Text Matters, Number 16, 2026
https://doi.org/10.18778/2083-2931.16.30

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A Review of *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion*, edited by Andrew Smith (Edinburgh University Press, 2025)

Ghost stories might be as old as humanity itself. As Stephen King speculated, "probably all of it goes back to the caveman who had to move out of his hole in the rock because he heard what sounded like voices back there in the shadows" (299). While the ghost story has maintained its grip on our cultures up to the present—perhaps now more than ever, as the "ghost in the machine" of digital culture—the heyday in the development of this subgenre of Gothic fiction came in the Victorian era. This period spans from the publication of Charles Dickens's prominent ghost novella *A Christmas Carol* to the post-Victorian antiquarian ghost stories of M. R. James in Great Britain and H. P. Lovecraft's weird tales in the US.

Several academic monographs currently revisit the genre of the Victorian ghost story, testifying to a renewed interest in the topic. Examples include *Ghosts and the Gothic*, edited by Ruth Heholt and Joanne Ella Parsons (Manchester UP, 2025), *New Directions in the Ghost Story, Volume I*, edited by Henry Bartholomew, Joan Passey, and Jan Baker (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2026), and the upcoming *The Victorian Ghost Story and the Spirit World* by Lorena MacMillan (Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2026). Nevertheless, what makes *The Victorian Ghost Story: An Edinburgh Companion* (Edinburgh UP, 2025) stand out among other publications of this type is its comprehensive and thorough discussion of multiple aspects of the genre: from its history and development, through geographical and cultural contexts and its best known authors, to the most typical haunted spaces of the Victorian ghost story.

As indicated by the book's editor, Andrew Smith (a recognised specialist in Gothic fiction, particularly ghost stories), the collection's overarching goal is to argue that "engaging with the social, political, and economic issues of the period is a key driver in the innovation of the Victorian ghost story" (1), as ghosts are "not there simply to haunt, but also to enlighten"

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Funding information: Not applicable. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures of no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication.

Received: 8 June 2026. Verified: 10 July 2026. Accepted: 15 July 2026.

(2). While ghosts have been used in literature as "harbingers of justice or doom" or voices for political activism since early modern folklore and fiction (Edwards 356), the Edinburgh companion presents Victorian ghost stories as texts involved in social and political reform, becoming—if not didactic—at least a genre that highlights and investigates the hegemonic structures of the Victorian empire, most keenly evident in ghost stories written by women or those with a colonial context in mind.

This collection applies a generous approach both to the definition of the Victorian era and the ghost story. The texts discussed here come from the long 19th century and encompass not only short stories but also novels that include a ghost element. This allows for a wide scope of discussion, showing the cultural significance of the motif of haunting even beyond the classically delineated Victorian era. This is particularly important in Part I of the book, "Historical Contexts," which includes a chapter by Dale Townshend surveying late 18th- and early 19th-century examples of ghost narratives that influenced the Victorians. This is followed by two chapters examining the Victorian ghost story proper (one by Anthony Mandal, focusing on periodical press from 1830–70, and the other by Nick Freeman, focusing on the most crucial instances of the genre between 1830 and 1900). Part I concludes with a chapter on neo-Victorian novels (that is, contemporary works that critically reconfigure Victorian literature and culture) by Marie-Luise Kohlke. Such a sweeping vista on not only the Victorian ghost story proper but also its predecessors and contemporary descendants is inclusive and comprehensive, and offers insight into a genre that has a long-lasting effect on Gothic culture.

The second part of the book, "Critical Contexts," presents the Victorian ghost story as an intervention in crucial aspects of the Victorian era: economy, industry and technology, gender, colonialism, and religion. This part also includes a chapter on 19th-century American ghost narratives and the Victorian tradition of a ghost story for Christmas.

In the chapter titled "Economics," Andrew Smith considers the idea of "spectral economies" (86) that became apparent in times of crisis: "Money during a recession seems to become spectral, subject to disappearance and sudden reappearance" (ibid.). Thus, motifs concerning property, inheritance, frugality, and greed became a staple of the Victorian ghost story. Bridget M. Marshall's chapter on industrialisation and technology in the Victorian era conceptualises stories about ghostly factory workers and miners as an expression of the human cost of industrial capitalism. This chapter also touches on the idea of machines and transportation (mainly railways) as spectral or haunted, expressing fears regarding the new technological developments of the era.

Lucie Armitt, in her chapter on Victorian ghost stories written by women, discusses a number of topics related to the social, political, and

cultural situation of women in the 19th century, figured in spectral terms: from women's "shadowy public existence" (115) to "authorial ventriloquism" (117), whereby women writers—such as Charlotte Riddel, for instance—expressed their ideas via a male narrator, to more classically Gothic motifs of entrapment that represent the limitations of the woman's place.

Melissa Edmundson's chapter "The Victorian Ghost Story and Colonialism" notes that a ghost story was a "fitting vehicle to express colonial tensions" (130) in the Victorian British empire. It was thus used either to depict the British as haunted by their own colonialism or to portray the colonial Other as a ghost, thereby becoming a genre in which "the troubled relations between colonised and coloniser [are] at the forefront" (131). In the chapter on religion, Alison Milbank considers various spiritual concepts behind the belief in spectral visitations and examines how both Catholic and Protestant approaches to the afterlife affected Victorian ghost stories. Jeffrey Andrew Weinstock looks at the 19th-century ghost story in America as a vehicle for discussing cultural anxieties of the era. In American ghost stories, spectral justice is served concerning the abuse of women and children, and slavery. It is also a genre that allows for an examination of the afterlife and spiritualism, offering consolation to the bereaved but also reflecting the crisis of faith. Ghost stories also allow writers such as Charlotte Perkins Gilman and Henry James to examine instabilities and ambiguities in perspectives on reality.

Finally, in this first section, Tara Moore looks at the seasonality of ghost stories, focusing on the tradition of storytelling for Christmas. She shows how, in the Victorian era, it became a commercialised form of a nostalgic harking back to the English mansion Christmas, in which Charles Dickens played an important role. Over time, the genre shifted from simple local legends to sophisticated literary ghost stories that promoted moral reform, capitalism, and eventually, late-Victorian parody and Gothic horror, offering the comfort of a frightening tale in a cosy environment.

What follows is a section gathering the most recognised authors of the Victorian ghost story: Charles Dickens, Rudyard Kipling, Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Margaret Oliphant, Charlotte Riddell, Vernon Lee, Henry James, and M. R. James. Undoubtedly, from this group, Dickens is most often associated with the Victorian ghost story. Scott Brewster summarises Dickens's interest in the genre by stating that in Dickens's writing, "ghosts fulfil a variety of functions: sources of diverting fireside entertainment, . . . agents of justice, vengeance, moral guidance or social critique; or symptoms of physical or psychological illness" (198). Brewster also notes the importance of the aforementioned theme of spectral technology; in particular, "the railway is also a site of the uncanny" (207), as evident in "The Signal-Man." Minna Vuohelainen presents Rudyard Kipling as a writer who enjoyed the ghost story

form due to its set conventions and brevity, while simultaneously anticipating modernist literary experimentation by challenging the well-trodden paths of the ghost story. The themes Kipling explored include "colonial unease, the uncomfortable and often violent nature of intercultural encounters, the centrality of loss and grief to modern life, and the experiences of belonging, marginality, transit and exile" (211). In particular, the sense of the colonial place is a characteristic feature of Kipling's short stories, which depict "an Indian landscape haunted by the past" (211).

William Hughes discusses Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu's ghost stories, particularly *The Purcell Papers*, as an expression of nostalgia for the past during times of political and economic instability, where the uncanny is used to convey religious and political tensions. The chapter on Margaret Oliphant by Valerie Sanders notes that the ghost story is an unusual genre choice for a writer associated with realist fiction; nevertheless, personal experience of grief fuelled Oliphant's interest in the possibility of the living communing with the deceased. Thus, Oliphant's ghost stories fall into two types: those in which spectral visitors are benign and approach the living to warn or help them, and those where malign ghosts traumatise the living. The nature of spectral visitations is also discussed in her stories. Charlotte Riddell's ghost stories, discussed by Helena Ifill, often focus on the motif of the haunted house. While Riddell explores this motif to examine the situation of Victorian women within domesticity and marriage, what is innovative in her oeuvre is her frequent use of male narrators and protagonists. Often young and financially struggling, these male characters in haunted houses are placed "in conventional positions of femininity" (Smith qtd. in Ifill 256), and Riddell is thus engaged in a discussion of masculinity and gender roles in the Victorian era, and in particular, how these gender expectations intersect with economic issues.

Ardel Haefele-Thomas writes about Vernon Lee as a writer who uses ghost stories to examine and subvert heteronorms and cisnorms in the *fin de siècle*, particularly regarding "family, heterosexuality and reproduction" (271). As suggested by Haefele-Thomas, Lee's ghost stories are characterised by "their nostalgia for the past via the haunting of the present" (271). Similarly, Luke Thurston describes Henry James's ghost stories as an avenue for exploration and experimentation, "a precious way to express the more ludic and experimental possibilities" (285). Thurston's main point is to show that Henry James's personal experience—particularly its queer aspects—served as inspiration for his ghost narratives. Finally, another James—Montague Rhodes James—is the topic of the last chapter in this section, written by Roger Luckhurst. This chapter delineates M. R. James's creation of the antiquarian ghost story—an activity that was marginal to his academic research—also touching upon the writer's repressed homosexuality as a possible influence.

The last section of this companion is devoted to haunted spaces in Victorian ghost stories, including landscapes and seascapes, houses, museums, libraries, and—reflecting the Egyptophilia of late-Victorian culture—pyramids. Emma McEvoy examines stories set within the "hauntings outdoors" (317), most often within the British Isles. As the author notes, such settings are usually related to marginalised and dispossessed characters, and thus reveal their social and economic contexts: "The urbanite meets the rural dweller, gentry encounter labourers, those from industrial and agricultural economies eye each other askance, and the imperialist and the colonised come into contact" (317). McEvoy also touches upon colonial landscapes, "ghosts outside Europe" (326), in her examination of landscape in ghost stories. Joan Passey's chapter explores "the spectral seascape in the Victorian imaginary" (332), discussing ghost stories of maritime disasters and shipwrecks, folklore, "seascapes, smuggling, wrecking" (333), colonial travel, and being at sea. The seascape in the Victorian ghost story becomes an uncanny place.

An important part of any discussion of the Victorian ghost story is also, of course, the haunted house—a motif that becomes a vehicle for anxieties related to Victorian domesticity, marriage, and family, as examined by Emma Liggins, who states that "[t]he haunted house is a 'troubled house,' a place of secrets, disruption and violence" (347). It is also a space of anxieties related to economics: property, inheritance, and the gendered aspects of these topics. Darryl Jones looks at specific institutional spaces—libraries and museums—as haunted locales in the Victorian ghost story. These spaces are related to the aforementioned sub-genre of the antiquarian ghost story. Finally, Andrew Smith explores pyramids as spaces of fear typical for mummy stories, which serve as vehicles for discussing the colonial relations and cultural appropriations of the Victorian era.

The Victorian Ghost Story is a mammoth work and a brilliant effort to encompass and comprehend an expansive and significant phenomenon in Victorian Gothic fiction. It is a collection recommended both to scholars who might desire a comprehensive overview of the topic and to students who are just becoming acquainted with the ghost story.

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