since historically these stories have reflected on the culture from which they stem: "Ghost stories are as old and older than literature, and in many preliterate societies all over the world ghosts act as the protectors and guardians of social values and traditional wisdom" (Briggs 25). However, in the Victorian Gothic, ghosts still reflect on society but generally focus on the past and not necessarily in a positive way. For instance, the predominant theme found throughout these stories is the inability to let go of the past and move into the future. Michael Cox and R. A. Gilbert describe it this way: "In personal terms, ghosts were obvious, though still potent, images of the past—past sins, past promises, past attachments, past regrets—and could be used to confront, and exorcise, the demons of guilt and fear" (ix). The need to face the past and work through any remaining issues is most clearly evident in the hidden aspects of every haunted

house: why are the ghosts there and what do they want? In *Phantasmagoria*, the ghost is there not by choice, but because he trained as a Phantom and then was assigned to haunt a man named Tibbs (but accidentally and temporarily haunts Tibbets instead). However, by associating the Victorian class system with ghosts, which were widely accepted as representing issues from the past that must be addressed in order for a character to move into the future, Carroll could be suggesting that the current social structure is outdated and needs to be resolved. Yet he does not take that argument to its logical conclusion: when the Phantom moves on at the end of the poem, everything remains as it was before. The haunting is not solved in any tangible way. Instead, the Phantom leaves because he is assigned elsewhere. Again, Carroll offers what appears to be criticism, but falls short of making a definitive point or offering any concrete guidelines for change. This lack of a strong conclusion to his political satire is problematic and is discussed in further detail below.

Generic Satire of the Popular Ghost Story

While the political satire in *Phantasmagoria* is not unlike similar satirical scenes in his *Alice* books, Carroll also appears to be offering a veiled criticism of the popular ghost stories themselves. In this case, the dichotomy between the upper and lower categories of ghosts does double duty as both a class distinction (as noted above) and as representative of what Carroll sees as two very different classes of ghost stories. The Phantom represents the new popular ghost stories: overworked, worn thin, and without the necessary resources to improve the quality of his station. Further, the position of haunter had previously been held by one of the elite Spectres:

> This is a "one-ghost" house, and you,
>
> When you arrived last summer,
>
> May have remarked a Spectre who
>
> Was doing all that Ghosts can do
>
> To welcome the new-comer. (Carroll 22)

Here, as in the theatre, the house represents the audience. Further, the audience only has room (it is a "one-ghost" house) to love and accept one type of ghost story at a time, hence the very strict and domineering expectations that apparently make or break a story's success. The ghosts are ultimately dependant upon the house-audience for a place to call home and for their livelihoods. Tibbets, the writer in this scenario, is the one who interacts most directly with the different types of hauntings and comes and goes in a way that the house-audience does not. He also wavers between siding with the Phantom and defending his house-audience from insult. Briggs*,* notes that ghost stories have existed throughout history and that "interviews with the dead are a basic ingredient from the Babylonian epic, *Gilgamesh*, through Homeric poetry and the Old Testament, to the Icelandic eddas and our own *Beowulf*" (25-26). The presence of the ghost story has remained constant over time, but the ghost story as a mass commodity was a nineteenth-century phenomenon. The Spectres, whose presence predates the Phantom, represent these older, more varied ghost stories that existed prior to formulaic genre expectations and the popularity of circulating periodicals.

Viewed through this lens, the ghost hierarchy Carroll introduces in the first Canto takes on an entirely different pale:

> A Spectre has first choice, by right,
>
> In filling up a vacancy;
>
> Then Phantom, Goblin, Elf, and Sprite—
>
> If all these fail them, they invite
>
> The nicest Ghoul that they can see. (23)

In this comparison, Phantoms (popular ghost stories) are not the lowest possible class, but they are apparently a poor substitution for Spectres, as Tibbets takes immediate offense that they chose "a brat like [him]" to haunt a man of his age (23). The word brat, which dates back to the 1500s but remained in common usage in the nineteenth century, was used to describe not just any child, but specifically a "beggar's child" ("Brat"). Tibbets is insulted not just because Phantoms are of a lower class than Spectres, but also because they are somehow younger, not in individual age, but as an entire group. The Phantom explains that he is not really young, but has simply been without a "domestic part" for a while and has therefore forgotten his manners (24). Here, the ghost stories themselves are not new, but their popularity and position are a recent development, which has made them, as a genre, somewhat unrefined. For his part, Tibbets would prefer to be haunted by a Spectre (older, higher class ghost story), if indeed he must be haunted at all.

Carroll criticizes the popularity of these stories by placing the blame on the audience rather than on the writers (Tibbets), thereby providing yet another reason why readers have been unenthusiastic about this poem. In *Phantasmagoria*, it is not Tibbets's fault that the Spectre left and was replaced by the lesser Phantom. In fact, while the Spectre called the house "low," the Phantom also critiques the house and questions its merits on almost every point, including structure (23). When Tibbets attempts to defend

the house as “fashioned by an architect / Who pinned his faith on Ruskin,”[18] the Phantom responds by saying the inspiration does not matter because the outcome remains unchanged:

> I don’t care who he was, Sir, or
> On whom he pinned his faith!
> Constructed by whatever law,
> So poor a job I never saw,
> As I’m a living Wraith! (39-40)

The Victorian readership had great influence over the production of popular fiction in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Ten years prior, Wilkie Collins published an article titled “The Unknown Public,” in which he expressed his anxieties about a vast unrecorded readership “numbering 3 million” (1). His prediction was that this readership, which was “waiting to be taught the difference between a good book and a bad,” would eventually become more mainstream and influential (1). For Carroll, it is the genre expectations created and reinforced by this mass readership that pushed out the earlier ghost stories (Spectres) and left an opening that was filled by the new replacements (Phantom). The Phantom is always at the mercy of his assigned house, just as these popular ghost stories are at the mercy of the audience’s whim. Although Carroll spends much of his time detailing the differences between the Phantom and the Spectres, he shows little sympathy for the latter (he describes them as snobby and rude toward those in the lower ghost ranks). Ultimately, Carroll (through Tibbets) would prefer there be no

---

[18] John Ruskin (1819-1900) published a chapter on Gothic architecture, “The Nature of Gothic,” in 1852.

ghosts or ghost stories at all, but he is particularly offended by the non-Spectre ghosts, not because Spectres (the old stories) were somehow inherently superior, but because the Phantoms (popular ghost stories) are new, many, and in his house.

In the final two Cantos, Carroll returns to a hallmark of the traditional ghost story (that of an underlying mystery that must be solved) when the Phantom discovers that he has been haunting the wrong man all along and leaves, resolving the haunting:

> Good-night, old Turnip-top, good-night!
> When I am gone, perhaps
> They'll send you some inferior Sprite,
> Who'll keep you in a constant fright
> And spoil your soundest naps. (63)

The Phantom departs Tibbets's house with the indication that his absence (like the absence of the Spectre before him) will leave the home open to occupation by something less desirable, and that his replacement will be even lower down the ghost totem pole than he is. Thus, while Carroll is poking fun at and perhaps criticizing the pop culture dynamic that had allowed these common ghosts stories to become so successful, he is not also suggesting that they be removed completely, as their replacements would be even worse. Though not as suspenseful as a typical climax of a ghost story, this tiny bit of mystery—the solving of which results in the ghost's departure—means that Carroll ends his poem in much the same way that he began it: in keeping with genre conventions. Although Carroll had enjoyed great success by the time he published *Phantasmagoria*, he needed to convince his readers to continue reading his work. The timing of *Phantasmagoria* (as directly in between the two *Alice* novels) was likely not Carroll's

original intent. By 1869 he had already finished writing *Through the Looking Glass* and was in the middle of his battle to find a satisfactory illustrator. However, the fact that his readership was eager for more of Carroll's work had its drawbacks, as well. While the clamoring for more *Alice* may have pleased Carroll, it also inhibited his ability to publish other work. To be clear, the purpose of this paper is not to claim that Carroll's failure to satisfy the ghost story genre expectations of his readers was the sole reason for his poem's lack of success. To do so would be to ignore the very real expectations readers had for Carroll's work on other grounds, including their desire for more *Alice*, their lack of receptivity to him as a poet, and their limited interest in him as a political satirist. However, he faced these same potential obstacles in several of his other writings that did not ultimately share in *Phantasmagoria*'s obscurity.

CHAPTER IV

METHODOLOGY

In their book, *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*, authors Anis Bawarshi and Mary Jo Reiff describe how genre has been defined in two primary ways by scholars. Historically, they explain, genres have been "simple categorizations of text types" used to "sort and classify" works according to specific (albeit largely arbitrary) labels (Bawarshi and Reiff 3). This approach has its roots in Neo-classicism and is certainly not without merit. However, genres can also be defined as able to "reflect, help shape, and even generate what they represent in culturally defined ways (and therefore play a role in meaning-making)" (Bawarshi and Reiff 3). This second definition helps to show how genre can have a direct impact on both the production and the reception of a given work. Bawarshi and Reiff go on to explain that, more recently

> genre has come to be defined less as a means of organizing kinds of texts and more as a powerful, ideologically active, and historically changing shaper of texts, meanings, and social actions. From this perspective, genres are understood as forms of cultural knowledge that conceptually frame and mediate how we understand and typically act within various situations. This view recognizes genres as both organizing *and* generating kinds of texts and social actions, in complex, dynamic relation to one another. (4)

According to this definition, genre can have a direct (though certainly not uncomplicated) impact on the success of a given work, depending on its relationship to a specific genre

and audience. This frame of shared "cultural knowledge," as defined by Bawarshi and Reiff, creates a kind of contract between author and audience once a certain genre has been claimed, deliberately or not. However, their definition does not assign exclusive ownership of this organizing and generating power to author, readership, or critic. Instead, it leaves room for each party to have a say in the matter, with crises only developing when there is some kind of systemic disagreement between them.

While we tend to think of genre as flexible and fluctuating, it often is (and is expected to be) stable, and a work can potentially fail because of unmet genre expectations. This phenomenon can be understood as a natural extension of how Stanley Fish describes language: "If the speakers of a language share a system of rules that each of them has somehow internalized, understanding will, in some sense, be uniform…and insofar as these rules are constraints on production…they will also be constraints on the range, and even the direction, of response" (84). According to Jane Tompkins, "The reader reacts to the words on the page in one way rather than another because he operates according to the same set of rules that the author used to generate them" (xvii). According to this theory, an inherent understanding must exist between reader and writer in order for a text to have meaning. Genre can be seen to function in much the same way: betrayal of the unified expectations of a given readership (Victorian England, in Carroll's case) results in disapproval.

Both Fish and Tompkins focus on the structure of language itself, but the principles they describe can be applied to our examination of the Victorian ghost story and *Phantasmagoria* as well. The high level of popularity and specificity of the ghost story during Carroll's lifetime created a shared "system of rules" and, as a result, a

uniform understanding of what a ghost story was supposed to be and do. Readers knew what they wanted and expected authors to fulfill their expectations. Therefore, when Carroll chose to invoke the label of a ghost story for his poem,[19] he created certain expectations in his readers. According to Frederic Jameson, "Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact" (qtd. in Bawarshi and Reiff 18). This conceptualization of genre allows it to determine and even define what a work or "cultural artifact" should be. Defying the author-readership contract, then, would result in a work's ineligibility for its "proper use" according to genre. What exactly qualifies as defiance of this tacit agreement remains unclear. How much can an author play with reader expectations before the resulting work loses its potential for "proper use"? Jonathan Culler claims the activity of writing "is made possible by the very existence of the genre, which the writer can write against, certainly, whose conventions he may attempt to subvert, but which is none the less the context within which his activity takes place, as surely as the failure to keep a promise is made possible by the institution of promising" (qtd. in Bawarshi 18). Like Jameson, Culler sees genre as a contract or promise between writer and reader. He allows for the *attempted* subversion of genre by an author, but does not reflect on the possible limits of or ramifications for such

[19] Carroll follows the genre conventions for prose ghost stories in *Phantasmagoria* and seems to be modeling his narrative after them, so they remain of primary interest here. However, it is worth noting that by choosing to model his poem after works of prose, Carroll is once again defying potential reader expectations. For example, Victorian ghost poetry most often focused on themes of loss, mourning, and insanity, and many poems had strong connections to Romanticism and Shakespeare, rather than to the Gothic and Walpole. See "Romantic Ghosts: The Refusal of Mourning in Emily Brontë's Poetry" by Steven Vine and *The Ghost Behind the Masks*: *The Victorian Poets and Shakespeare* by W. David Shaw.

an approach. Lewis Carroll overstepped such limits when he failed to meet the most powerful and popular expectations of the Victorian ghost story genre, and the result was a complete lack of success for *Phantasmagoria*.

While this concept of genre can certainly be applied regardless of the historical moment being examined, readers in Victorian England enjoyed a level of control over authors and their writing on a major scale. Many Victorian authors we now consider both famous and influential bowed to the pressure of their readers in order to maintain their popularity and financial success, even to the point of rewriting entire sections of their works. According to David Lodge, one major contributing factor to this reader-writer power dynamic was the prevalent practice of publishing novels in serial form over many months, sometimes even years:

> When novels were published in serial form, or in volumes published separately over a longish period, there was continual feedback from the audience during the process of composition, and the author was always likely to come under pressure from his friends, his publishers and the reading public at large to provide an ending that conformed to their desires. (146)

Even Charles Dickens experienced extreme pressure about several of his works. In fact, the ending to *Great Expectations* (1860) that most readers today are familiar with was not the one that Dickens originally penned. Edward Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens's close friend and editor, suggested the change in order to avoid audience displeasure. Finally, while Lodge acknowledges that this kind of pressure from readers was not exclusive to the Victorian period (Samuel Richardson, one of the very first English novelists, faced

similar reader backlash when rumors spread that his *Clarissa* was going to end in tragedy), he does note that "[b]y the time of Victoria, the reading public….had become more tyrannical" (146).

Some authors handled this relentless feedback by adjusting to the desires of their readers and others did not. One notable example of the latter is Carroll contemporary Henry James.[20] James managed to be more experimental in his writing—including in his own psychological ghost story, *The Turn of the Screw* (1898)—with relative impunity. In fact, James's experience with the ghost story readership was almost the exact opposite of Carroll's. According to Jean Lee Cole, by the time he wrote *The Turn of the Screw*, James's career was suffering as he struggled to find an audience for his work, and the success of his ghost story was "in many ways, a turning point in James' career" (Cole 191, 197). *The Turn of the Screw* features a mystery involving multiple deaths and a disappearance, which leads the young governess (and through her, the reader) to suspect a haunting. As with the protagonists of many other Victorian ghost stories, the governess sets out to try and discover what really happened in order to solve the underlying mystery. Unlike other ghost stories, however, *The Turn of the Screw* is more psychological than supernatural, it never confirms the presence of ghosts, and its mystery is left unsolved. Yet in spite of these alterations, the novel remains a chilling tale that follows the genre-required ghost story formula with precision. And it is perhaps this precise adherence to genre that gave James the freedom to experiment with other elements of the story without sharing Carroll's fate.

---

[20] Although American-born, by this point in his career James had been living, writing, and publishing in England for many years.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Over the years, much of Carroll's work has been dubbed "nonsense literature," suggesting that little sense can be made of his stories, much less any significant meaning found.[21] However, George Watson argues that the *Alice* books contain a recognizable middle-class Victorian society in both Alice's home life and in the traditions he turned inside out, such as the distorted poems that are based on real works middle-class Victorian children would be expected to know by heart. For Watson, "[t]he *Alice* books are plainly about social reality—much as dreams are…the first of the *Alice* books is a dream about a game of cards…Dreams jumble up reality, but what they are jumbling is real—sometimes all too real. And there are more ways than realism of describing reality" (544). Here, as in *Phantasmagoria,* Carroll utilizes elements of Victorian culture that would have been very recognizable to his readers (familiar childhood poems/songs, the governess character, parents as somewhat distant or removed figures), though not necessarily to his youngest ones. As for Carroll's attempts at satire, the *Alice* books contain some instances of satire that are both more obvious and more pointedly political than any in *Phantasmagoria*. One such example is the trial scene in *Through the Looking Glass*. In this scene, a crowd of creatures, including the White Rabbit, have gathered in the King's court for the trial against the Knave, and things quickly deteriorate in typical Carroll style: "The conduct of the judge, jurors, and witness is, not surprisingly, totally

---

[21] Although it should be noted that this label has not stopped critics from finding everything from fallen woman metaphors (Alice does, after all, fall into a hole) to a Freudian desire to "re-womb," hidden in the *Alice* books. See *Ellen Terry: Player in Her Time* by Nina Auerbach and *Alice's Adventure in Wonderland and Through the Looking Glass: Nonsense, Sense, and Meaning* by Donald Rackin.

uncivilized. Insignificant details are stressed and important ones overlooked. Justice is as arbitrary as it is whimsical…There is no law in Wonderland, nothing can be systematically evaluated. Wonderland indiscriminately introduces chaos into everything it touches" (Kelly 95). According to Shane Leslie, this trial is "an allegorical comment on the Oxford Movement"[22] (Kelly 95). Leslie sees a direct correlation between the various elements of the trial and the reality of the political debate surrounding the Movement: "the tarts represent the Thirty-Nine Articles of the Anglican faith; 'a knavish Ritualist' (John Henry Newman) is accused of 'having removed their natural sense'; and the Mad Hatter (High Church) and the March Hare (Low Church) are called as witnesses against him" (qtd. in Kelly 95). Leslie further notes that many of the King's lines about the Knave are precisely the same as the ones being hurled at Newman (and others who sided with him) in the real world (Kelly 95). And while, as Kelly notes, the success of *Through the Looking Glass* is not due to it being a work of political satire, it did not face failure because of it, either. Both the *Alice* books and even some of Carroll's other poems, such as "Jabberwocky" and "The Hunting of the Snark," were met with apparent reader enthusiasm, yet *Phantasmagoria* failed to gain similar traction in the marketplace or classroom.

Carroll's poetry, especially his more serious poems like "Mariana" and "The Palace of Art" (both of which were part of the original publication of *Phantasmagoria*

---

[22] Associated with the University of Oxford, this movement was the result of High Church Anglicans who were arguing for a return of more Catholic traditions into their religious beliefs and ceremonies. They eventually branched off into their own Anglo-catholic denomination. While seemingly religious in nature, this movement also involved significant political concerns. See *The Mind of the Oxford Movement* by Owen Chadwick for more information.

and Other Poems) has long been considered "very dull" for its heavy-handed treatment of emotions and morals (Kelly 44-5). The fact that *Phantasmagoria* does not fall into this unfortunate trap should be a mark in its favor, as it is both humorous and, at least on some level, entertaining. Further, *Phantasmagoria* is the longest work in the collection and holds the titular distinction, which could have allowed readers to dismiss the more dismally serious pieces in favor of this primary poem. However, readers' obvious eagerness for Carroll's *Alice* stories was not enough to overcome the other issues with his unusual ghost story poem and may in fact have hurt its chances at success. When Carroll published *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* in 1865, it was one of those rare, mythical, overnight successes. In contrast, even Carroll's now-famous poem "The Hunting of the Snark" (1876) was initially met with mixed critical reviews (Cohen, "Hark the Snark" 92). Criticisms included, interestingly enough, Carroll's choice to write it in verse rather than prose and its "overly engaging" title (Cohen, "Hark the Snark" 96). The fact that some readers remained resistant to the idea of Carroll as a poet seven years after *Phantasmagoria* failed suggests that his readers knew what they wanted from Carroll, and it was *Alice*. These preliminary critical reactions were limited, however, and "The Hunting of the Snark" enjoyed multiple reprints in that first year alone. But unlike *Phantasmagoria*, "The Hunting of the Snark" has very strong ties to Carroll's *Alice* books, including sharing the same world (and some of the nonsensical creatures) as his other well-loved poem, "Jabberwocky," which appears in *Through the Looking Glass.* So while his readership might have preferred for Carroll to stick to his novels, they seem comfortable adopting his nonsense poems into the *Alice* family. *Phantasmagoria*, completely unconnected to Carroll's "nonsense" or *Alice*, received no such welcome.

Although Carroll successfully included satirical elements in his *Alice* novels, *Phantasmagoria* also fails as a work of satire. Where successful political satirists like Benjamin Disraeli proposed solutions alongside their criticisms, in *Phantasmagoria* Carroll offers no such resolutions. Even Dickens's *A Christmas Carol* offers answers for the future: his proposed answer is more philosophical than practical—love each other and be generous with those less fortunate—but it remains a solution his readers could act upon and feel good about. Carroll denies his readers this satisfaction by neglecting to take his criticism to the expected conclusion: a political or social solution that addresses the concerns of his readership that his satire is identifying. Further, in his satirical criticism of the ghost story readership Carroll turns the mockery on his own audience, unlike Disraeli and Dickens who stick to poking fun at the upper classes and remain firmly on the side of their middle and working class readers. Therefore even if his audience read *Phantasmagoria* as social or political satire rather than as a ghost story, Carroll's version of satire would have left those genre expectations unmet as well.

Lewis Carroll knew ghost stories well enough to be able to isolate and twist the various aspects of the accepted formula, yet his choice to turn it into this odd combination of humorous poem and political satire remains somewhat unexpected. His decision to frame his social commentary in verse is ultimately less surprising, as he tended to be more didactic in his poetry than anywhere else. But why make it a ghost story? The answer may be both personal and professional. Carroll, though a devout Anglican, had a lifelong interest in the supernatural and the paranormal. In fact, he was one of the earliest members of the Society for Psychical Research when it formed in 1882, and he was particularly interested in spiritualism and the occult (Gardner 10). He did not, however,

seem to believe that ghosts existed in the traditional sense: "And while he believed that the physical phenomena produced by mediums were real, he did not think they were the work of departed souls" (Gardner 10). While certainly not conclusive evidence, his personal perspective on the supernatural may very well have influenced his decision to de-mystify his ghosts in *Phantasmagoria*. Professionally, during the years between the time he finished writing *Through the Looking Glass* and its publication, Carroll was perhaps frustrated by the inundation of the literary marketplace with these formulaic yet popular ghost stories, which may have contributed to the less-than-friendly satirization of the genre within the poem. Whatever his motivations, however, the reality remains that Lewis Carroll found himself facing unexpectedly sturdy genre limitations and, in fighting them, lost the battle for *Phantasmagoria*'s success. As our understanding of genre continues to shift, Carroll scholars like Gardner may finally get their wish for *Phantasmagoria* to receive more critical attention. And other works previously relegated to the shadows of literary study may finally find a place in the light as we seek to comprehend more fully the impact of genre expectations on critical and popular reception.

WORKS CITED

Bawarshi, Anis S. and Mary Jo Reiff. *Genre: An Introduction to History, Theory, Research, and Pedagogy*. Lafayette: Parlor, 2010. Print.

Berthine, Christine. *Gothic Hauntings: Melancholy Crypts and Textual Ghosts.* New York: MacMillan, 2010. Print.

Bloy, Marjie. "Conservative." The Victorian Web: Literature, History, & Culture in the Age of Victoria.VictorianWeb.org, 11 Oct. 2002. Web. 13 Feb. 2014.

"Brat." *Online Etymology Dictionary.* Douglas Harper, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2014.

Briggs, Julia. *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story.* London: Faber, 1977. Print.

Bulwer-Lytton, Edward. "The Haunted and the Haunters." *Famous Ghost Stories.* Ed. Bennett Cerf. New York: Random House, 1944. 22-43. Print.

Carroll, Lewis. *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland.* 1865. New York: Dover, 1993. Print.

---. *Phantasmagoria*. Ed. Martin Gardner. New York: Prometheus, 1998. Print.

---. *Through the Looking Glass.* 1871. New York: Dover, 1999. Print.

Cohen, Morton N. "Hark the Snark." *Lewis Carroll Observed*. Ed. Edward Guiliano. New York: Crown, 1976. 92-110. Print.

---. *Lewis Carroll: A Biography*. New York: Knopf, 1996. Print.

Cole, Jean Lee. "The Hideous Obscure of Henry James." *American Periodicals: A Journal of History, Criticism, and Bibliography* 20.2 (2010): 190-215. Print.

Collins, Wilkie. "The Unknown Public." *The Wilkie Collins Pages.* Paul Lewis, n.d. Web. 20 Mar. 2014.

Cox, Michael and R. A. Gilbert. Introduction. *Victorian Ghost Stories: An Oxford Anthology.* Ed. Cox and Gilbert. New York: Oxford UP, 1991. ix-xx. Print.

Davies, Ivor. "Phantasmagoria: Lewis Carroll and the Victorian Ghost Story." *The Carrollian.* 8.1 (2001): 3-8. Print.

Dickens, Charles. *A Christmas Carol.* New York: Dover, 1991. Print.

Fish, Stanley. "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics." *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*. Ed. Jane P. Tompkins. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. 70-100. Print.

Gardner, Martin. Introduction. *Phantasmagoria*. By Lewis Carroll. New York: Prometheus, 1998. 9-15. Print.

Kelly, Richard S. *Lewis Carroll.* Boston: Twayne, 1977. Print.

Lodge, David. *Working with Structuralism*. Boston: Routledge, 1981. Print.

MacRaild, Donald. "'No Irish Need Apply': The Origins and Persistence of a Prejudice." *Labour History Review* 78.3 (2013): 269-99. Print.

Morrow, Bradford and Patrick McGrath. Introduction. *The New Gothic: A Collection of Contemporary Gothic Fiction.* Ed. Morrow and McGrath. New York: Random House, 1991. vi-xxvi. Print.

"Phantasmagoria." *Online Etymology Dictionary.* Douglas Harper, n.d. Web. 13 Feb. 2014.

Plumb, J. H. Introduction. *Disraeli.* By Richard W. Davis. Boston: Little, 1976. ix-xiii. Print.

Ruskin, John. *The Nature of Gothic: A Chapter of the Stones of Venice.* 1852. Whitefish, MT: Kessinger, 2010. Print.

Thompson, F. M. L. *The Rise of Respectable Society: A Social History of Victorian Britain 1830-1900.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1988. Print.

Tompkins, Jane P. Introduction. *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism.* Ed. Tompkins. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980. ix-xxvi. Print.

Walpole, Horace. *The Castle of Otranto.* New York: Dover, 1966. Print.

Watson, George. “Tory Alice.” *American Scholar* 55.4 (1986): 543-51. Print.