THE HUMAN AS A GHOST: DECENTERING IN GOTHIC NARRATIVES AND THE SPECTRAL TURN WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO *THE WOMAN IN BLACK*

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Abstract

This paper examines the Gothic tradition's tendency to decenter the human subject, with particular attention to Susan Hill's The Woman in Black (1983). Drawing on Jacques Derrida's concept of the "spectral turn" in Specters of Marx, as well as contemporary Gothic theory, the paper argues that ghosts in Gothic literature do not merely represent supernatural antagonists but instead destabilize the human subject, revealing its spectral nature. Through an analysis of Arthur Kipps' haunted subjectivity, the role of Jennet Humfrye's ghost, and the agency of nonhuman environments such as Eel Marsh House and the marshes, the paper demonstrates that Hill's novel decenters human authority and underscores the ghostly condition of human existence. The study concludes that the Gothic foregrounds human fragility, positioning the human as only one one spectral presence among others in a decentered world.

Keywords: Gothic, decentering, posthumanism, spectral turn

Introduction

The Gothic has long been recognized as a literary mode that unsettles human certainties, particularly by foregrounding the presence of ghosts, haunted landscapes, and inexplicable phenomena. As Fred Botting notes, the Gothic is marked by "a writing of excess, transgressing limits, breaking boundaries" (1). One of its key transgressions is the disruption of the stable human subject, often through the presence of ghosts and haunting that collapse distinctions between life and death, past and present.

Recent theoretical discourse, especially Derrida's Specters of Marx (1993), has placed ghosts at the center of philosophical inquiry, inaugurating what critics call the "spectral turn." The ghost becomes a figure that unsettles human-centered temporality and ontology. Julian Wolfreys emphasizes that "to be is always to be

haunted" (xviii), while Avery Gordon describes haunting as a "constituent element of modern social life" (7). Within this framework, the Gothic emerges not as an escapist genre but as one that insists on the fragility and spectrality of human existence.

Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* exemplifies this Gothic tradition of decentering. While ostensibly a ghost story rooted in classic Gothic tropes, the novel dramatizes the diminished authority of human beings in the face of spectral and nonhuman agencies. This paper explores how Hill's narrative reveals the human as ghostly, destabilized by trauma, memory, and forces beyond comprehends Narration.

Destabilizing Human Identity

Gothic fiction has often depicted human beings as fragile and unstable, caught in the grip of forces they cannot master. In works such as Mary Shelley's Frankenstein or Emily Bronte's Wuthering Heights, characters are spectralized by guilt, trauma, or obsession. The Gothic thus renders the human as a haunted subject, always already disrupted by what lies beyond rational control.

Derrida's spectral logic provides a useful lens here. For Derrida, the ghost is a paradoxical figure, "neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive" (63). This liminality decenters the human by revealing that identity itself is never secure, always shaped by absence as much as presence. In Gothic literature, the ghost functions not merely as an intruder but as a figure that exposes the ghostliness of the human condition itself.

The Ghost beyond Characterization

Jennet Humfrye, the titular Woman in Black, is more than a ghostly antagonist; she is a narrative force that exceeds human comprehension. Her appearances are marked by inevitability—each sighting results in the death of a child. She cannot be exorcised, reasoned with, or morally contained. In this way, the ghost displaces Arthur Kipps, reducing him to a victim of her power.

The ghost also functions as a destabilizer of narrative itself. As Kelly Hurley observes, Gothic horror frequently involves "the collapse of the human into the nonhuman" (3). In Hill's novel, the Woman in Black resists incorporation into rational storytelling, leaving the narrative unresolved and perpetually haunted.

Arthur Kipps as a Spectral Subject

Although Arthur Kipps survives his encounter, he emerges as a spectralized subject. His trauma—the loss of his wife and child in the accident engineered by the ghost—haunts him permanently. His narrative voice, framed as a belated recollection, underscores Derrida's notion that the past never disappears but continues to structure the present. Avery Gordon's claim that haunting is "the

means by which abusive systems of power make themselves known" (xvi) resonates here: Kipps is haunted by both personal trauma and a broader recognition of human impotence before spectral forces.

Kipps' act of narration itself is ghostly. In telling his story, he does not exorcise the past but reanimates it. His words summon the ghost again, making him a medium rather than a master of narrative.

Haunted Spaces and Nonhuman Agencies

The marshes, fog, and tidal rhythms surrounding Eel Marsh House play an equally spectral role in the novel. As Botting reminds us, the Gothic landscape often functions as "an agent of power and transgression" (3). Here, the environment overwhelms the human, engulfing Kipps in silence, darkness, and disorientation.

The landscape is not passive but active: the sea mists disorient, the tides isolate, and the marshes threaten to consume. These nonhuman agencies reinforce the decentering of the human by situating human existence within forces that are alien, inhuman, and ultimately indifferent.

Decentering the Human

Taken together, these elements demonstrate how *The Woman in Black* dramatizes the decentering of human subjectivity. Jennet Humfrye is not reducible to a moral category of victim or villain; she remains irreducibly spectral. Kipps is neither hero nor rational observer but a haunted man whose narrative testifies to human fragility. The marshes and fog assume agency, further undermining anthropocentrism.

The novel thus enacts a Gothic post humanism: it resists the centrality of the human, insisting instead on the haunting presence of spectral and nonhuman forces. Wolfreys argues, "every step forward is a step haunted" (xviii). In Hill's novel, every human act is shadowed by the ghost's inevitable return.

Conclusion

Susan Hill's *The Woman in Black* exemplifies the Gothic's capacity to decenter human identity and foreground the spectral turn. By representing humans as ghostly, Hill underscores the precariousness of human presence in a world shaped by absence, trauma, and nonhuman power. The ghost, the haunted landscape, and the traumatized narrator together destabilize anthropocentric narratives of mastery and control.

Ultimately, the novel suggests that the human condition is itself spectral. To be human is to be haunted: by memory, by trauma, by forces beyond comprehension. In Hill's Gothic world, the human is never central but always displaced, a ghost among ghosts.

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