

# Ghost Story Short Guide

## Ghost Story by Peter Straub

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## Characters

Most of the central characters who provide unity to the novel's collection of stories are the members of the Chowder Society. They are, as the novel begins, old men who have lived in Milburn, New York, for most of their lives; they are conservative and care very much about the people and values of their town. By the end of the novel, their lone survivor, Ricky James, bands together with Don Wanderley, the nephew of his late friend, and with Peter Barnes, a high school senior; thus three generations join to fight the evil which is rapidly gaining control of their town. This small group is far more diverse than the Chowder Society and is in fact like the group of vampire hunters of Bram Stoker's *Dracula* in its balance of experienced but physically weak old men and inexperienced, strong young men. In each case, the apparently diverse members are unified by their common goal.

Opposing them are Eva/Alma (who uses a great many different names throughout the novel) and those under her control. Although she appears in many different forms, the forms do have some similarity: She is almost always, in human form, an attractive young woman who relies more on her changing personality than on physical beauty to seduce her victims. For example, to attract Don Wanderley (in attempted revenge on his uncle Edward), she enrolls in the graduate school where he is an instructor and provides him with such details of her life as she knows he will find intriguing. She enjoys toying with her victims before she kills them, and her arrogance leads her to reveal clues that later prove helpful to the group which destroys her. She is by far the most complex of the characters, and her frequent "shapeshifting" makes her identity, literal and figurative, unclear.



## Social Concerns

Like most horror fiction, *Ghost Story* deals with a struggle between good and evil; the audience's values as well as those of the surviving characters are reaffirmed as good ultimately triumphs over evil. Straub explores the nature of this struggle, however, far more deeply than formula fiction does. In *Ghost Story*, as in some of his other works, Straub deals with ghosts that have peculiarly symbiotic relationships with the other characters. In a particularly important scene, for example, Don Wanderley awakens to find Alma standing at the bedroom window.

When he asks her if anything is wrong, she replies, "I saw a ghost." In retrospect, Don thinks she may have said instead, "I am a ghost"; finally, and most frighteningly, he realizes that she actually said, "I am you." Which species of evil creatures Alma belongs to is not important throughout most of the novel — she and her associates have characteristics of ghosts, vampires, werewolves, and other monsters — but toward the end of the novel Don identifies her as a "shapeshifter." In altering their form, Don suggests, shapeshifters alter their victims' sense of reality and sanity; the best defense, therefore, is to accept that the horror one sees is actually taking place.

Justice is another important aspect of the horror novel, and it is usually served simply by having evil defeated and destroyed. Again, Straub goes far beyond this superficial treatment of an important issue. His concern with justice is immediately apparent in his characters: two of the main characters are lawyers and a third is named for a judge in Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851). Also, the plot of *Ghost Story* bears some similarity to that of another Hawthorne novel, *The Marble Faun* (1860), which addresses the nature of evil and the consequences of sin. Straub suggests these similarities by using an epigraph from *The Marble Faun* at the beginning of *Ghost Story*.

Justice concerns not only the good characters in the novel, but the evil ones as well. Eva/Alma obviously sees herself as righting wrongs, and in doing so she feels justified in destroying not only the "wrongdoers" but everyone connected with them. One of the complexities of the novel is that she was in fact killed by members of the Chowder Society when they were young men, and as the plot of the novel begins, they have kept their guilty secret, never even referring to it among themselves, for fifty years.

Thus, the good are not totally blameless in this novel; their guilt lies not so much in Eva/Alma's death, clearly an accident, as in their attraction to her and in their covering up her death.

Finally, the theme of the importance of the past plays a significant part in *Ghost Story*. Ghosts themselves are literally of the past, which they also represent symbolically. In particular, in horror fiction, they are an evil part of the past; in other types of fiction, they may be harmless or even helpful. The unusually long period of time, fifty years, between the death and the appearance of the ghost in the novel suggests generally that one's involvement with the past does not necessarily end easily or quickly. Most of the



characters are deeply concerned with the past, as is exemplified in the stories told by the Chowder Society members.

As well, Straub's own interest in the past is apparent in his many allusions, direct and indirect, to the early masters of his genre.



# Techniques

Straub uses a literary device called framework, stories within a story. The main story is the struggle between the Chowder Society and Eva/Alma, and this story provides the "frame" for the many stories the characters tell. The most obvious use of storytelling is the Chowder Society itself, which meets for the purpose of telling stories. Also, Don Wanderley is a writer and English instructor, professions which allow him to tell a number of stories (for example, the plot of his novel which is based on his relationship with "Alma Mobley") as well as mention numerous literary works; in particular, his references to the works of writers such as Hawthorne and Henry James remind the reader of the literary tradition in which Straub is working.

Another of Straub's techniques, as King points out in *Danse Macabre*, is mirroring. Straub even uses an actual mirror in a scene near the end of the novel, in which Don, Ricky, and Peter go to find "Anna Mostyn" in her house. Peter glances into a small mirror in an empty bedroom and sees the face of a beautiful woman who speaks to him, telling him that he is one of "them" and urging him to kill the other two men. He is raising his knife to do so when Ricky, who had tried to prevent him from looking into the mirror, breaks it. Straub also uses mirroring in his retelling, in an epigraph, the myth of Narcissus. In Greek mythology Narcissus is the young man who falls in love with his image in a pond and pines away, turning into the flower which is called by his name. In Straub's version, which begins the third section of the book, Narcissus is weeping because, as he explains to a friend, he has worn out his innocence by gazing at his own image.

Many other "mirrors" appear throughout the novel. The film playing at the town's movie theater during the group's dangerous encounter with the Bate brothers is *Night of the Living Dead*; the events on the screen mirror those of the actual fight between the living group and the living dead brothers, and Gregory Bate even throws Peter through the movie screen. This scene points up the main characters' problems in separating reality from the illusions Eva/Alma is able to create. In the novel's climactic scene the small group is saved from destruction by the reality of Ricky's sneeze just as they are about to accept as real the individual "scenes" Eva/Alma arranges for them; here, as in Straub's *Floating Dragon* (1983), the evil forces use a kind of psychological warfare to get their victims to contribute to their own destruction. In Stephen King's *Salem's Lot* (1975), a novel which Straub has said influenced him, the vampires, as in old vampire legends, can enter only by invitation; similar techniques are used in other horror fiction to suggest that evil is basically internal.

# Adaptations

A major motion picture version of *Ghost Story* was released by Universal in 1981. It starred Fred Astaire, Melvyn Douglas, Douglas Fairbanks, Jr., John Houseman, Patricia Neal, and Alice Krige. John Irvin directed the film, for which Lawrence D. Cohen wrote the screenplay. Despite an excellent cast, the film was not successful with critics and audiences. The screenplay greatly simplifies the novel's plot and relies on many of the clichés of the horror genre rather than suggesting the fresh use which Straub makes of familiar material.

Mia Farrow and Keir Dullea starred in a 1976 Paramount version of *Julia*, which was titled *The Haunting of Julia* (originally titled *Full Circle*). Like the film based on *Ghost Story*, it was not well received.

## Literary Precedents

On the dust jacket of *Ghost Story* Straub is quoted as explaining that the novel "refers back to the classic American novels and stories of the genre by Henry James and Nathaniel Hawthorne ... I was moved by a desire to look into, examine, and play with the genre — to take these 'classic' elements as far as they could go."

Straub's direct references to James and Hawthorne help to establish this sense of tradition. The names of the two law partners, Sears James and Ricky Hawthorne, are the most obvious of these references; after Sears's death, a new partner joins the firm, and Ricky tells his wife, "Pity his name isn't Poe."

Less obviously, a third member of the Chowder Society, Dr. John Jaffrey, takes his name from Judge Jaffrey Pyncheon, a character in Hawthorne's *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851).

Also, the Chowder Society tale that Sears James tells is quite similar to Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

In some ways, Straub is also working in a tradition centuries older than nineteenth-century American fiction. Two of the names of the evil female character, "Galli" (Eva's last name) and "Alma," are associated with Cybele, the Asiatic goddess who represents the fecundity of nature. Even the generic-sounding title of the novel reminds the reader of the long history of the ghost story.



## Related Titles

Straub has written five other novels which deal with the supernatural, including one which he cowrote with Stephen King. The earliest of these novels, *Julia*, was published in 1975 and is the story of a woman who attempts to save her choking daughter's life with an amateur, unsuccessful tracheotomy. After the child's death, Julia believes herself to be haunted by her ghost. Another ghost story, *If You Could See Me Now*, followed in 1977.

Three other works dealing with the supernatural followed the 1979 publication of *Ghost Story*. *Shadowland*, published in 1980, involves magic and is similar to *Ghost Story* in technique; it makes use of a series of stories, although these stories, as the appearance of the Brothers Grimm suggests, are related to fairy tales. The next of Straub's novels, *Floating Dragon* (1983), uses many of the themes, techniques, and types of characters of the previous novels; its climactic scene is particularly reminiscent of *Ghost Story*. Its differences from Straub's other novels may be partly due to Straub's association and eventual collaboration with Stephen King. In 1984, the two published *The Talisman*.



# Copyright Information

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