

**Univerzita Karlova**

**Filozofická fakulta**

ÚSTAV ANGLOFONNÍCH LITERATUR A KULTUR

# **Bakalářská práce**



## **From Ghostly Hooves to Phantom Voices: Sounds as a Source of Anxiety in Selected British Ghost Stories**

**Dusot přízračných kopyt a hlasy zjevení: Zvuk coby zdroj napětí  
ve vybraných britských duchařských povídkách**

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V Praze dne .....

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## **Abstract:**

The thesis discusses the use of sound as a means of inducing anxiety in four selected British ghost stories that were published either during or closely after the Victorian period. Each story was analyzed focusing on the kinds of sounds the author employs, the nature and cause of the haunting, the response of the characters, also with the references to the historical background and context.

The primary texts were selected according to the diverse types of sounds that the authors use in them. The first chapter deals with “The Open Door” (1881) by Margaret Oliphant in which she employs a weeping child ghost looking for his mother, that haunts another child and his family. The following chapter comments on William Hope Hodgson’s “The Horse of the Invisible” (1910) where an allegedly cursed family is haunted by the sounds of an evil horse galloping and neighing. The story, which is part of the series which features the occult investigator Thomas Carnacki, combines detective and ghost story elements. The third chapter analyses “The Mass for the Dead” (1893) by Edit Nesbit, which follows a couple being haunted by choral music, told from the point of view of one of the lovers. The fourth chapter reflects on “A Wicked Voice” (1890) by Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), in which the main character, an opera composer, is haunted by the voice of a famous castrato. Finally, the conclusion provides an overall comparison of the four selected stories in terms of the prevalence of each element analyzed within the chapters.

The thesis employs a range of secondary sources, from Dorothy Scarborough’s classic treatise *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (1917) to most recent studies which deal with British supernatural fiction of the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

**Key Words:**

Vernon Lee, William Hope Hodgson, Margaret Oliphant, Edith Nesbit, ghost stories, narrative strategies, sound, anxiety

## **Abstrakt:**

Tato práce pojednává o využití zvuku coby prostředku k navození napětí ve čtyřech vybraných britských duchařských povídkách, které všechny vyšly během viktoriánské éry nebo těsně po jejím skončení. Každá povídka je zkoumána se zaměřením na typ zvuků, které autor či autorka v daném příběhu používá, jejich zdroj, povahu a příčinu nadpřirozeného jevu a reakce jednotlivých postav, s ohledem na historické pozadí a kontext.

Povídky byly zvoleny dle různorodých typů zvuků, které jsou v nich použity. První kapitola pojednává o povídce „The Open Door“ (1881) Margaret Oliphant, v níž duch plačícího dítěte, které hledá matku, straší jiného chlapce spolu s jeho rodinou. Následující kapitola se zaměřuje na povídku Williama Hope Hodgsona „The Horse of the Invisible“ (1910), kde údajně prokletou rodinu pronásledují zvuky koňského cvalu a ržání. Příběh je součástí souboru povídek spojených hlavní postavou okultního detektiva Thomase Carnackiho, v němž autor kombinuje prvky detektivního žánru a duchařských povídek. Následující kapitola je věnována povídce „The Mass for the Dead“ (1893), jejíž autorkou je Edith Nesbit. Povídka je vyprávěná z pohledu dvou milenců, kteří jsou pronásledováni hudbou zádušní mše. Čtvrtá kapitola zkoumá povídku „A Wicked Voice“ (1890) Vernon Lee (Violet Paget), v níž hlavní postavu, operního skladatele, straší hlas slavného kastráta. Závěr práce předkládá celkové srovnání povídek co do převládajících prvků a hlavních podobností a rozdílů ve využití zvuku.

Práce vychází z řady sekundárních zdrojů, počínaje klasickým pojednáním Dorothy Scarborough *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (1917) a konče nejnovějšími studiemi, které se zabývají britskou literaturou s nadpřirozenými prvky z devatenáctého a počátku dvacátého století.

**Klíčová slova:**

Vernon Lee, William Hope Hodgson, Margaret Oliphant, Edith Nesbit, duchařské povídky, vypravěčské techniky, zvuk, napětí

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# 1. Introduction

Julia Briggs describes the genre of the ghost story as ultimately breaking the barriers between the world of dead and living, omitting the laws of nature, and using the imagination of reader and their fear of the ghosts to the author's advantage.<sup>1</sup> In various forms, ghost stories have been popular for centuries and are part of a number of literary traditions, but as a genre the ghost story is especially strongly associated with the writing of the British Isles

Andrew Smith and William Hughes pin down the first wave of success of gothic literature and the ghost story between the publication of Horace Walpole's *Castle of Otranto* in 1764 and Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* in 1818.<sup>2</sup> Punter points out that the gothic then had its renaissance along with the ghost story towards the end of the nineteenth century and reaching into the beginning of the twentieth, creating a vast corpus of stories that appeared in periodical press and in collections.<sup>3</sup>

Some authors of the period specialized in short supernatural fiction and are mostly remembered for these works, such as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu and M. R. James. Other remarkable practitioners of the genre, including Joseph Rudyard Kipling, are primarily associated with their work in other fields. A number of authors who were prominent in the time but later fell into various degrees of obscurity are now being rediscovered, also thanks to the resurgence of interest in the genre and the new editions that are focus both on individual writers and on selected topics, such as the Spooky Season series produced by the British Library, to give just one example out of many.

The structure and components of the Victorian ghost story attracted the attention of critics already in the early decades of the twentieth century, inspiring studies by Jack

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<sup>1</sup> Julia Briggs, "The Ghost Story," *A New Companion to The Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Blackwell Publishing, 2012): 176.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Smith, William Hughes, "Introduction: Locating the Victorian Gothic," *The Victorian Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion*, ed. Andrew Smith, William Hughes, (Edinburgh University Press, 2012): 2.

<sup>3</sup> David Punter, "Introduction: The Ghost of a History," *A New Companion to the Gothic*, ed. David Punter (Blackwell Publishing, 2012): 2.

Sullivan, Elliott O'Donnel, and Dorothy Scarborough, and this thesis makes use of their observations. In recent years, much more literary scholarship has been devoted to the ghost story and its different themes and elements, to individual authors, and to the historical and social context of the period and the way it is reflected in the stories, leading to a more nuanced appreciation of the phenomenon. Some of the prominent contemporary scholars who have been focusing on the genre of the ghost story would be Srdjan Smajic, Jen Cawallader, Simon Hay, and Andrew Smith, whose works are referred to in this thesis.

This thesis comments on the usage of sound as the main source of anxiety in four British ghost stories. It discusses the types of the sounds and their origins, the way characters respond to them, their connection to specific places, times and people, and other aspects. When relevant, it also briefly mentions some of the necessary period context to further explain why certain sounds would be considered disquieting.

The first chapter deals with “The Open Door” by Margaret Oliphant (1828–1897). Oliphant was a Scottish writer who during her life managed to produce a great amount of work way beyond the ghost story genre. She published numerous novels, often dealing with the lives of women and the domestic space, journal articles, biographies, and historical guides.<sup>4</sup> In Scotland, Oliphant is recognized as one of the finest practitioners of the ghost story in the nineteenth century, and “The Open Door”, together with “The Library Window”, is considered one of her masterpieces. It was published as a part of *The Open Door, and the Portrait: Stories of the Seen and the Unseen* in 1881. The story works with a remarkable ease of aural haunting where the voice and cries of a small child that are heard near the home of the main characters and trouble the son of the narrator.

The following chapter comments on “The Horse of the Invisible” by English writer William Hope Hodgson (1877–1918). Hodgson was productive in a number of genres,

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Oliphant, “Introduction,” *The Autobiography of Margaret Oliphant*, (Broadview Press, 2002): 7-8.

and some of his work would fall rather into the realm of science fiction and speculative literature.<sup>5</sup> Towards the end of his career, between 1910 and 1912, he published a series of stories connected by the figure of the occult detective Thomas Carnacki, later collected as *Carnacki, the Ghost Finder*. Most of the Carnacki stories work effectively with sound, including “The Horse of the Invisible” where the investigator deals with a case of a cursed family followed by the sounds of galloping and neighing of a spectral stallion.

The third chapter analyses “The Mass for the Dead” by Edith Nesbit (1886–1924). Nesbit was an English author and journalist, at present known mainly for her contribution to literature for children.<sup>6</sup> “The Mass for the Dead”, which was published in 1893 as a part of her short story collection *Grim Tales*, tells the story of a young couple that are haunted by the sounds of choral music.

The last chapter reflects on “A Wicked Voice” by Vernon Lee (1856–1935). Violet Paget, who chose the pseudonym Vernon Lee, was an English author who wrote in a number of genres, from fiction to art history and theory, and is associated with Aestheticism. She spent a substantial part of her life in Italy, which often features as a setting of her supernatural works where she also draws on her detailed knowledge of Italian music and art. There has been an increased interest in her supernatural fiction in the recent years.<sup>7</sup> “A Wicked Voice” is one of the short stories in her collection *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* that went into print in 1890. In this particular story, the main character is an Scandinavian opera composer staying in Italy who becomes haunted by the voice of a castrato. Finally, the conclusion provides a comparison of all four stories, and comments on the most prominent elements in the narratives, highlighting the main similarities and differences.

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<sup>5</sup> Mat Cardin, “Hodgson, William Hope (1877–1918),” *Horror Literature through History: An Encyclopaedia of the Stories that Speak to Our Deepest Fears*, vol. 1,2 (2017): 439.

<sup>6</sup> Ravenna Helson, “E. Nesbit’s Forty-First Year: Her Life, Times, and Symbolizations of Personality Growth” *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 4(1), (1984)” 54 <https://doi.org/10.2190/L783-9KCE-C01H-5C5E>

<sup>7</sup> Vineta Colby, “Preface,” *Vernon Lee: A Literary Biography*, (University of Virginia Press, 2003): 12.

## 2. Margaret Oliphant: “The Open Door”

The story is narrated from the point of view of the main character Henry, after he has moved to the village of Brentwood with his family – wife, two daughters and a son, from their previous home in Simla. It is decided that Roland, Henry’s son, is to attend school not too far away from his home and that he shall ride his pony every day to get some fresh air. After some time, however, Roland starts hearing a voice of a crying boy. As often in Oliphant’s fiction, the focus is on domestic affairs and relationships in small family units, especially between sons and fathers – the same dynamic can be observed in her other ghost stories, including “The Portrait” and “The Secret Chamber”.

When Roland’s mother starts noticing that her son has been coming home very upset, he tells her about the incidents that keep happening in the park surrounding the ruins of the old village, on his way from school. Ruins as a setting are quite common in Victorian ghost story, as Whelan points out, and they are frequently introduced before the main plot starts to unfold.<sup>1</sup>

When Roland’s illness starts to affect him, Henry is away. According to his wife, however, the boy had been acting differently even before Henry left. When he returns home, Roland describes to him what has been happening and tells his father that at first, he assumed that it was simply a wounded animal and even visited the ruins the next day but did not find anything. Then he proceeds to confess that he does not think that the sounds that he hears come from the world of the living. Faced with this revelation, his father decides to face the ghost in order to save him. Three visits to the ruins are mentioned in the story. The first time, Henry goes only with his butler. The second time, he takes along Roland’s doctor who doubts the existence of the ghost the most, and on

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<sup>1</sup> Lara Baker Whelan, “Between Worlds: Class Identity and Suburban Ghost Stories, 1850 to 1880,” *Mosaic: An Interdisciplinary Critical Journal* 35, no. 1 (2002): 138. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44029942>.

the last occasion, Henry brings along not only the doctor and but also the local minister, enlisting help both from science and religion.

## 2. 1. Aural and Physical Aspects of the Ghost

Although the community is well aware of the ghost's presence, and there are several witnesses, nobody from the village is willing to acknowledge its existence. Despite the proofs at hand, they will laugh at anybody who would attempt to deal with the situation and assign the sounds to the trees or the flowing river.

According to information provided by the servant Jarvis and his wife, the sounds always start around eleven o'clock in the evening and they stop with the sunrise. They start in November when the sun goes down early and disappear again with spring. As the characters describe it, the sounds gradually become more intense – beginning with quiet moaning that grows into actual cries and exclamations. The ghost starts to weep and eventually calls out “Oh mother, let me in! Let me in!”<sup>2</sup> which he then incessantly repeats.

Based on the servants' descriptions, the sounds are connected to night and darkness. Henry and his companions bring lanterns to each of the visits to hopefully see the source of the sounds for themselves. The first time the lantern blows out before the sounds even properly start. The second time nothing is to be seen again. During the third time, it seems to the narrator that they have managed to surround the source of the sound with the lanterns, yet there was no visual manifestation.

But the haunting is not limited to these sounds only: the characters can hear how the ghost moves. The father describes several times that the sounds are very close to him when they start. All the characters can hear them near the empty doorway. At the second visit at the ruins, Henry and his companions can hear somebody pacing back a fourth in front of the door.<sup>3</sup> At the last encounter the father can hear someone or something to be violently thrown at the door. That motion sounds so real to the main character that he

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<sup>2</sup> Oliphant, “The Open Door,” 18.

<sup>3</sup> This situation is similar to Hodgson's “The Horse of the Invisible” where the characters hear the horse galloping around the house.

jumps forward trying to stop Willie from hurting himself. But of course, there is nothing tangible for him to grab and he ends up hitting himself against the door. This also shows that there is some physical aspect to the ghost. When Henry jumps forward, he does not catch anything. But the ghost can interact with the door and run into it.

The ghost itself is invisible and seems to be unable to communicate with the outside world. It does not seem to have the full personality of a living person and could be just a fragment of a memory trapped in the present world. His communicative abilities are limited to the repetition of the same words: “Oh, mother, let me in! Oh, mother, let me in!”<sup>4</sup> The only response that the characters receive from the ghost is when the minister recognizes him to be little Willie, a boy who used to live in the village with his mother who had passed away a couple years prior to the events of the plot, and addresses him directly.

It is thus remarkable that while everybody can hear Willie’s voice, Willie himself is able to interact directly only with the minister, the door, and the space surrounding the house that his mother died in. During the third visit the minister says: “Willie, if it is you, – and it’s you, if it is not a delusion of Satan – Willie, lad! Why come ye here frightening that that know you not? Why came ye not to me?”<sup>5</sup> This could potentially mean that Willie is able to respond to certain objects and people from the world of the living, but only if they were present while he was alive as well. The butler also tries to navigate the ghost into the hallway of the ruins of the house where the door is left during the first encounter, but the ghost does not react and keeps on crying.

Minna Vuohelainen points out that Oliphant often uses the trope of doors, windows, and thresholds in her ghost stories to implicate the boundary between the world

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<sup>4</sup> Margaret Oliphant, “The Open Door,” *The Open Door, and the Portrait: Stories of the Seen and the Unseen*, (London, 1881; Project Gutenberg, 2003): 18.

<sup>5</sup> Oliphant, “The Open Door,” 37.

of the living and the world of the dead.<sup>6</sup> Willie is trapped in the world of the living, yet without his actual living form: he is able to hit to door but cannot open it.

Liggins in her study of miscommunication as a topic in Oliphant's ghost story "Old Lady Mary" observes that only women and animals can feel the ghost who owes an explanation to one of her descendants and is now trapped in time. Similarly, in "The Open Door" the door itself is closed between life and death and Willie is behind it unable to open due to a misunderstanding that occurred between him and his mother.<sup>7</sup> Margree in her study states that it is common for Oliphant to portray ghosts as trapped souls in need of help from the living.<sup>8</sup> In this particular case, the help is provided by the minister.

As Cadwallader states, the Victorian period worked with the preconceived notion that children are always innocent and they should mean no harm, thus making their appearances in ghost stories that much more startling and difficult to accept for the readers of the time.<sup>9</sup> In connection to this, it is also worth mentioning that Oliphant in her stories frequently asserts that the supernatural does not necessarily need to be destructive and not all spirits are inevitably evil.<sup>10</sup> There are no signs of the ghost meaning any harm and there does not seem to be any reason to think that Roland was targeted by Willie. The adult characters do not respond to the calling of the ghost as intensely as Roland does, but they do respond, nonetheless.

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<sup>6</sup> Minna Vuohelainen, "'A Feeling of Space': Margaret Oliphant's Supernatural Short Fiction in *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*," *Women's Writing* 29, no. 2 (July 2022): 218. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2022.2052458>.

<sup>7</sup> Emma Liggins, "Ghostly Communication and Female Inheritance," *The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories*, (London, 2020): 98. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40752-0>.

<sup>8</sup> Victoria Margree, "(Other) Worldly Goods: Short Fiction as Financial Writing in Margaret Oliphant and Charlotte Riddell," *British Women's Short Fiction, 1860 – 1930, Our Own Ghostliness* (2019): 35. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27142-8>.

<sup>9</sup> Jen Cadwallader, "The Anatomy of Desire: Madness, Mesmerism, and the Spectres of Female Sexuality," *Spirits and Spirituality in Victorian Fiction* (2016): 83. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-137-55516-8>.

<sup>10</sup> Emma Liggins, "Left Out in the Cold: Exclusion and Communications with the Female Ancestor in the Ghost Stories of Margaret Oliphant," *The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories* (2020): 82. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-40752-0>.



## 2. 2. The Character's Response to the Sounds

Every time the characters hear the voice of the ghost, it triggers a deeply emotional reaction. The character affected the most is, of course, Roland. Each of the characters react in a slightly different way. At the very beginning, it is mentioned that Roland is a sensitive and emotional child, which could serve as an explanation to his response to the ghost. One could also say that he has a stronger connection to the ghost simply because he is a child as well.<sup>11</sup> He is the only one of the characters, however, who can hear the ghost while being at home. He also repeats the words and stops being aware of his surroundings when the ghost starts talking again. The rest of the characters are upset by the ghost when they hear it but have no other reaction, however, Roland falls gravely ill.

It seems rather ironic that when Ronald talks about the sounds and eventually gets more and more ill, his parents and the doctor recommend as much peace and quiet as possible. Quite possibly, this makes the situation only worse for Roland, since now the sounds coming from the ghost have free access towards him and he does not encounter any other aural stimuli. This could potentially give the sounds more power than they had initially since he quite literally does not have any other sounds to focus on.

Furthermore, even if it is not the ghost itself, the voice of the ghost infiltrated the environment where Roland should feel completely safe, i.e., his home, thus making it harder for him to recover. This also affects Henry who, upon finding out that his home is not properly protected, feels even more responsible for the situation.

The other characters exhibit strong reactions too. The butler, despite having spent many years in the military, faints with horror and decides to quit working for the main

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<sup>11</sup> Other ghost stories from the same period, including "The Old Nurse's Tale" by Elizabeth Gaskell, work with the belief that children have a deeper connection to ghosts in general. The difference between Gaskell's and Oliphant's approach in this case is that in "The Old Nurse's Tale" the child character that interacts with the ghost, who also happens to be a child, is unaware of the supernatural nature of their new friend. Roland, on the other hand, is the one who identifies the boy as a ghost. He is also older than the child character in Gaskell's story. Another – and more recent – narrative which works with the close affinity of children and ghosts is the novel *The Woman in Black* (1983) by Susan Hill. In this case, the ghost is not that of a child but appears right before a child is supposed to die.

character the moment the problem seems to be solved. Simson, the doctor, tries to laugh at it at first, but eventually feels embarrassed about his mistake and is terrified during their second and last visit. When he returns to the ruins after the last visit and finds there a hiding spot where somebody might have spent the night, he decides to assign the sounds to a human agent and argues his point with laws of physics. Smajic observes that the Victorian period was occupied by the new focus on developing technology and sciences.<sup>12</sup> Simson as a man of science thus refuses to admit the possibility of a ghost because it contradicts and threatens his personal beliefs. When they are leaving the ruins after the second visit, he says that he is yet to understand fully the art of ventriloquism.

Similarly to Roland, the main character and the minister react in a more emotional manner. For them, unlike for the previously mentioned characters, the issue is personal – the minister knew Willie when he was alive, and the main character sees similarities between Willie and Roland. When Roland talks about the ghost to his father for the first time, he asks him to imagine Roland in the ghost's place. Every time he hears the voice, he shivers and struggles staying collected. At the same time, he still manages to remain calmer than the rest of the characters, which is mostly because of his promise to Roland.

As he comes to the ruins for the second and third time, his perception of the sounds changes. At first, he is angry with whoever is trying to harm his child. When he only passes the ruins on his way home from Jarvis' house, he is frightened. The second time he wants to prove the doctor wrong and starts to feel sympathy towards the ghost. By the third visit, he is no longer scared of the ghost. He starts calling the ghost "a creature" that needs his help and does not perceive it to be evil by any means. He is startled, however, when the minister addresses the ghost by its name for the first time, as if he could not believe it.

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<sup>12</sup> Srdjan Smajic, "The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story," *ELH* 70, no. 4 (2003): 1109. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/30029915>.

In the minister's case, he does not necessarily doubt Roland's story, and he joins the group to fulfill his duties as a spiritual leader. The moment he realizes the ghost's identity, he steps in without hesitation. The participation of the minister would signify the presence of an evil force that needs to be defeated with the power of God, and it seems the characters might have thought of the possibility of Willie being the work of the devil, hence asking for the minister's help. However, it is not something that would be automatically assumed as one of the options by the characters explicitly. In her study *The Supernatural in Modern Fiction* that came out about thirty years after the publication of "The Open Door", Dorothy Scarborough observes that the theme of the devil had been disappearing from the literature of the period for some time. She explains that modern writers seemed to believe more in human issues than in workings of the devil.<sup>13</sup>

The minister does not consider Willie's ghost to be evil at all. On the contrary, he approaches him in an affectionate way and only wants to help. He does ask God for help, but only to guide Willie. He repeatedly tries to explain the misunderstanding that took place between Willie and his mother. After that, the voice stops for good.

By this scene, and further explanation provided later, Willie's life was rather tragical, but nobody harmed him directly. Willie's mother died of an illness. That is emphasized when the minister asks Willie if he really thinks that his mother would leave him behind. He tells him that she is in heaven and that he should follow her there.

Harlow states that after an explanation of the past is provided in a ghost story, like in this case, the characters start to perceive events differently. The disruption of natural events in the present means that there must have been a drastic disruption of events in the past. The characters can hear the anguish and pain in Willie's voice from the beginning

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<sup>13</sup> Dorothy Scarborough, "The Devil and His Allies" *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (London, G.P. Putnam, 1917; Project Gutenberg, 2014): 98.

and it causes them to feel similar way out of pity. But with the minister's explanation, the natural order of the old dying and the young living on is disrupted.<sup>14</sup>

Bann observes that when it comes to child ghosts, there is a psychological complexity involved. She states that child ghosts initiate a feeling of responsibility within the adult characters and their actions become a fact of what they must do instead of what they can do.<sup>15</sup> Henry compares Roland to Willie throughout the whole story and he believes that a young boy like should not experience such phenomena. He says himself that he would rather himself die and help the seeker find his way out, rather than let his son perish because of the situation. In this respect, McCarthy makes an interesting point in her study of Oliphant when she notes that Henry realizes that he could lose his son due to something that has already been lost due to an unsolved debt or mistreatment.<sup>16</sup>

Ronald's mother and her experience of the sounds is also worthy of consideration. She never heard the sounds directly, only when repeated by Ronald wherever he can feel the ghost uttering them as well. She does not understand what is happening to her child, which puts her in a distressing situation. When Roland starts to scream the words, that Willie repeats every night, her response is "You are at home, my darling! Don't you know me? Your mother is here!"<sup>17</sup> Oliphant describes her as tired and pale, afraid to make any sound that might upset Roland further. Her situation must have been even more challenging than that of Roland's father, since he has never witnessed Roland's behavior directly, while under the ghost's influence. Yet, it is the father who takes the steps that ultimately lead to resolution.

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<sup>14</sup> Ilana Harlow. "Unravelling Stories: Exploring the Juncture of Ghost Story and Local Tragedy," *Journal of Folklore Research* 30, no. 2/3 (1993): 195. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3814315>.

<sup>15</sup> Jennifer Bann, "Ghostly Hands and Ghostly Agency: The Changing Figure of the Nineteenth-Century Spectre," *Victorian Studies* 51, no. 4 (2009): 678. <https://doi.org/10.2979/vic.2009.51.4.663>.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth McCarty, "Haunting Memories; Death, Mourning and Memory in the Ghost Stories of Margaret Oliphant" in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. S. Brewster & L. Thurston (New York, 2017): 109. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315644417>.

<sup>17</sup> Oliphant, "The Open Door," 10.

## 2. 3. Animals and Sounds

Not only human beings respond to the sounds in the story: all horses seem to react to them as well. Roland's pony is said to be terrified as they run through the ruins at the beginning of the story as Roland uses her reaction as the main argument to convince Henry of the presence of the ghost. The horses pulling Henry's carriage also react in the same way. While returning home at night, they drive through the park and pass the ruins. At this moment, Henry hears some of the sounds for the first time, but he does not think much of them, wanting to be at home as soon as possible. He only feels anger at first since he assumes there is a human agent behind the strange events, somebody who wants to harm his son.

According to Elliot O'Donnell's study *Animal Ghosts or, Animal Hauntings and the Hereafter*, which focuses on different kinds of animals in supernatural fiction, horses were believed to be able to sense the presence of spirits and respond to it, for instance by feeling nervous in the vicinity of a house where a person is dying or has recently died.<sup>18</sup> As Presnakova claims in her study on animals in ghost stories, especially horses and dogs are believed to sense the supernatural more acutely than a human would. They should be able to feel the supernatural and evil forces around them.<sup>19</sup>

In the story, Henry states that he did not have time to think of the horses' behavior, but he mentions that they were panting and reluctant to go back to their stable. During the second visit at the ruins, the main character mentions that he can hear the horses in the stable in the silence. It is possible to connect this incident to the reaction that horses tend to have to the ghost in the story, suggesting they can sense the present of a supernatural being more acutely than the adult characters involved – but it could also be a strategy

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<sup>18</sup> Elliot O'Donnell, "Horses and the Unknown," *Animal Hauntings and the Hereafter* (London, 1913; Project Gutenberg, 2006): 90.

<sup>19</sup> Irina Presnakova, "Representation of Animals in English Ghost Stories," in *Comparative Studies (1691-5038)* ed. Ilze Kačane 4, no. 1 (2012): 100.

to stress the silence at the ruins at the moment, since the stables are meant to be far away. The absence of further description of the sounds prevents a definite conclusion.

## 2. 4. Other Sounds

Oliphant uses other sounds to contrast with the crying and exclamations of the ghost. In particular, she employs the sounds of nature: “There were movements and noises which I understood all about, cracklings of small branches in the frost, and little rolls of gravel in the path.”<sup>20</sup> Oliphant brings forward these natural sounds that a person may not normally pay much attention to. In her study, Scarborough claims that even though frequently depicted, nature and the surroundings of the characters is not the most important element, since they are always represented subjectively. The author uses the specific description to fit the mood of the character and what they are feeling in the moment.<sup>21</sup>

When Henry and his butler go to the ruins for the first time, he claims that these sounds were suddenly pleasant to him. While the butler is startled at the sound of the owl, Henry is not perturbed, since it is a sound that he understands and simply it is not produced by the ghost. While in this scene the butler is frightened by every audible sound, the narrator is not. Henry himself explains that while he is waiting for a specific sound that he has encountered before, the other sounds do not distress him, while the butler does not know what they are looking for and waiting to hear and what he should fear.

When the minister helps Willie follow his mother and the party is walking home, the narrator returns to the sounds of nature once again. “The air was very still, not more than enough to make a faint sighing in the branches, which mingled with the sounds of the water to which we were descending.”<sup>22</sup> They appreciate the sound of the living things

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<sup>20</sup> Oliphant, “The Open Door,” 22.

<sup>21</sup> Scarborough, “The Gothic Romance,” 15.

<sup>22</sup> Oliphant, “The Open Door,” 40.

in their surroundings, with the knowledge that he does not have to look for Willie's voice anymore.

## 2. 5. Summary

The characters in "The Open Door" react to the voice of the ghost with compassion and pity. The repeated phrase of the ghost that recurs several times causes both the characters and the reader to believe that the child became a ghost as a result of poor treatment on part of the mother. As was already mentioned, Oliphant was using to her advantage the widespread concept of complete childhood innocence and in this case played with the notion of a child as a victim.

When the explanation is provided by the minister at the end, it does not take away the sadness associated with the sounds, but shifts it substantially: in the end, all the years of the ghost's suffering resulted from a mere misunderstanding. Oliphant then layers the feeling of pity with a feeling of horror, stressing the supernatural nature of the ghost by making it invisible and using only the movement of the sound to locate the ghost and detect its behavior.

Oliphant skillfully contrasts Willie's voice with the sounds of the surrounding nature. Those sounds do not add to the dreadful atmosphere of the ruins in the park, and they are portrayed as neutral – neither scary nor soothing and positive – when Willie's voice is still heard. At the end, she uses them as the sounds of comfort for the main character when the supernatural element disappears.

Lastly, Oliphant describes the perception of the sounds as highly subjective for each of the characters: Roland is physically affected by them, the doctor does not believe in the ghost and seeks to explain the sounds away rationally, Henry finds the sounds of the nature soothing, and the butler faints at the sounds of both the nature and Willie's voice.

### 3. William Hope Hodgson: “The Horse of the Invisible”

“The Horse of the Invisible” is narrated in retrospect. Carnacki invites a group of friends over to tell the story about a recent case, which is recounted by one of the visitors. He finds Carnacki alone in his house. Carnacki then wordlessly gives him the photos taken during the events that he is about to share with the rest of the group. The narrator notices Carnacki bruised face and exhaustion but does not mention it. When all of the visitors arrive, Carnacki begins to tell the story of what has happened to him, which is included as a first-person narrative.

Carnacki was called to the case by a distressed family that seems to have a strange long history of tragic premature deaths of their first-born daughters, all unmarried and in all cases connected with the apparition of a horse. During the events, galloping and neighing of a horse was heard and one of the deceased daughters had a fatal injury that seemed to be caused by a horse kick. The Hisgins ask the detective for help since the sounds of a horse galloping and neighing suddenly reappeared, seemingly in relation to the daughter’s new engagement. Carnacki however seems to be dismissive of the possible connection between all the deaths, does not believe in the ghost horse from the beginning to the end, and deems the similarities between the deaths to be purely coincidental.

#### 3. 1. The Animal Ghost

In his aforementioned study, O’Donnell claims in the preface, dealing with the relationship of animals and the supernatural, that there is no difference between the afterlife of humans and animals. He argues that since pet animals are a part of most people’s life, they should be taken care of accordingly and those who will mistreat them will be haunted by them, just like they would be haunted by a human ghost.<sup>1</sup> What is more, a horse in this period would still be a common part of a household and should serve

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<sup>1</sup> O’Donnell, “Preface,” 6.



and help its owners for both practical transport and pleasure. In a clever move, Hodgson uses it to disrupt the atmosphere of a home.

The horse takes on both character and bodily attributes that are not normal. Before Carnacki arrives to the house, there has already been an incident of the ghost attacking the character of Beaumont, the fiancé of the current first-born daughter in the family – Miss Hisgins. The horse breaks his forearm when it kicks him for no apparent reason. According to Emily Alder’s essay, this incident is additionally traumatic for the characters, since it changes their preconceived notion of a horse’s behavior.<sup>2</sup> Alder also mentions that during Hodgson’s time, the overall perception of animals changed due to Charles Darwin’s evolution theory, and animals started to be perceived more as fellow creatures and pets became more common among people.<sup>3</sup> This enhances the sinister dimension of a horse which would be commonly seen as a benign and helpful animal.

It also seems the horse is able to manipulate with physical objects, as it was able to close the door behind Beaumont and trap him in the horse ring, and it also comes into physical contact with Beaumont when it attacks him. On the other hand, Carnacki mentions several times that nobody could ever find any hoof tracks that would confirm the tangible nature of the creature. On one occasion, Carnacki describes the following scene: “Immediately afterward the sounds came right on as if some invisible thing passed through the closed door and the ponderous tread was upon us.”<sup>4</sup> This, on the other hand, would mean that the horse is able to walk through objects, which speaks against its material form.

All characters in the story can hear the sounds of the horse galloping and neighing, as everybody reacts to them, and even Carnacki, who has no connection to the family history, is able to hear them. The last important point in connection to the nature and

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<sup>2</sup> Emily Alder, “(Re)encountering Monsters: Animals in Early-twentieth-century Weird Fiction,” *Textual Practice* 31, no. 6 (2017): 1088. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0950236X.2017.1358686>.

<sup>3</sup> Alder, “(Re)encountering Monsters: Animals in Early-twentieth-century Weird Fiction,” 1085.

<sup>4</sup> William Hope Hodgson, “No. 4 – The Horse of the Invisible,” *Carnacki, The Ghost Finder* (London, 1913; Project Gutenberg, 2004): 71.

abilities of the horse is that it is able to make sounds other than galloping. In an incident where Beaumont is searching for the source of the sounds, he twice hears a blown kiss that could not have come from any of the characters, since he was alone, implying it was also somehow produced by the apparition, opening other possibilities as to its nature and intentions.

### 3. 2. Darkness and Silence

All the incidents when the sounds of the horse are heard in the story are tied to absolute darkness. When Carnacki first describes an actual incident, he observes: “It seems that as the two of them were going through the big lower corridor, just after dusk and before the lamps had been lighted, there had been a sudden horrible neighing in the corridor close to them.”<sup>5</sup> In another scene, Carnacki recalls that “as the matches burned out there came the sounds of a great horse galloping down the empty drive.”<sup>6</sup> Here, the characters’ anxiety is also caused by the lack of visual input. The characters manage to catch a glimpse of what the horse looks like when Carnacki takes a photo of Miss Hisgins and when they see it in the light of a match. After that, they have an idea of how physically big the threat is as well.

Smajic in his essay deals with the explanations of ghost seeing of the Victorian period. One of the theories claimed that human organs are imperfect and therefore things that are experienced could be, to a degree, flavored by human imagination and subjective perception of the events.<sup>7</sup> Unlike in “The Open Door,” the characters in “The Horse of the Invisible” are in complete darkness. In Oliphant’s story, they can still see the ruins around them, since they are equipped with lanterns, while in Hodgson’s narrative they often cannot see anything at all. Smajic points out that authors such as Goethe held hearing above sight, since a person’s sense of hearing sharpens when there is no visual

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<sup>5</sup> Hodgson, “No. 4 – The Horse of the Invisible,” 66.

<sup>6</sup> Hodgson, “No. 4 – The Horse of the Invisible,” 68.

<sup>7</sup> Smajic, “The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story,” 1115.

input provided in the situation. The aural perception of events in the moments of complete darkness might have seemed more intense for the characters.<sup>8</sup>

The sounds, however, are not solely connected to night-time in Hodgson's story. Carnacki decides to conduct an experiment in what he calls "artificial darkness" in the cellars in an attempt to take a photo of the ghost, and he and other characters can hear the sounds even though it is light outside of the room where the experiment is held.

Hodgson uses complete silence to balance out the sounds of the horse to further create tension and anticipation: "The great tread came right up to the door and then stopped and there was an instant of absolute silence."<sup>9</sup> When the horse appears, the characters often hear the sounds only for a short period of time and then they disappear without a trace. The characters in those situations do not move and they lower their voices. Dead silence is not the only contrast that Hodgson employs. Another frequent features of the Carnacki tales are descriptions of the detective's physical state, especially in states of extreme dread: "... except that so far as I was concerned, the pulsing in my throat and temples almost deafened me."<sup>10</sup> Carnacki describes his own fear in those situations with the sound of his blood rushing due to his hastened heartbeat, which increases the character's relatability for the readers.

### 3. 3. Sound and Movement

A prominent element in the story which enhances the distress of the characters is the movement of the horse. Carnacki mentions the captain, Miss Hisgins's father, waking up to the noise of a horse galloping round the house. Beaumont walks out of the hall looking for the cause of the noise. As he ventures further, the door slams shut behind him, trapping him. The sound of the door crashing is surprising for everybody since they are

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<sup>8</sup> Srdjan Smajic, "Coda," *Ghost-Seers, Detectives, and Spiritualists: Theories of Vision in Victorian Literature and Science. Cambridge Studies in Nineteenth-Century Literature and Culture* (Cambridge University Press, 2010): 202. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511712012>

<sup>9</sup> Hodgson, "No. 4 – The Horse of the Invisible," 71.

<sup>10</sup> Hodgson, "No. 4 – The Horse of the Invisible," 71.

listening for the sound of the horse. Beaumont then realizes that he cannot open the door, as something is holding it. He manages to leave the carriage circle eventually and is standing at the door wanting to return to the rest of the character. Before he does that, he hears the sound of a blown kiss. Immediately he assumes that the source of the sound is Miss Hisgins and returns the kiss. Right after that he realizes that it was not Miss Hisgins but probably the ghost itself, trying to lure him into the darkness. A few moments after, the kiss is heard again, this time much closer to him. However, the ghost does not attack him in this scene.

Carnacki describes several instances of the galloping and neighing coming from different rooms and corridors around the house. On one occasion, Beaumont and captain heard the sounds coming from Miss Hisgins's bedroom. She then woke up hearing the sounds from somewhere near her bed. This incident shows that everybody also hears the noises from the same spot in the house. Carnacki describes hearing the horse in the corridors, in the billiards room, and a handful of times when the characters find themselves in the same room as the ghost. "The clungk, clungk, clungk, clungk, of the great hoof falls passed right between us and slowly and with deadly deliberateness, down the passage."<sup>11</sup> In this instance for example, the ghost is moving in between the characters. The sounds are not restricted to the inside of the house either – Miss Hisgins encounters the horse while taking a walk in the grounds.

### 3. 4. The Haunted House

The sounds of the horse are mostly present in the house and at one point around it. Even though Miss Hisgins's father claims that there is no connection between the house and the horse, the presence of the spectral horse in a house amplifies the fear. The safety of the characters' home is disrupted by an evil phantom that also seems to be attached to

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<sup>11</sup> Hodgson, "No. 4 – The Horse of the Invisible," 71.

the family's history. Carnacki mentions that he feels anxious walking through those parts of the house where the horse had appeared, and the characters throughout the story develop a permanent connection between certain places in the house and the horse.

Harlow points out that any appearance of a ghost causes a disruption of the boundary between the ghost world and the physical world, and the space where the ghost appeared will be marked forever for those that experienced it.<sup>12</sup> Even though Captain Hisgins claims that there is not any connection between the horse and the house, a strong link certainly emerges for the characters.

### 3. 4. Investigation and Science

Even though all the characters can hear the horse running around and thus confirm their impressions, Carnacki is determined to get a more definite proof. He decides to take a photo of the horse with his camera. In his study, Smajic mentions the problem of characters' skepticism when they lack physical evidence of the ghost's existence and relates it to the historical context. He mentions that due to the new inventions of the Victorian period used in the forensic sciences, there appeared newly found confidence in creating evidence for the existence of the ghost or other supernatural creatures.<sup>13</sup> Carnacki as a detective is naturally knowledgeable of those inventions and uses them as a part of his investigations. During the aforementioned experiment in the cellar, Carnacki manages to take a photo of the horse's head and its hoof, thus finally erasing the possibility of the ghost as a product of everybody's imagination.

Another theory that Smajic mentions is that human brain can replay things previously seen or experienced and then trick the person into thinking that they are reexperiencing them.<sup>14</sup> This concept could potentially make sense in the case of the family

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<sup>12</sup> Harlow, "Unravelling Stories: Exploring the Juncture of Ghost Story and Local Tragedy," 182.

<sup>13</sup> Smajic "The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story," 1109.

<sup>14</sup> Smajic, "The Trouble with Ghost-Seeing: Vision, Ideology, and Genre in the Victorian Ghost Story," 1114.

that has been haunted by the ghost for generations, but not for Carnacki since he only met the family of the day of his arrival.

As the story progresses, however, Carnacki opts for other ways of investigating and protecting Beaumont whom he deems to be in most acute danger, apart from the latest technological inventions. He decides to draw pentacles around Beaumont, hoping that the ghost will not be able to come to him. This may not seem like a standard technique of investigation for a detective who consistently tries to keep an open mind regarding the nature of the phenomena he is encountering, however, this practice and the mixture of technology and the occult is common for Carnacki and he employs them in other stories as well. Parlati explains that Carnacki uses the pentacle for protection against forces difficult to investigate, as their possible inexplicable nature should not be taken lightly and can be overlooked when a detective is set on the mater-of-fact investigation.<sup>15</sup>

### 3. 5. The Human Agent

The horse does not physically interact with any of the characters, aside from Beaumont at the very beginning and the scene at the very end. Carnacki, Beaumont, and Parsket, a family friend, decide to construct a trap for the horse, and prepare a bell to call for the butler in case it attacks again. In the middle of the night, they hear the sounds of the hoofs again, silence follows, and suddenly the sounds reappear – only this time in the room itself. Beaumont is attacked by the horse, and when other people interfere and bring light, Parsket turns out to be the source of the hauntings. He is presented as a minor character who joined the house after Carnacki and seems unimportant for the story until the moment of revelation. He then admits having created the sounds because he was in love with Miss Hisgins and was hoping that Beaumont would abandon her out of fear of the legend associated with the family.

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<sup>15</sup> Marilena Parlati, "Ghostly Traces, Occult Clues: Tales of Detection in Victorian and Edwardian Fiction," *European Journal of English Studies* 15, no. 3 (2011): 216. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2011.626946>.

For Carnacki, that clarifies most of the incidents in the house, but the final scene he cannot explain. After the discovery, the sounds appear again, but this time Parsket claims the haunting is not his doing. While the rest of the characters cannot see any horse although there is light enough, it seems to be different for Parsket: "...and then I noticed that he seemed to be looking at something in the passage with a peculiar, desperate, fixed, incredibly masterful gaze. But there was nothing to be seen. And suddenly the clunk, clunk – clunk, clunk recommenced and passed onward down the passage."<sup>16</sup> Carnacki hears the horse running past him and as it reaches the other side of the hallway, Parsket falls to the ground dead. Carnacki then proceeds to provide rational explanations for the supernatural events, presenting Parsket as the sole source of all of them. He assigns the blowing kiss to Beaumont's imagination and the sounds of the horse to Parsket using the darkness and fear of the family to his full advantage.

What the reader might notice about Carnacki is that he himself is not mentally affected by the hauntings of the horse whatsoever. In her chapter dealing with detective fiction of the Victorian period, Bissel points out that the detectives investigating supernatural forces in the Victorian detective fiction reflect the psychic research approach to possible explanations of supernatural at the time.<sup>17</sup> Carnacki cannot be affected by his supernatural encounter since for him it was never a supernatural encounter in the first place.

When the narrator asks about Parsket's sudden death and suggests that it could be connected to the family curse and the history of the family and the other suspicious deaths, Carnacki claims he has a theory, but he does not go into detail. He suggests that Parsket's "induced haunting" might have convinced himself and he started to believe in it. He does not allow any connection between the family legend and Parsket's death. This does not, however, correlate with the fact that all the characters heard the sounds of the horse after

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<sup>16</sup> Hodgson, "No. 4 – The Horse of the Invisible," 84.

<sup>17</sup> Sarah Bissel, "The Ghost Story and Science," in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. S. Brewster & L. Thurston. (New York, 2017): 44. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315644417>.

Parsket's actions were revealed. What is more, the ghost did not simply disappear into thin air after Parsket's death, but Carnacki describes the sounds of the hoofs of the horse as it galloped away. Before the horse would just appear out of nowhere and disappear into thin air.

If the final haunting was only partially Parsket, it would change the perspective of the sounds and the hauntings that have been presented so far. The reader could agree with Carnacki and simply connect all the incidents to Parsket. That does not, however, explain Parsket's sudden death. Alternatively, the hauntings could be understood as a combination of an actual supernatural force and of Parsket's deliberate tricks. Here the reader could contemplate whether the ghost entered the scene at the very end, or it might have been earlier in the story and even Parsket did not notice. For example, it would not be possible for Parsket to walk through the door as it happens towards the beginning of the story. Carnacki also describes the sound of the hoofs as heavy and loud which would not correlate with Parsket's size as opposed to a grown horse.

### 3. 6. Summary

Hodgson uses the element of movement of the sound in connection to darkness as the most prominent element to create tension in his story. The author makes the horse to appear in close proximity of the characters and leaves them completely defenseless in all of the encounters. He then employs the element of family curse to deepen the superstition of the reader and the characters. When at the end the haunting is revealed to be staged by Parsket and the tension falls, there is the final appearance of what could actually be an invisible spectral horse which disrupts the recently established belief that all the incidents were caused by a human agent.



## 4. Edith Nesbit: “The Mass for the Dead”

The short story “The Mass for the Dead” is narrated from the perspective of a young student Jasper who is unhappily in love with his childhood friend Kate. He tells the reader that he has spent three years studying music and violin playing in Germany. This specific characteristic also has an impact on how the main character narrates and describes different scenes. The story begins a day before Kate is to be married to another man. The main character is in his room, trying to distract himself from the wedding and the ultimate loss of his lover. When he describes his surroundings, he says: “...my violin case looked like a child’s coffin.”<sup>1</sup> The violin in this situation could be used as foreshadowing for the prominent connection between music and death. The narrator views his stay in Germany and his choice of the career in music as the reason for the loss of his potential future with Kate. While he is thinking about the forfeiture of his loved one, he hears a strange melody, eventually identifying it as part of a requiem mass. He understands it as a warning and in fear of Kate’s life, they both run away and get married.

### 4. 1. Choral Music and Catholic Mass

The narrator is at home when he hears the mass for the first time. As he tries to distract himself with reading, he describes the letters jumping around on the page *pas fantastique*. Then he refers to the recurring thought of his lover’s wedding as the refrain that keeps repeating itself in his head.

This kind of narration does not have anything to do with the outside sounds so far, but it describes the mental state of the student who is dealing with a great amount of sorrow and anxiety. In this case the sound causing the tension in the story is the sound of the student’s thought and his perception of the world of which music is an important part.

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<sup>1</sup> Edith Nesbit, “The Mass for the Dead,” *Grim Tales* (London, A. D. Innes & Co., 1893; Project Gutenberg, 2012): 69.

After another useless attempt to sleep, Jasper talks about the Waits who are singing and playing outside his house. The Waits was a group of musicians walking through the street playing, appointed by the town to move around the city during the day and night and play different kinds of music according to the event which was being celebrated.<sup>2</sup> In the story, they proceed to play carols for a short time. Carols are in most cases celebratory and festive songs, which contrasts with the situation of the narrator, and they contribute to his sorrow, grief and anger. However, the grim Christmas ballad “The Mistletoe Bough” is mentioned specifically, which deals with the premature tragic death of a young bride. Eventually, Jasper finds comfort in singing one of Palestrina’s melodies against the carols. Even though before his violin case seemed to him like a child’s coffin, it is classical music that helps him eventually.

Suddenly, over the music of the Waits, the narrator hears a harmony that he has never encountered before. The description of the music itself is already a sign that it would not be music commonly heard. The reader is offered a point of view of someone who has spent the past three years of their life in intense classical music training. Therefore, he should be acquainted with most kinds of music. The narrator says: “...a harmony I had never heard before, beautiful beyond description, and as distinct and definite as any song man’ years have ever listened to.”<sup>3</sup> This description is a first signal that the reader would be dealing with a supernatural power of some kind.

Jasper first assumes that the music must be coming from the Waits but then he recognizes the music as a choral composition and the main instrument as the organ. Upon hearing the piece for the first time, the narrator believes the music to be real. As the piece progresses, it grows in volume. He opens the window since he deems the music to be coming from the outside. The moment he does that, however, the music goes fainter. Opening the window then goes directly against logical expectations, which is another sign

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<sup>2</sup> “Town Waits and Their Tunes.” *The Musical Times* 69, no. 1025 (1928): 656. <https://doi.org/10.2307/917172>.

<sup>3</sup> Nesbit, “The Mass for the Dead,” 70.

of the supernatural source of the sound. Before the sound ceases completely, the narrator recognizes the piece as a funeral mass. In this respect, it is interesting to realize that Jasper sings to himself Palestrina's melody to mute some of the Christmas carols performed by the Waits. Palestrina, who was also an organist and composed many masses in his life,<sup>4</sup> developed techniques that had direct impact on Catholic church music and created an example that other composers in the following centuries were expected to follow.

The narrator's thoughts are now stirred in a new direction. A funeral mass is a piece of music connected to death and mourning. After hearing the mass, the narrator's fear for his lover shifts. He claims to hear: "the echoes of tears, and of dim voiced bells tolling monotonously."<sup>5</sup> These sounds come to him after the music of the mass had stopped. These could be potentially vivid images of what happens during a funeral where the mass would be played.

Victoria Margree finds in Nesbit's ghost stories a repeated plot pattern featuring a forbidden love and a male protagonist who competes with a rival, and Nesbit uses the supernatural element in the story to reveal a fatal flaw of the given relationship or marriage.<sup>67</sup> "The Mass for the Dead" falls well into this pattern.

Overwhelmed by the fear for his loved one, Jasper decides to visit Kate. Before he even tries to explain what led him to visiting her, she tells him that she fears she may be going mad. She tells him about a mass for the dead that she heard that night for no reason. But unlike Jasper, she heard it sung. After hearing Kate out, Jasper believes that it was a warning and they both decide to leave, and at first, they spend their time happily.

It is worth mentioning that Jasper at first does not tell Kate that he heard the funeral mass the same night she did. He decides to tell her later on, when they feel safe

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<sup>4</sup> Albert de Vito, "Giovanni Pierluigi Da Palestrina," *The Choral Journal* 9, no. 4 (1969): 22. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23543184>.

<sup>5</sup> Nesbit, "The Mass for the Dead," 72.

<sup>6</sup> Victoria Margree, "The Feminist Orientation in Edith Nesbit's Gothic Short Fiction," *Women's Writing*, vol. 21 (2014), 428. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2014.920136>.

<sup>7</sup> Similarly, Charles Dickens uses the supernatural element in his story "The Signal-Man" as an omen for accidents on the railway.

in the moment. Kate, however, sees a different meaning in the mass. She thinks that it was a warning for them so they would not get married. The narrator is the most struck by the hopelessness in Kate's voice that he has never heard before. Then again, he talks about Kate sobbing at night to describe the misery they were both in. Nesbit also uses Kate's forced laughter to further deepen the depressing atmosphere at this point in the story. The story is thus very much focused on sound of all kinds, not only on music.

In an essay that discusses psychological aspects of the Catholic mass, Shunter states that since the mass is a reminder of Christ's sacrifice and resurrection, it is inevitable connected with guilt of those who are present and listen. Those who attend are expected to ponder upon their sins and the consequences of their actions.<sup>8</sup> Kate feels guilty for leaving his father to face his financial problems, which her arranged marriage would have resolved. According to the Catholic outlook, her decision to abandon him would be likely considered a sin that she is reminded of by the sound of the mass.

As the couple return from honeymoon to their hometown, they decide to visit a Catholic church. As they walk through the door, they both recognize the funeral mass that they heard on their wedding day when they decided to flee. But this time, it is not just music without a direct source. There is an actual funeral service happening in the church. As the sacristan explains, it is simply music composed by the local organist. He also claims that he is hearing it himself for the first time, which means Jasper and Kate could not have heard the music coming from the church previously by simply catching bits of the organist's practice.

After further exchange, they find out from the sacristan that it was Kate's fiancée who the funeral service was held for and whose dead body is present in the coffin. He happened to be in a railway accident which left no survivors. This means that if Kate were travelling with him, she would be dead as well, and the marriage would have led to the

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<sup>8</sup> William Shunter, "Sharing Our Humanity: The Psychological Power of the Catholic Mass," *American Imago* 63, no. 1 (2006): 8 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26305291>.

end of her life. It was Jasper who heard the mass and decided to respond to the warning. He is, therefore, the reason why Kate is still alive. At the end of the story, however, Jasper does not try to say that he was right about his hunch, and he was the one that understood the warning. He simply states that he cannot account for the music and where it came from.

Cadwallader mentions in his study that Nesbit in general did not support the notion of her contemporaries concerning supernatural rooted in the psychology of her characters. He states that further investigation for Nesbit's supernatural in her stories falls short because there is no explanation whatsoever, leaving the characters traumatized by their ghostly experience and the reader clueless.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. 2. Representation of Death

A theme that Margree observes repeatedly in Nesbit's stories is the fear of death and corpses: "It shows me the death (my death) that I continually repress to live."<sup>10</sup> Jasper is convinced that horrible fate awaits Kate if he does not step in. Manlove argues that Nesbit started writing her gothic fiction in reaction to childhood trauma after visiting an exhibition of mummies in Bordeaux and then living in allegedly haunted houses for most of her life. Many of her stories indeed involve striking representations of death and violence.<sup>11</sup>

According to Margree, the encounter with the corpse of the fiancée during his funeral service is not a common occurrence for Nesbit, as she usually portrays the corpses in a gruesome way out of medical or religious context.<sup>12</sup> Nesbit found the difference between what a person once was and what they become after death, succumbing to

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<sup>9</sup> Cadwallader, "Framing the Ghost Story," 16.

<sup>10</sup> Margree, "The Feminist Orientation in Edith Nesbit's Gothic Short Fiction," 429.

<sup>11</sup> Colin Manlove "Fantasy as Witty Conceit: E. Nesbit," *Mosaic: A Journal for the Interdisciplinary Study of Literature* 10, no. 2 (1977): 125. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24780287>.

<sup>12</sup> Victoria Magree, "Edith Nesbit, the Corpse and the Revenant," *British Women's Short Supernatural Fiction, 1860–1930: Our Own Ghostliness* (2019): 90. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-27142-8>.

nothingness, naturally distressing. She then uses the theme and the subject of love as a source of hope a safety.<sup>13</sup>In this particular story, she juxtaposes Kate and her ex-fiancé at the funeral with the knowledge that if Jasper did not interfere with the situation, the service would be held for her as well, which corresponds to the fear of nothingness and death.

#### 4. 3. Summary

In “The Mass for the Dead”, Nesbit uses the natural sadness of the mass for the dead to her advantage. The music of the requiem is apparently easy to recognize for both Kate and Jasper and given the timing, the aural hauntings serve as a warning to both of them. The first time it serves as a warning, the second time it launches a feeling of regret and sorrow in Kate, forcing the couple to return to their hometown. The last time it is played, it is at the actual mass for Kate’s dead fiancé, which closes the narrative. Throughout the story, the music serves as a foreshadowing of somebody’s death, without giving a clear hint of who it could be, thus enhancing the reader’s anxiety and suspense. Eventually the reader finds out that it was just the organist’s music who had nothing to do with the story until the very end, yet the way the characters could have heard it remains utterly unexplained.

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<sup>13</sup> Margree, “The Feminist Orientation in Edith Nesbit’s Gothic Short Fiction,” 429.

## 5. Vernon Lee: “A Wicked Voice”

“A Wicked Voice” tells the story of Magnus, a Norwegian composer who decides to come to Venice in search of inspiration for his opera in making, entitled *Ogier the Dane*. In Italy, the narrator becomes haunted by the voice of a signer, supposedly a castrato, Balthasar Cesari. Throughout the story, however the singer is addressed by his nickname, Zaffirino, reflecting the common practice of nicknames for famous real-life eighteenth-century Italian castrati, including Carlo Broschi (Farinelli) and Francesco Bernardi (Senesino). In a chapter on Lee’s supernatural stories, Tearle mentions that the author was more interested in the psychological properties of a ghost, what it means for the narrator and what it says about their mindset and past.<sup>1</sup> The story is narrated in retrospect as the narrator mentions a strange malady that has possessed him and prevents him from finishing his opera. The reader is provided with the story of Magnus’ and Zaffirino’s encounter and how the composer was bewitched by the castrato’s voice, unable to write his own original music in the future.

### 5. 1. Magnus’ Approach to Opera

Magnus as a composer claims himself to be a follower of Wagner and strives to imitate his style of composing. He is trying to compose a Wagnerian style opera, which, together with the title, as Milsom points out, indicates an opera set in the Scandinavia with characters that are mostly underappreciated with a tragic ending.<sup>2</sup> His audience praises him, however, for successfully recreating the style of the great dead masters of the eighteenth century, such as Handel, Gluck, Mozart, and Rossini. Magnus himself

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<sup>1</sup> Oliver Tearle, “Vernon Lee,” in *The Routledge Handbook to the Ghost Story*, ed. S. Brewster & L. Thurston. (New York, 2017): 151. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315644417>.

<sup>2</sup> Alexandra Milsom, “Manlier than Mozart: The Anti-Wagnerian Stance of “A Wicked Voice”,” *UCLA: Centre for the Study of Women* (2010): 3. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/1517r1q9>

shows a deep hatred towards the work of these composers. According to Magnus, the operas of those composers were mere “high-class singing exercises”.<sup>3</sup>

Magnus is allegedly learning the styles of the above-mentioned great only to reveal where they fall short. Caballero then points out that due to this motivation, he is now losing his individuality as a composer.<sup>4</sup> In connection to this argument, Kehler claims that Lee’s narrative, Wagner is suppressed directly by the eighteenth-century composers, since that is the period and style that Zaffirino represents, and he is the reason Magnus cannot create anymore. She states that Lee treats Wagner’s music in this manner since it did not agree with her own idea of music aesthetic experience.<sup>5</sup> In her opinion, Wagner with his music forced the audience to face their inner demons and past whether they were ready or not, as Caballero argues.<sup>6</sup>

In contrast to Wagnerian opera, the operas of the eighteenth-century involved very different plots, focused much more heavily on ornamentation and vocal virtuosity, and gave prominence to star signers, mostly sopranos, both female and male (castratos), and basically provided vehicles for their skills. Magnus views the human voice as something that possesses the body and soul and enslaves them. He says: “Singer, thing of evil, stupid and wicked slave of the voice, of that instrument which was not invented by the human intellect, but begotten of the body, and which, instead of moving the soul, merely stirs up the dregs of your nature!”<sup>7</sup> He describes the human voice as something impossible to control. It was “created” without a specific given function and those who are or are not born with it were not given a choice. He compares the human voice to a Beast that calls other beasts withing people to awaken, to further stress the innate wickedness of the human voice, presenting it as something that should be feared and avoided.

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<sup>3</sup> Vernon Lee, “A Wicked Voice,” *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* (London, 1890; Project Gutenberg, 2006): 141.

<sup>4</sup> Carlo Caballero, “‘A Wicked Voice’: On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music.” *Victorian Studies* 35, no. 4 (1992): 391. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3828463>.

<sup>5</sup> Grace Kehler, “Occult Charm and Social Ills: Vernon Lee’s “A Wicked Voice” and George Du Maurier’s Castrated Texts,” *Romanticism on the Net* no. 34-35 (2004): 3. <https://doi.org/10.7202/009438ar>.

<sup>6</sup> Caballero, “‘A Wicked Voice’: On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music,” 397.

<sup>7</sup> Lee, “A Wicked Voice,” 143.



## 5. 2. The Ghost of a Castrato

The ghost that Lee introduces in this short story is an opera singer who died many years before the story takes place. Zaffirino was supposed to be well-known as a signer in Italy. As Magnus states in the story, the nickname Zaffirino was assigned to the signer after he was approached by a stranger who gave him a sapphire with strange engravings. People of the time suspected this stranger to be the devil himself. He connects the encounter to the number of achievements that Zaffirino had collected during his relatively short life. This also contributes to the portrayal of the ghost in the story as an evil force.

Maxwell makes a connection between Satan as the tempter and the power of Zaffirino's voice. She argues that as Satan was the one to give Zaffirino his power, it would be the power of attraction. Going back to the description of the human voice as something created without the power of human intellect, attraction as well is something that is out of a person's control.<sup>8</sup>

At the beginning of the story, one character, Count Alvisé, tells a story about an incident connected to Zaffirino that occurred in his family. According to Count, during his life Zaffirino was able to kill a woman simply by singing to her. The singer allegedly serenaded the Count's ancestress three times, which resulted in her sudden death. From the narrative provided by the Count, the reader can assume that it was not the only time that a woman did not survive Zaffirino's performance. After the incident with the countess, Zaffirino had a carriage ready and left the town immediately, which means that he was aware of the possible fatal outcome of the performance as well.

Magnus seems to be the only person that is haunted by Zaffirino's voice but is not the only one that can hear Zaffirino sing. There is one incident described where the voice seems to be coming from a boat filled with musicians, but they all insist that none of them

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<sup>8</sup> Catherine Maxwell, "Sappho, Mary Wakefield, and Vernon Lee's 'A Wicked Voice,'" *The Modern Language Review* 102, no. 4 (2007): 970. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20467544>.

was the singer. There is a space for speculation whether Magnus recognized the voice correctly and it was in fact Zaffirino. But as was already mentioned, there was nobody else that could be the source at that time at that place.

For the rest of the incidents, there is not a sign of anybody else reacting to the voice or noticing it in general. Tearle points out that in Lee's stories, there is often no clear distinction between the supernatural and the psychological. The employment of mad, unstable, and unreliable narrators – another example would be Spiridion Trepka from Lee's famous "Amour Dure" – prevents the reader from making a firm opinion about the realness of the supernatural element.<sup>9</sup> Considering Zaffirino as a ghost, his hauntings could not be targeted towards Magnus personally and specifically, since they could never have met in real life. There could be, however, a grudge held towards somebody like Magnus.

Lee never explicitly states in the story that Zaffirino is in fact a castrato, but the nickname and the descriptions of the voice imply it heavily. In another story, "Winthrop's Adventure", Lee works openly with the figure of an Italian castrato. Caballero views this as a means of suppressing the violent origin of the ghost and the voice itself.<sup>10</sup> The assumptions of Zaffirino's identity come from Magnus' description of the portrait at the beginning in which Zaffirino is supposed to have androgenous features. Even after the incident on the boat where more people heard the voice, there is not a unified opinion whether it was a male or a female voice.

Zaffirino as a castrato must have experienced a significant amount of trauma both as a child and an adult. Kehler mentions in her article that castratos had an ambiguous position in society because they physically did not conform to expected gender norms.<sup>11</sup> Even though they were admired greatly by their audiences, their life was compromised

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<sup>9</sup> Tearle, "Vernon Lee," 148.

<sup>10</sup> Caballero, "A Wicked Voice": On Vernon Lee, Wagner, and the Effects of Music," 389.

<sup>11</sup> Kehler, "Occult Charm and Social Ills: Vernon Lee's "A Wicked Voice" and George Du Maurier's Castrated Texts," 4.

forever. They were not able to have a family or another job, and sometimes they would be perceived as vain creatures dependent solely on the stage.<sup>12</sup>

It is therefore ironic that castratos were “produced” by intentional operations, mostly decided upon by their parents and sometimes by the boys themselves, and the practice was originally instigated by the Church, as it banned women from the stage, while Magnus describes the voice as something not made by the human intellect. Even though the voice cannot be controlled the same way as other constructed musical instrument would be, castratos were not born naturally and were created by people for a specific purpose.

### 5. 3. Individual Encounters

#### 5. 3. 1. The Dream

The first time Magnus hears Zaffirino’s voice is in his dream. He finds himself in a space reminiscent of a ballroom. The author first sets the scene and describe the visual attributes of the scene. After she describes the ballroom, she does not give any further visual description of the actions taking place. Shortly after the beginning of the dream, he starts hearing sounds that remind him of somebody playing a mandolin. Then they slowly start to resemble human voice. The singing is very mild at first and quiet, gradually gets more powerful. It is suddenly cut by a woman’s scream. Magnus replays the entire death incident, as recounted by the Count, in his dream, but he only tells the reader about the growing intensity of Zaffirino’s voice and about the shriek that ends the singing.

In her essay, Pulham makes a point about Lee’s view of the role of cries in music. Lee thought that the cry was an equal means of expressing opinion just as words, if not a more powerful one. In her opinion, words during a performance are too overwhelmed by the music that it rends people speechless and leaves them with the only way of expressing

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<sup>12</sup> Kehler, “Occult Charm and Social Ills: Vernon Lee’s ‘A Wicked Voice’ and George Du Maurier’s Castrated Texts,” 5

their emotions possible – the cry, also making it the most expressive thing in that moment.<sup>13</sup> Taking this concept into consideration, one could connect it with the fact that Magnus struggles with his opera’s music. He says that he has finished the words long time ago, but he is having a hard time with the melody.

Only after the shriek, one of the characters lights a lamp in the room and the reader is offered some visual description again, but it offers only a flat image of the scene. When Lee returns to further narration of the following events, she picks up using aural input only. The reader is told about the splash of water when the rest of the characters attempted to wake the dead woman and further confused talking and exclamations. At this point, Magnus wakes up startled.

He realizes that the previous scene was just a dream, and he decides to work on his opera again. While he is working, he hears the voice once again. However, he informs the reader that the voice only appears as an echo in his mind, and it is not coming from anywhere around him. Like in the dream, the voice starts as very subtly gradually becoming more powerful. The reader is not further informed how the sound in Magnus’s mind ended.

### 5. 3. 2. Venice

Magnus is determined to finish his opera and find the inspiration that he has been struggling with. He seeks complete silence and solitude to hopefully come up with the main melody of his opera.<sup>14</sup> He is once again trying to think about one of the melodies that he would want to use for his piece when the voice appears again. He is sitting in a gondola. This time, however, it seems that the voice is coming from the outside. Magnus even asks the gondolier to bring him to the shore where he believes the voice is coming from, which would mean that the voice had a singular recognizable source it could be

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<sup>13</sup> Pulham, “The Castrato and the Cry in Vernon Lee’s *Wicked Voices*,” 426.

<sup>14</sup> This decision seems like the one made in “The Open Door” where the boy affected by the sounds is kept in complete silence and alone.

traced to. When they arrive at the shore, the singing ceases. It is not replaced by silence as it is in “The Horse of the Invisible”, but Lee instead uses sounds that are natural to the narrator’s surroundings, such as chirping of the crickets. After some time, the voice emerges again, only this time it reminds Magnus of a mocking laughter. Then another pause follows.

When the narrator decides to think about his opera some more, it starts again. After Magnus gives the gondolier another direction to follow the voice, it is disturbed by a military band as the narrator arrives to an open-air ballroom. Lee merges the music of the band with the sounds of people eating and talking, fully disturbing the image of the voice that should be haunting the narrator. The narrator frantically orders the musicians who are about to pack their instruments and go home to play for him some more tunes. Magnus changes his approach of dealing with the voice from searching for the source to surrounding himself by other sounds in order to escape it. But even this tactic proves futile as he continues to hear the voice whenever he is trying to work.

Here, as it was mentioned in connection to “The Open Door” previously, Scarborough’s observation that the environment of the narrator is not as important as it is always portrayed subjectively according to the narrator’s feelings proves pertinent again.<sup>15</sup> Lee brings the crickets forward as a replacement of the human voice, then she shows the band as a forced disruption for the narrator.

Even though the narrator should naturally be fearful of the voice, since its presence has direct impact on his work, he still considers it to be ridiculous and stupid. He continues to claim that he hates the art of singing and labels the haunting voice to be ridiculous singing-exercises. He is trying to convince himself that it is somebody or something tangible who keeps haunting him as a joke.

Eventually, Magnus is able to work on his opera without triggering the voice right away. On the other hand, he is disturbed by the sounds of other musicians playing under

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<sup>15</sup> Scarborough, “The Gothic Romance,” 15.

his window. Suddenly, the voice emerges again. But this time, Magnus is not the only person hearing the voice. After the singing stops, there is a round of applause and people are asking for the signer. The voice seemed to have come from a boat of musicians but all of them claim to not be the signer. This scene could potentially mean that the voice is coming from a real ghost and not from Magnus' imagination or his subconscious. It could also be a combination of his subconscious and a real ghost, in a way reminiscent of "The Horse of the Invisible."

But as the reader is informed later, the mysterious singer remains the subject of discussion for a couple of days after the singing on the boat was heard. Everybody seems to have their own theory, but nobody claims to have encountered that voice before. Only Magnus recognized it from previous incidents. Even though the ghost's voice could be heard by other people as well, the target of the haunting is definitely Magnus. People are not able to fully agree on whether the voice was a man or woman, again showing the ambiguity of a castrato's voice.

As the story progresses, Magnus admits that he is now thinking about the voice more and more. It escalates to the point where he actually longs to hear the voice again. It also brings his mind back to the older opera pieces that he is supposed to hate so much. He finds himself wondering how those melodies would sound if they were sung in that voice.

### 5. 3. 3. Padua

Eventually, Magnus decides to visit a doctor, since at this moment in the story he finds himself incapable of working altogether. The doctor's orders are rest and quiet away from Venice. He feels relieved thinking he left the voice behind in Venice as he moves to Padua for the time being. He decides to attend a mass in a local church and feels absolutely enchanted by the music. He claims that he has never heard such a mass or a piece of music in general before. The way he describes the mass, however, seems rather

chaotic. He mentions sudden bursts of melody, grunting of the priests answering to the squealing of children, lacking a given singular time and tune. He labels the music as something that “would have enlivened a witches’ meeting, or rather some mediaeval Feast of Fools.”<sup>16</sup> None of those comparisons really fit the atmosphere of a Catholic church.

As the description continues, he mentions two names – Guadagni and Tartini. Gaetano Guadagni was a famous Italian castrato who used to sing in Padua in the Church of St Anthony where the mass itself is taking place.<sup>17</sup> Giuseppe Tartini was a celebrated violinist, composer, and a performer at St. Anthony’s at the same time when Guadagni was singing in the local choir.<sup>18</sup>

After the narrator listens to the mass, he decides to visit St. Anthony’s again to hear it one more time. He also decides to write a rough draft of the cantata that the devil made for Tartini. The piece that Magnus is talking about is Tartini’s Sonata in G Minor which was nicknamed “The Devil’s Trill.” Tartini wrote it after the Devil allegedly appeared to him in his dream and played a sonata for him. The sonata was supposed to be a piece of the utmost virtuosity, something that Tartini has never heard before. “The Devil’s Trill” is his most known piece and one of the most complicated parts of the violin repertoire in general. However, Tartini himself was not very pleased with the result, since his recreation did not reach the level of the piece that the Devil played.<sup>19</sup> By working with these specific references, Lee again makes a connection between virtuosic musical abilities and devilry.

The cathedral is described as empty, and when Magnus was walking towards the church, he could hear faint sounds of the organ. When he arrives, only a priest is present. Lee emphasized the emptiness by the loud snap of the priest’s book and the clatter while

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<sup>16</sup> Lee, “A Wicked Voice,” 161.

<sup>17</sup> Patricia Howard, “Guadagni in the Dock: A Crisis in the Career of a Castrato,” *Early Music* 27, no. 1 (1999): 91. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3128594>.

<sup>18</sup> Pierpaolo Polzonetti, “Tartini and the Tongue of Saint Anthony,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 67, no. 2 (2014): 434. <https://doi.org/10.1525/jams.2014.67.2.429>.

<sup>19</sup> Christiano da Cruz Ribeiro e Rodrigues, “Giuseppe Tartini, Style,” *Giuseppe Tartini’s “Devil’s Trill” Sonata: An Arrangement and Recording for Solo Violin* (2019): 6,

he drops his stick, which normally is not a prominent sound at all. Liggins claims that the atmosphere of the cathedral in itself would be frightening enough. Magnus sees the vast space in the light of the candles as if it were already falling apart. This atmosphere of absolute silence is then broken by a violent sound of the organ. The voice is heard again this time interacting with the sound of the organ. Both the sound of the organ and the voice come to an abrupt end. In combination with the organ music, the space leaves the impression of a burial combining the sacred place, the music, and the crypt.<sup>20</sup>

As DeMarko notes, castratos were first meant to be employed by the church and sing during services, and if they proved to be good enough for the stage, they moved to the opera.<sup>21</sup> There is therefore a chance that Magnus might have also come in contact with a castrato during the mass that he enjoyed earlier, triggering a response from Zaffirino. This time the narrator does not have any motivation to search for the source. He describes himself as "...supremely happy, and yet as if I were dying..."<sup>22</sup>

As the narrator flees back to the villa, he mentions hearing the sounds of nature, such as birdsong, along with the melody of Ave Maria coming from the church that he has just escaped out of. When escaping the church, however, he was supposed to be the last person in there according to what he saw, and he did not mention any sounds of the bells while he was there either.

He returns to the villa, and it is dark outside when he leans on one of the windows. As he looks out, he says: "What music, even Wagner's, or that great singer of starry nights, the divine Schumann, what music could ever compare with the great silence, with this great concert of voiceless things that sing within one's soul?"<sup>23</sup> Suddenly, once again the sound appears through the night. Similarly to the scene on the gondola, the voice

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<sup>20</sup> Liggins, "The Rapture of Old Houses: Dust, Decay and Sacred Space in Vernon Lee's Italian Ghost Stories," 135.

<sup>21</sup> Laura E. DeMarco "The Fact of the Castrato and the Myth of the Countertenor," *The Musical Quarterly* 86, no. 1 (2002): 175. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3601006>.

<sup>22</sup> Lee, "A Wicked Voice," 163.

<sup>23</sup> Lee, "A Wicked Voice," 166.



has a source, which Magnus is able to roughly identify as the inside of the villa. When the voice ceases, he claims: “This silence made me feel sick.”<sup>24</sup> This indicates a substantial change of attitude, as before he was able to relax since he thought that the voice would not follow him into Padua.

Then the sounds start again, now it seems coming from the next room. After fumbling with the door, he enters what seems to be the villa’s ballroom. It is very dark in there and Magnus’s light is not sufficient for him to see very clearly, until one of the big chandeliers turns on. He sees a man leaning over a harpsichord, a woman laying on a sofa, and a small group of people around them. Magnus realises it is the dream he had before, about Zaffirino’s killing of the noblewoman, but this time the reader is given the visual as well.

Liggins points out that it is the emptiness of the vast ballroom that contributes to the uncanny atmosphere of the scene. The description of the room, given from Magnus’ point of view and with phrases such as: “...like gigantic spiders, the big chandeliers rotated slowly...” and “...piece of ceiling with the goddess and the green peacock...”, suggest that the narrator might have taken a leap back in time.<sup>25</sup>

Magnus recognizes the voice immediately. When he listens for a bit longer, he says: “But I recognized now what seemed to have been hidden from me till then, that this voice was what I cared most for in all the wide world.”<sup>26</sup> Magnus’ approach to the human voice has clearly hanged significantly, from being an evil, corrupt phenomenon that needs to be tamed by composer’s hand and does not have anything to do with humanity’s intellect, to the most precious thing in the world.

He describes Zaffirino’s voice as lacking any signs of youth and clearness. Magnus then hears multiple sobs coming from the ballroom as Zaffirino sings. The voice

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<sup>24</sup> Lee, “A Wicked Voice,” 167.

<sup>25</sup> Liggins, “The Rapture of Old Houses: Dust, Decay and Sacred Space in Vernon Lee’s Italian Ghost Stories,” 136.

<sup>26</sup> Lee, “A Wicked Voice,” 169.

is entangled with the sounds played on the piano. Magnus claims Zaffirino's piano accompaniment to be intense and merciless and states that: "...I felt my body melt even as wax in the sunshine..."<sup>27</sup> in reaction to the performance he experiences.

When Zaffirino arrives at the cadenza of his piece, Magnus decides that his singing needs to be stopped. Historically, a cadenza was the part of the piece where the performer was expected to show all of their skill. They would either be written by the composer and would be one of the hardest parts of the piece, or they would be left empty for the performer to improvise.<sup>28</sup> The heightened intensity of the singing would then mean more deadly power and potentially more damage caused both to Magnus himself and to the woman on the sofa. Magnus realizes that sheer presence of the voice would be deadly for him and runs from the ballroom with the voice still audible and following him. He again hears the woman shriek right before she dies, with Zaffirino's triumphant final note of the piece.

When he manages to enter one of the rooms in attempt to flee, he finds there a broken harpsichord. Magnus then recalls: "The one thing that mattered was the phrase that kept moving in my head, the phrase of that unfinished cadence which I had heard but an instant before."<sup>29</sup> He attempts to play the melody on the harpsichord but due to the broken strings, a "laughable and dreadful"<sup>30</sup> sound spreads through the room. This provokes in Magnus a sheer feeling of horror and in reaction to that, he jumps out of the window and runs away from the house into the fields.

In the conclusion of the story, Magnus claims that according to other people, he has recovered. He can compose again but he claims that the music that he writes is not his, even if he has never heard it before, suggesting he is possessed by somebody else's art. At the end of the story, he expresses the wish to hear the wicked voice of Zaffirino

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<sup>27</sup> Lee, "A Wicked Voice," 169.

<sup>28</sup> Joseph P. Swain, "Form and Function of the Classical Cadenza," *The Journal of Musicology* 6, no. 1 (1988): 27. <https://doi.org/10.2307/763668>.

<sup>29</sup> Lee, "A Wicked Voice," 170-171.

<sup>30</sup> Lee, "A Wicked Voice," 171.

once again, despite the fact that it was the power of the castrato's voice that now prevents him from composing what he would deem as his music.

There is a curious resemblance between Magnus's situation and the story of inspiration behind "The Devil's Trill" sonata, and the connection is likely intentionally introduced by Lee. Tartini heard the devil's melody, which he then failed to recreate after waking up from his dream, and he deemed all of his following music as inadequate in comparison to the Devil's music.<sup>31</sup> When Magnus attempts to finish the phrase that was sang by Zaffirino, the only sound he hears is of the broken strings. From that point on, all of his music seems inadequate when compared to Zaffirino's melodies. Furthermore, he longs to be able to hear the voice once again, similarly to Tartini who wished he could write down the actual Devil's Trill while listening to the Devil playing again.

Importantly, it is mentioned at the beginning of the story that Zaffirino was able to kill a woman by singing to her only three times. In Magnus' case, it is more than three times. Excluding the dream and the moments where he feels like the sound is not external, the voice is heard four times in total – on the gondola, when he is looking out of his window, in St. Anthony's after the mass, and during the final encounter with Zaffirino himself in the villa. Perhaps the longer resilience is caused by the difference in gender, perhaps the ghost of the castrato had other intentions with Magnus.

## 5. 4. Summary

In "A Wicked Voice", Lee applies a great amount of her knowledge of music, and the story is filled with numerous references from the world of classical music which give the overall narrative and the individual scenes a deeper meaning. She uses the voice of a

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<sup>31</sup> Cristiano da Cruz Ribeiro e Rodrigues, "Giuseppe Tartini, Style," *Giuseppe Tartini's "Devil's Trill" Sonata: An Arrangement and Recording for Solo Violin* (2019), 6

castrato, i.e. of a person with a clearly traumatic past who was sacrificed in the service of music, as a means of haunting a composer who despises the human voice.

She introduces the element of the supernatural when Magnus mentions that Zaffirino can kill with his voice after singing to somebody for three times, which then creates more tension each time the voice is heard. It is also not completely clear whether Magnus is in fact the only person who can hear the voice, which could mean that he has gone mad, or whether the people who witness the performance on the gondola actually hear the very same voice.

Eventually, Magnus is overpowered by the voice of Zaffirino but manages escape in the last moment. Even though he apparently survives the effects of the deadly voice and claims to have been cured, he remains obsessed with the voice and is unable to create properly for the rest of his life, suggesting the castrato and with him the eighteenth-century tradition managed to disintegrate the Wagnerian who showed them disdain, and turn him into their instrument.

## 6. Conclusion

This thesis attempted to outline some of the ways in which sound can be used as means for creating tension within a ghost story in connection to the narrative situation, the responses of the characters, and the overall outlook of the tale, including the nature of the haunting and its philosophical implications.

Each of the stories has a prevalent feature or element that it applies in terms of building tension via sounds, but there are also some prominent shared features. All of the stories apply repetition of the sound, and each encounter leaves the characters more unsettled. In all the four cases, the authors also use the element of movement. It is most prevalent in Hodgson's "The Horse of the Invisible" where the apparition keeps running around the house and moving in it. In "The Open Door", Oliphant combines the sound movement with Willie's cries but since the child ghost only repeats the way it moves it appears less haunting since it is predictable. Lee solely moves the source of the sound around to further confuse Magnus but unlike in "The Open Door" and "The Horse of the Invisible", Magnus does not hear Zaffirino move from place to place. It is least noticeable in Nesbit's "The Mass for the Dead" since Jasper only suspects the source of the sound to be somewhere outside of his house.

In two cases, the stories work with not only with human utterances and cries and animal sounds but with music. Lee and Nesbit include references to works of music from different periods that are connected to the main character's profession and give additional depth to the supernatural elements that reader who lacks the needed further knowledge about the subject may not notice. "A Wicked Voice" is intentionally built around specific musical cultures and the more the reader knows about the history of the opera, the greater the enjoyment of the nuances of the story will be. In Nesbit's story, the connection to musical history and to a specific musical culture are not as crucial as in "A Wicked Voice", however, she works with several specific references, be it the ominous Christmas

ballad “The Mistletoe Bough” or the phenomenon of the Waits, and the mass of the dead referred in the title is used to expand the topic of guilt.

Finally, each of the stories contrasts the sounds of the haunting with the sounds of their surroundings. Hodgson works with dead silence to create the atmosphere of anticipation and the sounds of blood rushing and hastened breathing are employed to express the fear of the characters and communicate it to readers. Nesbit contrasts the mass at the beginning with the carols and Christmas songs performed by musicians outside of the narrator’s house. Oliphant adds the sounds the characters and are used to, such as rustling leaves, nervous animals, and the flowing river, in opposition to the sounds from the world of the dead. Lee in her story uses all of the elements mentioned above depending on the scene and Magnus’ mental state – dead silence when he encounters Zaffirino at the villa, the sound of water at the gondola and the musicians while he is trying to escape the voice in Venice.

These four stories are naturally not the only representatives of the genre that work inventively and efficiently with sound, and many more would be just as worthy and interesting to analyse with regard to their aural aspects, but it is not possible to cover them all in a study of this limited scope. This thesis therefore decided to focus on stories that all belong to the British canon and exemplify different trends of the genre during several decades.

Although more critical attention has been recently devoted to the works of all authors included, they can all be considered less-researched figures of British literary history, and this thesis also adds to a more nuanced appreciation of their oeuvre by exploring the way they employ sound as part of the narrative techniques and strategies in order to enhance the overall effect and expand the possible interpretation of the stories. All of them also provide ample topics for further research: be it in reference to the sounds, such as the specific musical references in Lee and Nesbit, in relation to the development of the ghost story genre and its intersection with others, or on the level of more general

concerns, such as the gender dynamics within the context of the period, which are remarkable in all the chosen examples.

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