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'At the Hollow, there was Magic.' The Language of Kim Newman's Ghost Novel

Abstract: This essay discusses briefly the language of Kim Newman's *An English Ghost Story* with a focus on genre specific use of vocabulary and a discussion on whether the novel is, in fact, a ghost story.

Let me begin by quoting the first and final paragraphs of Newman's novel:

They would fall in a clump, like ripe apples. Mother, father, daughter, son [i.e. Father Steve, Mother Kirsty, Daughter Jordan and Son Tim Naremore (Ne'ermore?). C.P.] touched by the charm, their persistent – though thinned – love would flare. As only once before, at the birth of baby Tim, the family would be a whole, united by fiercely shared feeling. Things that had seemed important would be trivial, and things that had seemed negligible would be potent. The Hollow awaited the family with a welcome. It needed them. Unpopulated, it tended to drift. Without people in residence, it might disperse on the winds. That afternoon, the place was at its best behaviour, spring green promising summer gold. (*An English Ghost Story* 7)¹

Here we see something that characterises the novel throughout: the anthropomorphising of the house named the "Hollow". But let me first give you the final paragraph:

They would mature in the Hollow, like apples in a jam. Mother, father, daughter, son; warmed by the glow, their inescapable – and recently proved – love would thicken. As for years to come, the family were a whole, united by fiercely shared feelings. Things that had seemed important were trivial, and things that had seemed negligible were potent. The Hollow enfolded the family with its welcome. It needed them. Populated, it was fixed. With people, it could withstand the winds. That evening, the place was on its best behaviour, autumn red promising winter white. (313)

A perfect mirror, that is, in terms of syntax, individual lexical items and contents – a promising beginning of life in the Hollow; and a satisfying, pleasant ending of the settling in period. But – between pp. 8 and 312 – the family almost falls apart, they get very close to killing one another; and at one point – in midsummer! – the Hollow seems to be plunged into total darkness, even during daytime (cf. "utter blackness" 300). This then is where the novel apparently changes genre from ghost story to science fiction – the Naremores seem to be utterly alone in the darkness,

1 All further quotes from this edition.

there are no neighbours, no social contacts, they don't do things like food shopping or seeing friends or being visited. And the ghosts gradually change: "[...] the IP [see below. C.P.] were friendlies" (70), "[...] they are not our friends" (196), "[...] the IP, [...] the hostiles" (230) "The IP. The Hostiles" (254). The result: "They weren't charmed any more. They were haunted" (209). "[The ghosts] are killing us" (239). At one point Jordan has the following thoughts / impressions:

[...] the Hollow was larger on the ground than on the Ordnance Survey map. She had just not realised how vast, how extensive. The property was a continent, with lost tribes and ruined cities and fallen civilisations and trackless wastes. The house was a many-roomed mansion, a folded-up city disguised as a single-family dwelling. (278–79)

If there is such a thing as classic sci-fi territory, we are now firmly on it. And note "wastes" (278) with its faint echo of "Wasteland". One sentence about the story's background – the Naremore family have moved from the jungle of London to a remote village in Somerset – and to an isolated property outside the village called "The Hollows".

Let me come back to a previous observation: here are four randomly chosen examples of the Hollow being seen and written about as though it were a living organism: "The Hollow, they decided, was a happy place" (59), "[...] but [Steven] was going dangerously against the will of the Hollow" (171), "He begged the Hollow not to kill again" (202), "The Hollow might have lied to them" (208). The novel's structure is fairly straightforward – most chapters are headed by the respective seasons: (1) Spring, (2) Moving Day, (3) Settling In, (4) After Midsummer (this being the central and longest chapter), (5) Towards Autumn, and finally (6) Autumn. But there is another, more unusual feature. The chapter "Moving Day" is preceded by an excerpt from a ghost story written by the Hollow's previous tenant/owner, Louise Teazel (US English: a prickly plant): "Weezie and the Gloomy Ghost". Page 33 (recto) shows the exact title page of the original book, with title, author's name and illustrator, incidentally and probably not coincidentally, named Kels Van Loon; page 24 (verso) has, hyper-realistically, the detailed printing history of the book in the book, including "A CIP catalogue record for this title is available from the British Library" (24).

Teazel bases her story on her own biography/childhood. She is Weezie and the venue of the story, "Hilltop Heights", is the "Hollow". We read, in the story reproduced here, that there are eight friendly ghosts and one gloomy one. Each of them goes back to a certain period/event in the history of England: Sidney the Saxon, Guillaume the Norman, Noll the Roundhead, and so forth. (Weezie is friendly towards the Gloomy Ghost and he turns into her friend as well – echoes of "The Frog King" here?) These seem to be the ghosts the Naremores inherit,

plus “new” ones, namely Young Weezie and Old Miss Teazle, and the Secretary of the Local Teazle Society, who seems to have committed suicide and whose body crumbles to bits, and is then “resurrected” as a ghost. One pities the tenants following the Naremores . . .

“After Midsummer” is preceded by a chapter from a (made up) non-fiction volume, “Ghost Stories of the West Country” by one Catriona Kaye, and the excerpt given here is concerned with the “Hollow” and its ghosts and hauntings, as seen by a non-fiction writer. “Towards Autumn” is preceded by an excerpt from “The Journal of a Victorian Gentlewoman”, written by another tenant of the “Hollow”, well before Miss Teazle. It is about the writer’s conviction that the “Hollow” has killed her father, and it gives us the reason for the house’s name – a half-hallowed tree in the building’s ground. The tree was partly hollowed out during a particularly violent thunderstorm.

There are about five or six (more or less) obvious inter-textual references, at least to this reader: namely to E. A. Poe’s ghost story “The Pit and the Pendulum” (156), Wilde’s “*Canterville Ghost*” (64, 88, 238), possibly Orwell’s *1984* (264; a live rat in Kirsty’s magic chest of drawers), the Grimm Brother’s “*Froschkönig*”, “*Frogking*” (29–30) and the Cheshire Cat from Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland*, and to a 1902 horror story entitled “*Monkey’s Paw*” (208).

All the chapters have subsections, marked by an upper-case initial, and the majority of these subsections are told from one of the four protagonists’ point of view and in their “voice”. When parents are referred to as Mum and Dad, it is the children speaking/thinking, when Steve is e.g. referred to as Stevie, it is his wife speaking/thinking; When Kirsty is referred to as Kirst, it is her husband speaking/thinking, and so forth. When there are references to pop music of the 1960s it is Jordan’s turn – she is obsessed with music that was popular when her mother Kirsty was Jordan’s age, making her mother remarking caustically at one point: “Our daughter has the musical taste of a sixty-year-old drag queen. [...] One day, she’ll make someone a wonderful ‘fag hag’.” “What’s a ‘fag hag’?” asked Tim” (8). Jordan likes Lesley Gore’s songs in particular; Gore was very popular in the 1960s. Incidentally, she died when this essay was being prepared. There are no coincidences. . .

Tim’s sections are most easily identifiable: he uses lexical items, and abbreviations that this reader found quite puzzling – and so do Tim’s parents and older sister. In fact, the narrator introduces the term “Timisms” (36). Tim is a typical (pre) teenager, who lives in his own world, both (a) physically and (b) linguistically:

a) His favourite bolt-hole is the tree that gives the house its name, and that Tim has a code word for, “Green Base”.

b) His favourite way of expressing himself is the frequent use of abbreviations and acronyms, both on “normal” (family) situations and in his “warfare” against the increasingly hostile ghosts. A few examples from both categories: *LL* “lengthy list” (35; “Tim’s acronyms often annoyed mum [...]” – but this is not an acronym of course! Whose mistake is this?), *PP* “paternal parent” (50), *MP* “maternal parent” (51), *BS* “big sister” (152), *HH* “ha ha” (78), *FU* “family unit” (139) etc. Most of these abbreviations occur more than once.

Much more puzzling are some of his “warfare” terms, many picked up from too intense an exposure to computer war-games while he lived in London: *SS* “sinister survey” (35), *LRP* “Long Range Patrol” (70), *IP* “Invisible Person / People / Presences, Ghosts” (70 and passim), *SOP* “Standard Operating Procedure” (113), *U-Dub* “U-Double U = UW = Ultimate Weapon = Tim’s Catapult” (113 and passim), *DefCon 4, 3, 2, 1* “an alert system; Defence Control, 4 being low alert, 1 being full alert / “war” (117) and passim, *IPC.inC.* “Invisible People’s Chief in Command (141 and passim), *IpKick* “Ipc.inc. turned into a pronounceable acronym” (114 and passim) etc. And finally a look at Tim’s non-abbreviated “war” vocabulary. In a short paragraph of just 30 lines we find this: *squaddies, Enemy, a shot in the head, well-earned leave, headshots, the order, bullets, combat zone, peace treaty, Killing the enemy, heroism, mission, man-hours, the war, clean victory, no victory, enemy, victory, squaddies* (298–299)! A good example of “lexical cohesion”.

There are two or three direct references to the local, Somerset accent/dialect: the estate agent has the “Somerset burr” (13; a reference to the local rhoticity; “He didn’t sound like a yokel, though; [...]” (113)) and so does the old girl / old ghost / Miss Teazel (?) (160); and Tim, now attending Primary School, quickly picks up the local pronunciation and lexical items (307; “*a burr*”, *youm* “you are”, *gurt* “great”). Early in the story he has an idiosyncratic pronunciation of cool: *kew-all* (12) and *kewel* (72). His reason seems obvious – *cool* can only be emphasised by lengthening the vowel; when you turn the word into two syllables you can be much more emphatic!

Are there ghosts? A possible question might be: Is new technology helping to prove the existence of ghosts? Or helping to prove they don’t exist? One possible answer is: “The only technology that has anything valid to say about ghosts is neurotechnology. [...] Ghosts ‘exist’ when our brain tells us they do. They do not exist outside us” (*Guardian* March 19, 2015). And that seems to be a perfect description of the difficulties the Naremore family finds itself in. It is all in the head(s).

Bibliography:

Newman, Kim. *An English Ghost Story*. London: Titan, 2014.