

“Winter Stories — Ghost Stories... Round the Christmas Fire”: Victorian Ghost Stories and the Christmas Market

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Abstract

Using the publication of Elizabeth Gaskell’s “The Old Nurse’s Story” in the 1852 Christmas number of Dickens’s Household Words as a case study, this paper examines how the publication of Victorian ghost stories in Christmas numbers redefines the ghost story, transforming it from a modern text participating in contemporary debates on spiritualism into a social text participating in the broader cultural project of reaffirming the nation’s (religious) traditions in the face of (secular) modernity. While the themes of Christmas ghost stories explicitly address social issues and secular, middle-class cultural values, the morals and social traditions promoted by Christmas fiction cannot exist outside of the era’s contemporary conversations about the place of religion in a modern, industrial society. The ghosts and goblins of Dickens’s Christmas fiction address and attempt to correct the social ills of modern society through a secularised application of Christian values and behaviours.



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But it was in the Victorian era that telling ghost stories became an indispensable custom of the Christmas season – indeed, the genre's popularity had been dwindling somewhat until writers such as Wilkie Collins and Elizabeth Gaskell breathed new life into it. One of the most familiar examples of the Christmas ghost story is Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, which he wrote in 1843 as a way of cashing in on the renewed demand for the form. It begins: "The story had held us, round the fire, sufficiently breathless, but except the obvious remark that it was gruesome, as on Christmas Eve in an old house a strange tale should essentially be, I remember no comment uttered till somebody happened to note it as the only case he had met in which such a visitation had fallen on a child." From this point on, the story-telling tradition during the winter months solidified, and Victorian Brits looked forward to the time of year when the nights were long and the spirits roamed. Throwing a holiday party often involved gathering your friends and family around the glow of a fire and scaring them to bits with creepy, written tidbits about death and ghosts and strange whispers in the darkness. While a select few of these many horror stories mention Christmas, the vast majority were solely dedicated to making your skin crawl. But in honor of the looming December 25th holiday, all but on Christmas Eve was traditionally the time to tell scary stories round the hearth. And 19th-century writers proved fearsomely adept, writes Kira Cochrane. This connection continued in the Victorian era through Dickens's story, and through the ghost stories he later published at Christmas in his periodical *All the Year Round*, with contributors including Wilkie Collins and Elizabeth Gaskell. It would also continue in the tradition started by MR James, the provost of King's College, Cambridge, who would invite a select few students and friends to his rooms each year on Christmas Eve, where he'd read one of the ghost stories he had written, which are still popular today. Telling ghost stories during winter is a hallowed tradition, a folk custom stretches back centuries, when families would wile away the winter nights with tales of spooks and monsters. "A sad tale's best for winter," Mamillius proclaims in Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale*: "I have one. Of sprites and goblins." But by then the ghost of Christmas ghost stories had taken on an afterlife of its own, and other writers rushed to fill the void that Dickens had left. By the time of Jerome's 1891 *Told After Supper*, he could casually joke about a tradition long ensconced in Victorian culture. If some of these later ghost

stories haven't entered the Christmas canon as Dickens' work did, there's perhaps a reason. Set during the Christmas period, these atmospheric Victorian and Edwardian ghost stories by masters of the genre are perfect reading for the long Winter evenings! Contents The best is "A Story of a Disappearance and a Reappearance," M.R. James' late story about a missing man and the events that occur after his disappearance, with perhaps the most striking, shocking image of his whole oeuvre (told in a Punch-and-Judy themed dream, and featuring the smashing of heads and stark imagery). Others delight. B.M. Croker's "Number Ninety," is one of her best, overall, and still works on the reread.