

What are the important characteristics of an effective ghost story essay sample

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Gothic horror is a genre that has remained popular throughout history. The genre originally came about when books were introduced with castles and they were based gothic architecture, art and poetry- thus the genre was given its name. It's a lot more than just the locations; gothic horror tends to include trap doors, insanity, crumbling buildings, ancestral curses and strange events. Gothic horror has influenced a lot of modern day films and books and was even a big impact on the Victorians- they were big lovers of short, macabre tales.

It is said that Charles Dickens read them as a teenager and they influenced the gloominess in his works. Three examples of gothic horror stories are: 'The Red Room' by H. G. Wells (1896), 'Farthing House' by Susan Hill and 'The Axe' by Penelope Fitzgerald (1970s). 'The Red Room' is an interesting title that conjures up many images in the readers minds. The use of the colour red can create images of blood, danger, passion, love, anger, stop- most of which are appropriate for the ghost story setting whereas 'Farthing House' does not have the same effect.

It can create the image of perhaps an old, gothic house but is not particularly strong. It almost gives no clue as to what the story is about. 'The Axe' tends to make people think of a literal axe which instantly gives people that horror story feel. Though, of course, 'The Axe' can be taken two ways in the sense that to fire someone from their job can be referred to as axing them or it could be an actual axe. All three of the stories start in different manners, which sets them apart. 'The Red Room' begins with speech; 'I can assure you... that it will take a very tangible ghost to frighten me'.

This instantly leaves you in no doubt that the story is going to be a ghost story. The rest of the opening includes a man with a 'withered arm', a man with a 'shade' and an 'old woman' which creates the spooky atmosphere from the start. The use of odd characters is made plain and obvious and keeps the reader captured in the ghostly feeling. 'Farthing House' also starts with a sense of mysteriousness because the character starts by telling the reader that she has 'never told you any of this before' and that 'you will be prey to enough anxieties without my adding ghosts to them. She instantly tells us something about the person she's writing it to also, they are pregnant- 'the time before the birth of a child one is so very vulnerable. '

However, the story quickly flicks to the past where it is described to having been a 'beautiful day'. This keeps the reader interested by wondering what it is that she has to say, and wonder why the mood keeps changing constantly. Compared to the two before 'The Axe', which has the most sinister title, starts in a completely different way. For a start the entire story starts with '...' which is a very unusual story, it makes the reader feel as though they are missing something.

The beginning paragraph is written very matter-of-fact and report-like using words like 'discouraging trading figures', 'small firm', 'Company reports', 'democratic style' and 'your other enterprises'. From this you can gather that the narrator is talking to his company boss, especially since the person he is writing to has given him the task of 'speaking to those who were to be asked to leave'. The start to this story even contains useless information not

usually used in a ghost story like the fact that Singlebury ' managed to retain every year the complimentary desk calendar sent to us by Dino's... '

Having a story start in such a way creates a sense of confusion in the readers mind and they are intrigued and have to read more. The beginning of the story is quite different to what you expect in the title. There are hints dropped in the first parts though, like how the office smelt of damp but ' not the ordinary smell of damp' or that the building had once been owned by the ' Admiralty and that relatives had been allowed to wait or queue there in hope of getting news of those missing at sea' which leads on to Singlebury saying that the disappointment had ' permeated the building like a corrosive gas'.

It also uses words such as ' disappointment', ' morbid', death', ' vanished' and ' damp'. Each story has strong main ' narrator' characters, all of which are actually in first person. This helps create a one-sided view of events, which helps create suspense and keep the readers interest. However, each character is very different and thus cannot be said to be ' typical of ghost stories'. ' The red room' has a character who believes himself to be very strong and confident because he believes that it will take a ' very tangible ghost' to frighten him. The whole story is written solely in past tense.

In the first paragraph he is standing ' before the fire with a glass' in his hand. This creates a strong character stance as if he is standing strong and powerful before the fire. He talks confidently and constantly dismisses the idea of ghosts in the way that he says ' never a ghost have I seen as yet' and

he seems unafraid by having to get to the room alone when he just says 'very well'. However, things start to change rapidly with the character because as he is going through the castle on his own he slowly starts getting scared.

He even says that he 'must confess that the oddness of these three old pensioners... and the deep-toned, old-fashioned furniture of the housekeeper's room in which they forgathered affected' him. He describes the people in the house as 'spectral', which also suggests that he is rather scared of them. As he is going through the castle he describes shadows as 'cowering and quivering', which is strong personification showing the narrators state of mind. He is becoming uneasy and quite afraid. He even says he 'fancied' he heard a rustling, which is a definite sign of fear if he can hear things that aren't even there. He 'stands rigid' with fear also in parts and he reaches for the revolver in his pocket.

Now, obviously this shows the narrator not to be as brave as he makes out to be. 'Farthing House' has a character who also begins as very strong and level-minded, but she remains this way throughout the story. It is written mostly in the past tense but has parts at the beginning and end that are present tense. She never pretends, at any point, that she is not afraid of what she has seen, but does try to rationalise events. This can be seen when she hears the sound of a baby crying but then decides that 'the noise had come from the television then'.

She often makes references to the fact that she did not actually know what was going to happen, which proves that she is a reliable narrator. She says that 'it would be too easy to claim that' she 'had sensed something sinister' and that she had been 'shrouded at once in the atmosphere of a haunted house'. She tells the story completely how she saw it and that makes her more believable and credible. 'The axe' has a very factual main character who starts off fairly detached and writing it very fact-like but then the whole text becomes less report like until right at the end.

It is written mostly in the past tense with small amounts of the present tense. The character seems quite reliable but then you have to wonder whether or not he's actually insane or not toward the end. At one point, towards the end of the story he sees his coat as being 'covered with blood' and then he says 'the illusion or impression passed' which leads the reader to believe that the narrator is becoming just a little odd. It could also be said that at the end when he sees Singlebury that it is also all in his mind. The settings of the stories are all linked in some ways but are very different in other ways.

In 'The Axe' and 'Farthing House' the buildings were once used as something else in the past and are sinister mainly because of that fact- or it is a big reason for it. However, in 'The Red Room' it is a very typical Gothic Horror setting. It is set in an old castle and in a so-called haunted room. The room is decorated ornately but in an 'old-fashioned' way. In 'Farthing House' there are always moments of horror followed by moments of normality. The old people's home of Farthing House is set just down the road

from a graveyard, which adds to the horror and typical gothic feel of the story.

In 'The Axe' the building is old and has been used before and, at the end, is empty and 'dim', which is extremely common of gothic horror because it gives an element of fear. It is quite common for people to be afraid when they are alone and in the dark. The authors of the stories have used many effects to create tension and fear. As mentioned before in 'The Red Room' Wells uses personification to add fear to the story. He describes the shadows as; 'crouching', 'stirring', 'shifting' and says that they 'cowered and quivered' which gives the impression that the shadows are following him ready to 'waylay' him.

He describes his candle as 'a little tongue of light in its vastness', which is an interesting and powerful metaphor. Wells uses many of these to put across his point and make everything more vivid and sinister. He also uses repetition at the beginning of the story to create an eerie atmosphere. The line 'it is your own choosing' is repeated a few times as is 'this night of all nights'. To repeat the same sentences adds the effect of mad people or that they are trying to change his mind, which is very typical of the gothic horror genre.

You begin to feel sympathetic towards the character at the end because of how he screams and basically gets 'battered' around the room and is knocked out. In 'Farthing House' there are many words used that create an eerie atmosphere at times like: 'anxious', 'sinister', 'haunted', 'depressed',

'unsettled', 'frissons', 'oppressed', 'inconsolably hopeless' and 'distress and agitation'. All of these words create an uneasy or gloomy feeling. The author drops hints throughout with the fact that there is the baby crying and the feelings she gets about the building.

The tone and mood of the stories are generally pretty gloomy and depressing with fear mixed in with it- which obviously fits the genre and would have to be essential to a ghost story. The ending of each of the stories are pretty similar in the sense that they all have a twist at the end. The tension lowers in the story until right at the end where it rises again. 'The Red Room' ends with the narrator deciding that there actually was no ghost and that it was fear that 'followed' him 'through the corridor' and 'fought against' him in the room.

This could be seen as Wells showing that though it appears to be a ghost story it really wasn't or that the character is sticking with his original story that ghosts don't exist. However, 'Farthing House' ends with a twist on the fact that the ghost came back and took killed someone's baby, forcing that baby's mother to steal a child. You did not expect such an ending because it seems as if the ghost part of the story is already over. The last sentence seems rather strange because the narrator seems almost unaffected by what the ghost has done and simply says: 'But, I imagine that she has gone, now that she has what she was looking for'.

In "The axe" the story comes to a climax at the end with the man locking himself in his office and the ghost of Singlebury in the other room. The fact

that he describes Singlebury as having ' eyes that were thickly filmed over' adds to the fear in the end and yet the last paragraph is somehow comical to think of a man locked in his office refusing to leave. The most important elements of the gothic horror genre are suspense, clues and well-defined characters. Usually these are strong, or seemingly strong, characters. They almost certainly have a twist or major climax at the end to leave you reeling.

All of the above three mentioned stories involve old buildings with a history of a depressing nature. ' The Red Room' is the story that I believe to be most successful. Though I did not think so at first, under closer analysis I have found that it has some wonderful language and use of language throughout which gives it the creepy factor that it needs. The other two are successful in their own rights but ' The Red Room' has more description and seems to be a bit deeper. It seems to be the most typical ghost story but in reality they all have strong elements of the gothic horror genre throughout.