

Ghost Story

Obviously the key element in a ghost story is the use of ghosts or the supernatural to create horror. However, it is important to remember that it is virtually impossible to actually write a scary description of a ghost or of something violent and bloody happening that does not become clichéd and ridiculous. This is why the scariest part of a scary movie is usually just **before** the killer is on screen. The best ghost stories use uncertainty about what will happen, when it will happen and what the ghost is to create tension and they leave the ghost 'off-screen' most of the time. For example, in the extract below, we never get a clear look at the ghost and indeed by the end of the novel there is doubt as to whether there really were ghosts at all or the female protagonist imagined everything. An appropriate setting and brief periods of normality are also key elements

Suddenly, in these circumstances, I became aware that, on the other side of the Sea of Azof, we had an interested spectator. The way this knowledge gathered in me was the strangest thing in the world--the strangest, that is, except the very much stranger in which it quickly merged itself. I had sat down with a piece of work--for I was something or other that could sit--on the old stone bench which overlooked the pond; and in this position I began to take in with certitude, and yet without direct vision, the presence, at a distance, of a third person. The old trees, the thick shrubbery, made a great and pleasant shade, but it was all suffused with the brightness of the hot, still hour. There was no ambiguity in anything; none whatever, at least, in the conviction I from one moment to another found myself forming as to what I should see straight before me and across the lake as a consequence of raising my eyes. They were attached at this juncture to the stitching in which I was engaged, and I can feel once more the spasm of my effort not to move them till I should so have steadied myself as to be able to make up my mind what to do. There was an alien object in view--a figure whose right of presence I instantly, passionately questioned. I recollect counting over perfectly the possibilities, reminding myself that nothing was more natural, for instance, than the appearance of one of the men about the place, or even of a messenger, a postman, or a tradesman's boy, from the village. That reminder had as little effect on my practical certitude as I was conscious--still even without looking--of its having upon the character and attitude of our visitor. Nothing was more natural than that these things should be the other things that they absolutely were not.

Of the positive identity of the apparition I would assure myself as soon as the small clock of my courage should have ticked out the right second; meanwhile, with an effort that was already sharp enough, I transferred my eyes straight to little Flora, who, at the moment, was about ten yards away. My heart had stood still for an instant with the wonder and terror of the question whether she too would see; and I held my breath while I waited for what a cry from her, what some sudden innocent sign either of interest or of alarm, would tell me. I waited, but nothing came; then, in the first place--and there is something more dire in this, I feel, than in anything I have to relate--I was determined by a sense that, within a minute, all sounds from her had previously dropped; and, in the second, by the circumstance that, also within the minute, she had, in her play, turned her back to the water. This was her attitude when I at last looked at her--looked with the confirmed conviction that we were still, together, under direct personal notice. She had picked up a small flat piece of wood, which happened to have in it a little hole that had evidently suggested to her the idea of sticking in another fragment that might figure as a mast and make the thing a boat. This second morsel, as I watched her, she was very markedly and intently attempting to tighten in its place. My apprehension of what she was doing sustained me so that after some seconds I felt I was ready for more. Then I again shifted my eyes--I faced what I had to face.

Comment [K1]: Clear symbol that the normal events of life so far are about to be disrupted

Comment [K2]: Note the vagueness and the initially un-threatening nature of the statement

Comment [K3]: Something is unusual, or out of place. Notice also the unusual form of the phrase 'gathered in me' which begins to create the uncertainty about whether the narrator really did see any ghosts or it was all in her head

Comment [K4]: Again the focus on the narrator -- is she 'causing' the visions herself

Comment [K5]: We are never presented with a direct clear view of the ghosts

Comment [K6]: Her certainty makes the reader question ours

Comment [K7]: Again, notice the unusual form of this phrase. She is certain about what she would see *if* she were looking!

Comment [K8]: A heavily laden phrase with threatening and eerie connotations. Alien here meaning 'out of place' rather than little green man

Comment [K9]: There are a multitude of rational explanations. Does this list convince us that they are not true or that this over-emotional nanny has simply jumped to unwarranted conclusions? The uncertainty here is part of what creates the tension

Comment [K10]: On an initial reading it is often easy to mistake the narrator's certainty for actual certainty. A closer reading reveals how much we are not shown and makes her absolute certainty begin to sound hollow with ever

Comment [K11]: The classic use of a young child in a ghost story as an innocent victim

Comment [K12]: Again, fairly classic bodily descriptions and use of metaphors, symbols and images to suggest fear

Comment [K13]: So the little girl hasn't seen 'it' either.

Comment [K14]: The extended description of this childhood game delays the moment when we see the 'ghost' and increases tension

Comment [K15]: Notice the cliff hanger ending