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“I Know not who these Mute Folk Are” – Ghostly Houses in Early Twentieth Century English and American Poetry

Abstract: The purpose of this research is to gain insights into ghostly poems of the twentieth century. Poetry is not the preferred medium to portray ghostly occurrences. Still, Edward Thomas as well as Robert Frost describe ghostly houses in the poems “Gone, Gone Again” and “Ghost House”. Freud analysed what is frightening in his study “The ‘Uncanny’”. This and other articles on ghost houses and ghostliness serve as a basis for the analysis of the two poems. Both poems were written at the beginning of the twentieth century. Time was then valued in a new way. Through modernity a different perception of time was introduced. Thus, these changes might be visible in the poetry of the period. This paper argues, that the speakers of the two poems do not fear supernatural occurrences but the past, present or future, in short: time. Both poets describe ghostly and empty houses. However, what they actually fear is time changing. Thomas, in his status as a soldier, expresses a fear that he will die soon and his belongings will be abandoned like the house he describes. Still, writing poetry gives his speaker comfort and the thought that after his death the English countryside will survive, comforts him. Frost also fears time but he is looking back to the past. He sees the ghosts as company and thus, embraces life.

Poetry may be an unusual genre for ghost stories. The short story may be more common. Still, poets of different periods, for example John Donne, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, Thomas Hardy, Robert Frost and Edward Thomas chose to describe ghostliness in verses. The house is often the subject of eerie poetry. As Sigmund Freud puts it in his essay “The Uncanny”, “it is in the highest degree uncanny when inanimate objects [...] come to life” (16). One reason for a house or in general an object, to come to live metaphorically is that it has outlived the people it belonged to and therefore could tell secret stories about their former owner. Houses contain invisible lives. They are haunted, haunted with ghosts of the past.

Edward Thomas and Robert Frost write about haunted houses in their poems “Gone, Gone Again” and “Ghost House”. Both poets lived in an age, the beginning of the twentieth century, which saw great changes. These changes are now associated with the term Modernity. The term is here used defining the transformations of a society from predominantly rural and agrarian to predominantly urban and industrial forms of living. These changes occurred in Britain from the

18th century. With the industrialisation a different perception of time was introduced because the importance of clocks rose and the workers had to be at their workplace at a certain hour. Additionally, trains were leaving at an accurate time. Life became faster, more regulated and time became more terrifying. Another important aspect is World War I. Thomas became a soldier and the threat the war evoked is visible in his poems. Thus, it could be argued that the speakers of the poems do not express a fear of supernatural occurrences but they feared the past, present or future, in short: time.

Theories on ghostliness and more specific ghost houses such as Sigmund Freud's will be the basis for the analysis of the two poems. The works will be scrutinised concerning the way they engage with ghostliness and how time is treated. For Thomas' poem it is important to scrutinise his prose, especially *The South Country*. With that, insights into the poetry of the twentieth century and the poets' treatment of ghostly appearances will be gained.

Freud demonstrates in his paper "The Uncanny" the origin of the word. He states that *unheimlich* is the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, which means "familiar", "native" or "belonging to the home" (Freud 76). The house is the basis for the German *unheimlich*. Houses and homeliness evoke something, and Freud states that houses are "[f]riendly, intimate, homelike" (77). Ernst Jentsch even states that "this word appears to express that someone to whom something 'uncanny' happens is not quite 'at home' or 'at ease' in the situation concerned" (Jentsch 8). Thus, the origin of *unheimlich* connotes an importance of houses in connection with ghostliness.

Houses themselves may become uncanny. This concept is according to Nickolas Royle, "a disturbance of the very idea of personal or private property" (Royle 1). Thus, a house becomes eery through being without an owner or being with new owners, which certainly includes ghosts. The term derives from a "commingling of the familiar and unfamiliar" (Royle 1). The house may still be familiar, but as it is not used anymore, it is unfamiliar at the same time. Freud underlines, as quoted before, another factor for the concept: "it is in the highest degree uncanny when inanimate objects [. . .] come to life" (16). A reason for an object, to come to live metaphorically is that it has outlived the people it belonged to. Thus, time had taken away its use by robbing it off its owner. Change is a very important factor. Change always comes through time. Time destroys memories, things and eventually it kills everything. Fear might often not evoke from supernatural occurrences such as ghosts, but time as the destructive element.

Edward Thomas: “Gone, Gone Again”

The poem “Gone, Gone Again” is one of the last poems by Edward Thomas, written in 1916. Edward Thomas enlisted in 1915 and he went to France in 1917. He was killed in action on Easter Monday of the same year. Michael Kirkham describes the circumstances of the time Thomas produced his poetry as such:

Thomas wrote all his poems on war-time and nearly half of them as a soldier training and instructing in various English camps and barracks; he seems to have written no poems during his few weeks of active service in France. Apart from the three epitaphs there are no war poems in the usual sense of the word: no poems written in anticipation or from experience of battle. Many of his poems draw on moods and scenes recollected from his pre-war travels in the southern English countryside. Yet these are not exercises in memory for their own sake; he was not trying to forget the war. (120)

In all his poems the war is perceivable through a melancholy undertone, as he wrote his poetry in wartime. Thomas’ reason to join the war was to protect his beloved country. He feared that through the war the countryside would change. In 1916, when the poem was written, he was “an officer cadet with the Royal Artillery in London” (Longley 309). Thus, the poem is certainly influenced by the war. The melancholy undertone is discernible in the first line, if not in the first word. “Gone” (1) alone already shows loss, being alone, mourning. The word is repeated four times in the first stanza:

Gone, gone again,
May, June, July,
And August gone,
Again gone by. (1–4)

The repetition underlines the speaker’s feelings. “Gone” (1) also refers to time and change, and the next word “again” and the list of months accentuates this aspect. The rhyme with “by” (4) also shows that the river represents time, as something passing. Time, is clearly an important aspect of the poem. Autumn and winter are to follow. This time stands for a hard time, for cold and dark days. For Thomas, who was soon to go to France, winter represents war. The second stanza ends with an image of flowing rivers:

Not memorable
Save that I saw them go,
As past the empty quays
The rivers flow. (5–8)

A river is something moving and relentless. The rhyming pattern of the poem itself is irregular. In the beginning in the first two stanzas, when he recollects the change, it is consistent: abcb. In the third stanza, the words flow like the river.

And now again,
 In the harvest rain,
 The Blenheim oranges
 Fall grubby from the trees. (9–12)

“[A]gain” and “rain” are imperfect rhymes. The “grubby” oranges also indicate the end of summer, rot and, thus, time passing unstopably. The “lost one” in the fourth stanza can be an old friend who died and, thus, might be a ghost now.

As when I was young—
 And when the lost one was here—
 And when the war began
 To turn young men to dung. (13–16)

The speaker mourns for his childhood. The things he encounters now have always been like this. The oranges then did become “grubby”. Martin Bidney identifies in Thomas’ poems “resentment and nostalgia [and] melancholic mourning” (292). These sentiments are also reflected in “Gone, Gone Again”. The words “young” and “dung” are the rhyming words. The passage implies that the young men’s lives are wasted in the war. The attention is turned to the last two lines of the stanza. It is unusual for Thomas to mention the war itself in his poems. As seen before, it was often discernible through an undertone. In “Gone, Gone Again” he directly addresses the topics war, death and loss. In the next stanza, Thomas turns to the old house:

Look at the old house,
 Outmoded, dignified,
 Dark and untenanted,
 With grass growing instead. (17–20)

John Lucas sees the house as “the house at the heart of England [. . .] but [it is] no longer seen as a symbol of survival, of continuity, but as a finished way of life” (92). Thus, he interprets the house as something that time has stopped from being used. The way of life it represents discontinues. Edna Longley found that “[t]he house is central to Thomas’s metaphysics of inhabiting the earth and the body” (255). In *The South Country*, a collection of Thomas’ prose, he writes about houses: “The other house is not so high; nor has it eyes; nor do an old man and a girl and two children go in and out of it; it is, in fact, not a house of the living, but of the dead, a round tumulus at the edge of the hill” (197). Thus, the house in the poem

is a house for the dead. It is “[o]utmoded, dignified, dark and untenanted” (18). Thomas connects the inhabitants with their houses. A house is a body for the inhabitants. The object, the house is deserted and only the dead can use it. Change and time have made the house a ghost house.

Thomas also sees houses as such: “[a] house is a perdurable garment, giving and taking of life. If it only fit, straightaway it begins to chronicle our days. It beholds our sorrows and joys; its untalebearing walls know all our thoughts” (Thomas, *The South Country* 238). A house can tell stories about an owner. They are perceived as uncanny or ghostly because they come to live. Thus, in “Gone, Gone Again” the dark house clearly bears uncanny elements. The line twenty-one “[o]n the footsteps of life” indicates the traces everybody leaves behind. That refers to what Thomas has written in *The South Country*: everything one touches has a story to tell about one. In the sixth stanza a regular rhyme scheme occurs: abab:

Of the footsteps of life,
The friendliness, the strife;
In its beds have lain
Youth, love, age, and pain. (21–24)

It is the first time in the poem that all ending syllables rhyme. The insight that something stays, even when one is dead, has a calming, a regulating effect. The form of the stanza represents this. Thomas may have thought of his going to war and reflect on the purpose, namely to protect his beloved country. Andrew Webb found that Thomas’ death “as a soldier shows that his appreciation of th[e] beauty [of the English countryside] was so heartfelt that he felt it worth joining the army and dying for it” (Webb 64). Louis Untermeyer states that Thomas was “fighting not merely for England, but for the English country-side which he loved in that queer blend of brusqueness and passion” (266). Thus, he, as seen before, does fight for his country. The speaker realises that even when he is dead, the country and its stories will survive. The next stanza has no regular rhyme scheme. The poetic “I” sees him as “that”:

I am something like that;
Only I am not dead,
Still breathing and interested
In the house that is not dark:—. (25–28)

The “that” refers to what stays in a house, the stories. Longley states that “he [even] speaks as the ghost of haunted houses” (310). He sees nothing but himself as an unnatural occurrence. He, although still alive, considers how it is when he is dead. His house is not dark and untenanted yet. However, he will leave the house in the future. Thus, he fears that his house is going to be empty.

The last stanza begins with a repetition of the first line of the seventh stanza:

I am something like that:
 Not one pane to reflect the sun,
 For the schoolboys to throw at—
 They have broken every one. (29–32)

The schoolboys destroy the windows of the empty house. The speaker himself was once such a schoolboy. Still, now he sees the destruction of the windows as purely negative. There is nothing there to destroy anymore. The boys just played and, through playing, destroyed something that was important to someone, namely the speaker. Thus, the poem ends sorrowfully. The speaker expresses hopelessness, even after trying to be comforted through poetry.

Robert Frost “Ghost House”

Robert Frost’s poem “Ghost House” was written in 1901. It draws on the topic of ghostliness in a concrete way. The American poet published this work as part of the series “A Boy’s Will”. The work was written before he came to England and, in contrast to Thomas’ poem, long before the war. The ghost house is an American house. By the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century, as Robert Faggen found, many houses in America were abandoned because “farm populations were dwindling rapidly” (52). Therefore, Faggen suggests that the house is a farmhouse and the poem is about life in the countryside. Deirdre Fagan states that the “opening stanza concerns itself with absence” (136):

I dwell in a lonely house I know
 That vanished many a summer ago,
 And left no trace but the cellar walls,
 And a cellar in which the daylight falls,
 And the purple-stemmed wild raspberries grow. (1–5)

The house in the poem does not exist. They have “left no trace but cellar walls” (3). Faggen states, that “life in the country bears a *memento mori*, a remembrance of death” (52). For Faggen, “[g]oing back in time imaginatively to a time made simple may seem a pastoral gesture of retreat [but i]n Frost, however, it often signals a history of loss and decay, as it [does] in ‘Ghost House’” (148). Thus, loss, decay and even death alongside expiration play an important role in the poem. The speaker remembers the house that was there and “dwell[s] with a strangely aching heart” (11). He mourns something, possibly the past. Andy Duncan identifies “the house as a metaphor of the speaker’s childhood” (133). Therefore, childhood, which stands for the past, is mourned. Here, the two findings of Faggen and

Duncan contradict each other. Robert Frost’s childhood did not take place in the countryside. Still, both assumptions lead to the same conclusion: the speaker is mourning a time bygone. The place is overgrown and the speaker is lonely. Still, daylight falls in the cellar walls. The poetic “I” dwells there at daytime. In contrast to Thomas’ poem, it is summer. Nature is taking back the place, as described in the second stanza:

O’er ruined fences the grape-vines shield
 The woods come back to the mowing field;
 The orchard tree has grown one copse
 Of new wood and old where the woodpecker chops;
 The footpath down to the well is healed. (6–10)

When night comes, bats and birds fly through the air:

The whippoorwill is coming to shout
 And hush and cluck and flutter about:
 I hear him begin far enough away
 Full many a time to say his say
 Before he arrives to say it out. (16–20)

The fast movements make unusual sounds when the animals “hush and cluck and flutter about” (17). The bird, the whippoorwill, a bird that is only to be found in North and Central America, is personified, as it speaks. The darkness, the sounds, the bats and birds make this place uncanny. It is unfamiliar, because in the darkness, the movements are not visible. Timothy D. O’Brien identifies that “this ‘I’ speaks of his surroundings more as if he were a ghost” (106). Fagan also interpreted that “[t]he house is a ‘ghost house’ not simply because it is abandoned but because it houses a ghost [and t]he speaker is a ghost who is unable to read the names on the stones” (136). Hence, both identify Frost’s speaker as a ghost, just as Thomas’ speaker does:

In stanza five, the ghosts appear in the poem.

It is under the small, dim, summer star.
 I know not who these mute folk are
 Who share the unlit place with me--
 Those stones out under the low-limbed tree
 Doubtless bear names that the mosses mar. (21–25)

Even as “these mute folk” appear, the rhyme scheme remains regular. Thus, the speaker is not frightened, maybe because he is one of them. Fagan states that “[t]he couple may have been the owners of a house that once stood there, and this may be a family plot” (137). The subtitle of the poem, “He is happy in society of his choosing”, indicates that the speaker has chosen the ghosts as a society. Thus,

he is definitely not frightened of the ghosts. They share the unlit place with him. He does not know who they are. As the stones, that bear names, seem to belong to a cemetery, the setting has changed. The ghost house may never have been a house but a catacomb, maybe a part of a mausoleum. Fagan interpreted the poem in the same way. She states that “the ghost house is a burial place” and “perhaps the ruin of a crypt or mausoleum, in a cemetery” and “the cellar walls are like a tomb” (136). Thus, the change that happens in the poem is from light to darkness, which changes the appearance of things. Time is recognised as the ever-changing element, even within a day.

The ghosts only appear by night, which is an uncertain time of the day. It is dark, obscure. Thus, the changing time they represent may be something bad. Nevertheless, the speaker does not fear the ghosts. He decides, that they are good companions. Fagan states that the “poem also in many ways embraces life” (137). She sees “comfort in knowing that life goes on after our individual deaths” (147). The coherent rhyme scheme of the poem aabba, underlines this assumption. It expresses composure and regularity. Thus, the ghosts give the speaker hope. That means that the he has learned to accept change and even finds good aspects in it.

Conclusion

Both poems compare houses, ghostly houses, with graves. For Frost the house denotes mourning for the past. He is not occupied with the future, as Thomas is. The poems were written at different times. Frost wrote at the beginning of the 20th century, while Thomas wrote his poem shortly before he went to France to fight in World War I. Frost is full of hope but melancholy, while Thomas is hopeless and tries to console himself with his poetry. The houses serve as a symbol for this reassurance. Concluding, both poets describe a certain fear of time and the ghosts are the speakers themselves in the future. The ghosts have a calming effect. Thus, both speakers do not fear supernatural occurrences but find comfort in the thought of them.

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