

# Old Haunts, dead is so archaic

Traditional ghosts in popular culture are being replaced by images of pathology and bodily decay. What does this reveal about our changing attitudes to death? by Sarah Khan

Once upon a time there were ghosts, remember? A direct line of descent can be traced from these venerable spooks to the autopsied and unburied corpses that now appear so often in novels, films and, in particular, television series such as CSI (2000–ongoing) and Bones (2005–ongoing). Wounded or half-decayed bodies are laid out before pathologists who solve criminal cases with their acute knowledge of the chemistry of death. Only then can the maltreated mortal remains be laid to rest, having rendered one last service to the living. In this gruesomely functional way, these corpses are the blood relations of the ghosts of old, speaking from a stage between life and death. What has changed, however, is the distance from which we interrogate and observe these undead figures. We no longer scream or run away. On the contrary, autopsies and examinations are presented as an aesthetic, sacred spectacle. This may point to a not-insignificant cultural shift in attitudes towards death. In Western culture there are standards in place dictating that the dead must be buried or burned, that bodies must be removed relatively quickly, that the dead must rest in peace and that the living are to respect this peace at all costs. But, in a kind of dialectic manoeuvre, culture came up with a way of circumventing this pact of peace – by inventing ghost stories in which the very things that are not meant to happen, do: ghosts and ghouls climb out of their graves; they rattle their bones and clank their chains; they turn night into day; they walk through walls; they enter our houses and scare us to death. In other words, they engage in more or less everything denied to them by the laws of nature and usually forbidden to us in dealing with dead bodies: noisemaking, public display, acts of physical and mental intimacy. But why do ghosts do this?

Often, it seems to stir up fear and get us to leave the dead alone. Fear is the mark of

quality for a good ghost story: the key saleable effect on which the authors of such tales depend. Stephen King, for example, finds it hard to do without utterly despicable characters in his novels. He has imagined a range of phantoms that look quite unlike the classical apparition in a nightshirt (which in fact represents the white linen shroud). King's inventions are evil through and through. They are non-human, sometimes objects or hybrids: a car, a bear, a clown, a cuddly toy. They possess a bestial psyche and a tenacity that sees them persist until the very end of the story. King clearly tells us what to expect from ghosts: nothing good. But, compared with more recent takes on 'the other side', such as those seen in M. Night Shyamalan's feature film *The Sixth Sense* (1999) or the American television series *Six Feet Under* (2001–5), this position seems almost antiquated or conservative. Embodying untamed evil in a lurid literary fantasy – its effect an icy cold bath in fear, its movement a hunt for the victims – perpetuates the rule that one should keep one's distance from the dead and prevents any progress from being made in terms of questioning that rule. Long before all this, however, the great modernist Oscar Wilde dispensed with the notion that ghosts are evil, even when they are trying desperately to be just that. In his very first published short story, *The Canterville Ghost* (1887), Wilde shows other forms of coexistence between man and ghost, inventing a delightful social experiment in which a very American family encounters the typically English ghost, Sir Simon de Canterville, in an old country house. He fails to convince the family of his gruesomeness. Thus demystified, Sir Canterville is able to die at last. The ghost's longing for peace, for true death, is probably the only unironic part of the story. He describes a place where he could sleep, a place that lies 'far away beyond the pine-woods'. He describes the grass, the song of the nightingale and the light of the moon. He has figures of speech that take the horror out of death: 'Yes, death. Death must be so beautiful. To lie in the soft brown earth, with the grasses waving above one's head, and listen to silence. To have no yesterday, and no tomorrow. To forget time, to forget life, to be at peace.' The ghost of Sir Canterville doesn't describe a typical cemetery with burial plots, grave-tending duties, opening hours and rules for visitors. Essentially, he's talking about the most modern form to emerge in Western burial culture: the anonymous woodland cemetery.

In Wilde's story, this is called 'the garden of death'. *Six Feet Under*, the saga of the Fishers, a family of funeral directors in California, features a succession of aestheticized dead and wounded bodies, and even ghosts, but it also demonstrates forms of interment. Most of the deceased are cremated or put in solid, ornate caskets. But the series' central character, Nate Fisher, a progressive mortician with extrasensory gifts, makes an entirely different choice for his deceased wife and, ultimately, also for himself. Nate is buried only in a shroud, at his own request, 'because it's more natural'. The aim of placing the dead body into the ground without a coffin is to allow for quicker, unhindered decomposition. But this reference to the 'natural' reflects a cultural rather than natural notion that has evolved over many years. Today, the idea of natural burial should be viewed in the context of global environmental threats: with the swift dissolution of the body into the 'suffering' environment, a feeling of collective guilt is assuaged and a final act of atonement performed. It is a symbolic bid for reconciliation between man and nature. But, beyond their desire to rest in peace, what do ghosts have to tell us? What are their secrets? For his *Canterville* story, Wilde plumped for something typical: a satire on married life. Sir Simon murdered his wife on the grounds of domestic disagreements: her cooking was tasteless, her ironing an abomination. Presented with such a mundane reason for the existence of one of the best-known ghosts in literary history, we might ask ourselves what else we were expecting. Given that in most cases we will not have an author such as Wilde to rely on for answers, what would we ask the dead if we had a direct telephone line to the afterlife? How metaphysically would we talk and what kind of solace would we be prepared to accept in our enlightened world? Or are we just interested in the frisson of encountering the dead? Enter the forensic pathologists. With them, the audience can step up to the rotting body and see the blowflies, maggots and mites.

The popularity of the pathological gaze is anything but proof of purely scientific interest, however. Standing at the buffet of mortality, the audience returns once again to the question of the exact distance between heaven and earth. Ultimately, the answers provided by the forensic expert do not satisfy. But where is one to go with one's enquiries as to the meaning of life? The decaying corpse is today's ultimate spine-chilling kick. Here, the dead person makes one last contribution to a culture that thinks it no longer

believes in ghosts. Yet there is a secret link between the corpses and the ghosts: a longing for the residue-free dissolution of a life contaminated by modernity. In this light, the ecological recycling of today is revealed, perhaps surprisingly, as a cultural equivalent of the good old-fashioned 'ashes to ashes, dust to dust'. Death is so archaic. Translated by Nicholas Grindell