

‘Like a Ghost at the Door’: Women’s World War I Poetry and a Gothic Home Front

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Abstract: Though over a century old, Great War literature is only now being revisited in an effort to understand war experiences more fully. As Catharine Reilly, Margaret Higonnet and Keith Gandall, I seek to expand our literary knowledge of non-combatant First World War lives. This paper draws on English women’s poetry that captures their Great War experiences; while British women had different understandings of the war, many of their poems had an intense emphasis on the Gothic. I argue that Gothic overtones in these poems are used to ultimately cohere World War I British home front poetics into a haunted home front.

Keywords: World War I, poetry, women poets, the gothic, home front

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When we conceptualise the Gothic, we might think of misty moors, decrepit homes, and dark secrets. And, of course, hauntings and ghosts often take their place as keystones of the Gothic genre. In this paper, I propose that World War I poetry written by women fits into the Gothic genre mould, while extending the idea of the haunted house to the haunted home front. While comparatively little research has interrogated women’s First World War poetry and verse, I draw on Catherine Reilly’s robust archival masterpiece *Scars Upon My Heart*, a collection of British women’s poetry written during or immediately after World War I. While obviously somewhat narrow in scope to Britain, these poems reflect an unshakeable unease and ghostliness that, I argue, lends itself to Gothic interpretations. While such a connection may seem apparent to readers interested in women’s experiences during the Great War, no scholar has yet to configure women’s First World poetry

into Gothic valences. Through an exploration of how the Gothic illuminates women's First World War verse, a home front emerges that is united in its haunted qualities.

Paul Fussell's seminal text *The Great War and Modern Memory* was somewhat of a double-edged sword: while it brought harrowing, unforgettable male Anglophone poetry into scholarly debate, it also served male texts exclusively; in *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays* he goes so far as to claim that women did not write 'good' war poetry because they were not 'the custodians of the subtlest sorts of antiwar irony'.¹ Scholars such as Reilly, Margaret Higonnet, Viv Newman, and Nosheen Khan take issue with Fussell's claim on a myriad of levels. As Rita Felski argues for a re-examination of the gender of modernity,² I argue that the non-combatant female experience is similarly integral to our understanding the era of the Great War. Underexplored depths emerge when revisiting women's World War I verse, far outside of the 'criticisms [...] against the quality of women's poetry, deemed to be uneven at best, doggerel at worst'.³ Similar work has been done by Higonnet in her Anglophone and non-Anglophone compilation of women's World War I writing, *Lines of Fire*. Newman and Khan have both made strides in the arena of women's World War I poetry, also drawing on the archival labour done by Catherine Reilly. Newman's landmark thesis 'Women's Poetry of the First World War' forcefully makes a case for examining poetry specifically written by women: 'women's poetry is often broader than men's, reflecting how warfare involves far more than writing about trenches and the camaraderie of those who live and die in battle'.⁴ What women poets could capture, even more accurately than many men at the time, were the psychological conditions of the home front. By examining their verse, and uncovering the Gothic valences therein, readers are able to reconfigure the home front not as a place of relative safety, but of psychological trauma.

The poems to be examined contend with ideas around *home*, unsurprising given British culture's temporary cleaving between *home front* and *front lines*. Women largely remained at home during the war, whether they were working, volunteering, farming, raising

children, or a combination of the above. So, it is no surprise that home and the home front are prominent haunted settings in poetry written by women during this era. Gothic and the home are by-and-large intertwined as Andrew Ng notes in his monograph *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives*:

Throughout its tradition, the Gothic has consistently recognized a quality invested in domestic space that has the power to unnerve, fragment, and even destroy its inhabitant [...] The uncanny, in other words, points fundamentally to a shift in terms of the relationship between the house and its inhabitant, whether this shift is paranormally induced, or the result of more mundane circumstances such as familial conflict, a crime, or an unwelcomed intrusion.⁵

While the ghosts in these poems are not always as supernatural as they are grief-stricken, the shift in hauntings stems from Ng's noted conflict. The Female Gothic specifically is shaped by 'national identity, sexuality, language, race and history' and is ultimately about identity – both the author's identity and the female speakers'.⁶ As women were grappling with the emotional trauma of loved ones being killed, wounded, or missing in action, as well as the in-flux British socioeconomic scene, the home became a fraught battleground between inhabitant and structure, between inhabitant and grief. Put simply, for these women, every aspect of their lives was in some ways completely altered by the outbreak of the war, and, while not enduring the trauma of the front lines, they were still anchored to a home that felt hostile, haunted, and unrecognizable.

Teresa Hooley's most famous poem, 'A War Film', brings mental distress and imagined dead men into the domestic space. Unfortunately, Hooley's biographical background is scant, but we do know that she was British and had a decent number of poems published before the war.⁷ 'A War Film' describes a speaker who views war footage at the movies and returns home only to be confronted with the playful games of her young son. Instead of

being able to enjoy her child's company, she envisions him as a war casualty:

How could he know
The sudden terror that assaulted me? [...]
The body I had borne [...]
Someday
It should be taken away
To War. Tortured, Torn.
Slain.
Rotting in No Man's Land, out in the rain –
My little son....⁸

As the speaker persists in self-comforting gestures like speaking to and hugging her child, the poem concludes with these chilling lines:

I kissed and kissed and kissed him, crooning his name
He thought that I was daft.
He thought it was a game,
And laughed and laughed.

This poem is curiously haunted by a person still alive; the ghost of the speaker's son appears before her eyes, yet he is not dead. Because of documentary footage and the explosion of the motion picture, civilian women in Britain would have a very accurate understanding of the war and its conditions; between 15 and 20 million watched one war documentary within its first six weeks being shown.⁹ Because of the speaker's understanding of World War I, she is haunted in multiplicity via cinema. She is haunted by the dead and the dying in the film she saw, and she is haunted by the seemingly unpreventable death of her 'little son'. Hooley's double haunting is of course sharpened by the realistic nature of the poem and the son's own ignorance. We as readers are also forced to imagine the young boy as already dead, since the speaker conveys her bleak vision through the first person. The usual safety of the bath, the

maternal care, and the domestic are completely upended by the brutality and ghost-like appearance of the dead in the speaker's family home. As the violence of the front lines intersects with the home front, sanctuary cannot exist in a domestic space or the speaker's own mentality.

A different kind of haunting occurs in the psychologically twisted 'Reported Missing', arguably Anna Gordon Keown's best-known work. Likely written when she was a teenager or a young woman, this eerie poem unsettles as it aches. When her loved one is reported missing, the speaker refuses to accept or even understand the devastating news; rather, she insists that she is incapable of thinking of her loved one as deceased. As people try to appeal logically to the speaker, she merely laughs, vowing instead that her love 'will come again'.¹⁰ She then moves on to an interior description:

There's purple lilac in your little room,
And somewhere out beyond the evening gloom
Small boys are culling summer watercress.
Of these familiar things I have no dread
Being so very sure you are not dead.

By intertwining the 'familiar' and 'dread', as well as pairing of the living greens in a dead man's room, Gordon Keown creates a portrait of the disrupted domestic, a home in which death is both unfathomable and inescapable. The pronoun 'your little' in this description hints at a parent-child relationship, made more apparent by the images of 'small boys' culling summer watercress. While the title of the poem indicates a soldier is missing, the speaker and her loved ones are grappling with a death, although it seems the death has not yet been declared. As John Stephens notes,

[i]f a soldier was posted as missing in action, it meant anxious uncertainty for relatives. It was bad enough to know that death was certain and to know the approximate location of the body, even if visiting the grave was out of the question. However, there was *far greater psychological*

distress about a loved one's fate if there was no certainty about death or the possible condition of the body [...] People took a long time to come to terms with the idea of a soldier who was missing – if they ever did at all (emphasis mine).¹¹

This suspension of death rituals and an inability to accept an absolute death creates a domestic space haunted by someone who is both missing and dead. Readers are placed in the role of the observer, understanding that the speaker's belief that her loved one will return safely is delusional. Because the speaker is intent on keeping her loved one alive, even keeping the room tidied and filled with living lilac, she creates a liminal space for a figure who is not allowed to be fully missing or fully deceased. Her mental grappling takes place in her familiar home setting, but she lacks control over her beloved's wellbeing; as she separates her home from 'your room', she further entrenches her loved one as a ghostly presence disturbing her ability to grieve and process such a clearly traumatic loss.

May Wedderburn Cannan posits a distraught female psyche inhabiting a domestic space in her poem 'Lamplight', written in 1916.¹² The poem begins with her attempt at conversation in which she describes her loved one's eyes as they (might) appear in her (or perhaps, previously, their) lamplit home.¹³ In distress, she says, 'Now in the quiet of a chill Winter's night | Your voice comes hushed to me | Full of forgotten memories'. The tercet suggests that this commonplace recollection may verge upon being an auditory hallucination because of the intensity and poignancy of her loss. Even the warm glow of the lamplight cannot dispel feelings of horror. Grief assumes the form of a gothic presence, a traumatic haunting in which the ordinary is transfigured as the extraordinary, and pleasure, pain. The psychological unease in the palpable presence of the beloved killed in the war, coupled with an inability to latch solidly onto reality in a once-familiar domestic space, exemplifies the female British Gothic experience of the First World War.

Ghosts are a more pressing reminder of death in Nora Griffiths' poem 'The Wykhamist'.¹⁴ Moving beyond personal loss is the poem

itself, which contends with wartime Britain and generalized death. The speaker takes ten lines to describe the setting, interspersing descriptors such as ‘pallid blooms’ with ‘the scroop of tortured gear on a battered car’.¹⁵ After scenic grounding, the speaker recounts her loved one’s abrupt transition from scholar to soldier and his subsequent death: ‘You ... “died of wounds” ... they told me’ (ellipses in original). Returning to the present, the speaker concludes, ‘... yet your feet | Pass with others down the twilit street’ (ellipses in original). Here, the speaker is physically outside of her domestic space, yet, she clearly feels a familiar sense of belonging on St Catherine’s Hill, the setting of the poem. The poet’s frequent use of ellipses evokes a sense of distraction and incompleteness, as if the speaker cannot verbalize or even quite comprehend the magnitude of her loss.

The haunting the speaker experiences is unavoidable as she attempts to process her grief. Andrew F. Hermann suggests that, when linking the supernatural and the self, ‘ghosts are often shattered love stories, and that is where their power of horror resides’.¹⁶ While we are not able to clearly understand the exact relationship between the Wykhamist and the speaker, this poem makes abundantly clear that the speaker and student / soldier loved one another very deeply. The horror of this poem lies ultimately in the unbridgeable gap between the living and the dead – as it does for male poets engaged in actual combat.¹⁷

The speaker of ‘London in War’ by Helen Dircks similarly points out how war trauma deprives one of the normal capacity to separate the living and the dead.¹⁸ ‘London in War’ weaves in and out of dreams and dream imagery as the female speaker grapples with the emotional trauma of war from her home:

I see the brightness
Through a throbbing gloom,
While a death rattles
To a tripping melody.¹⁹

The above lines describe the speaker's crossing and recrossing into a disturbed mental 'reality', and whether or not she is merely dreaming or experiencing an abnormal mental state is not made clear until the poem's last stanza. Dircks begins this stanza with the following lines: 'Night falls with its olden touch, | But sleep comes | Like a bloody man'. The speaker's mental anguish is jarringly juxtaposed with images of comfort ('brightness', 'melody') and compounded by horror ('gloom', 'death rattles', 'bloody man'). This juxtaposition generates a feeling of dread, culminating in the penultimate image of the poem: sleep as the grotesque form of a bloody man: an undeniable reference to the war's brutal violence. As the speaker is haunted by this bleeding figure, her home, London, becomes a place where even the release of sleep is psychologically unsafe. London as a metropolitan stronghold was a military target, thereby jeopardizing this woman's life. Her own mind similarly turns into an unsafe escape, making the speaker's home (city, body) feel doubly violated. World War I trench warfare literature makes clear that trenches were spaces that saw a complete breakdown of physical and mental order. The home front in this poem simulates this breakdown,²⁰ and thus the apparent distinction between soldier and non-combatant dissolves. Both soldier and non-combatant live under complex war conditions that produce trauma. Dircks' physical and mental breakdown, as evidenced by the poem's modulation toward the dreamlike and the unreal, combines with her physical exhaustion to trap her in a haunted paralysis. Dircks' poem exemplifies the instability of home, future, and culture that defines the Gothic.²¹

Poetry from this period often features women grappling with loss and hauntings within their own Gothic spaces and sometimes even inhabiting a physical space that is degraded and reduced to rubble. 'A Memory' by Margaret Sackville helps conceptualise Gothic rubble in the context of home front war poetry. Describing a town's only occupants, the town's dead, 'A Memory' is the aftershock of a bombing:²²

There was no sound at all, no crying in the village,
Nothing you would count as sound, that is, after the shells;

Only behind a wall the low sobbing of women,
The creaking of a door, a lost dog – nothing else.
Silence which might be felt, no pity in the silence,
Horrible, soft like blood.

After describing both male and female corpses, including the notable figure of a bayoneted woman, Sackville concludes her poem with the following lines: ‘Not by the battle fires, the shrapnel are we haunted; | Who shall deliver us from the memory of these dead?’. ‘A Memory’ was perhaps not personally experienced (though we cannot rule this out) but this poem is clearly working outside of the jingoist poetry of the era, evidenced by shock-value images of a bayoneted woman and corpses. Sackville’s ruined village would surely unnerve a non-combatant audience, since British civilians were at risk of bombings, and the anonymity of the ruined village allows the readers to imagine it as their own. Perhaps most crucially, Sackville emphasizes that it is not the ruined village that composes the most haunting part of this memory, it is the dead. While villages can be rebuilt, the dead are lost, returning only as ghosts.

The physical degradation of the home front appears as a motif in many poems written by women at this time.²³ As humans are able to build stability through structures, the built environment can ‘paradoxically be deathly to the human, yet simultaneously host to unnatural “life”’.²⁴ Unnatural life spawned in ruined spaces, whether that takes the form of ghosts or post-traumatic flashbacks, creates permanently disturbed domestic spaces. Whether or not homes may have remained intact, ghosts still arrived at the door.

Helen Hamilton explores the monstrous side of the Gothic while positing a political statement in her unequivocally titled poem ‘The Ghouls’. ‘The Ghouls’ explores monstrosity and human nature, with the speaker directing her address to a targeted ‘you’, being perpetrators of war:²⁵

Unknowingly you draw, it seems,
From their young bodies,
Dead young bodies,

Fresh life,
New value,
Now that yours are ebbing.
You strange old ghouls,
Who gloat with dulled old eyes,
Over those lists,
Those dreadful lists,
Of young men dead.

While the portrayal of the ‘you’ is monstrous, Hamilton chooses to preface her accusatory remarks with the caveat that the ‘you’ acts ‘unknowingly ... it seems’. However, this subtlety only emphasizes the poem’s general extravagance, which comports with the Gothic. As Derek Lee points out, ‘there is nothing subtle about Gothic style – lack of nuance in fact, is the genre’s calling card’.²⁶ A genre-typical lack of nuance helps round out Fussell-esque protestations to Hamilton’s blunt poetry, as well as the other conspicuous ghosts present in this paper. Hamilton’s heavy use of repetition throughout the entire poem, particularly with ‘young’, ‘old’, and ‘ghouls’, then mimically suggests a kind of verbal haunting, again in keeping with the Gothic.

‘The Ghouls’ portrays women on the home front rebelling against the government and other war supporters who are depicted in classic Gothic imagery, draining the life from their young victims. Thus, we see Hamilton employing Gothic literary motifs as political satire, allowing the Gothic to take on protest valences, as well as its traditional elegiac role. Hence, the Gothic element in ‘The Ghouls’ helps to rebut the common mischaracterization of women’s World War I verse as jingoist and blindly war-supporting, a mischaracterization that recent scholarship is working to counter.²⁷

Hamilton’s poem echoes the social criticism in ‘The Dancers’ by Edith Sitwell, an accomplished poet. Sitwell creates a hellish world that is as bloody as it is frantic. Likely written about the decisively disastrous Battle of the Somme, ‘The Dancers’ contends with life on the British side of the channel, wryly thanking God that ‘we

still can dance, each night’, while ‘the floors are slippery with blood [... and soldiers] die hourly for us’.

The music has grown numb with death –
But we will suck their dying breath,
The whispered name they breathed to chance,
To swell our music, make it loud
That we may dance, – may dance.²⁸

In the vampiric imagery we see in Hamilton’s ‘The Ghouls’, Sitwell invokes a transfer of life force in which civilians at home are drawing the ‘dying breath[s]’ from soldiers for their own pleasures. While Sitwell portrays the civilians as engaging in a supercilious dance, she also complicates her criticism by commenting that those on the home front are not in control of their own actions and are also deeply disturbed:

We are the dull blind carrion-fly
[...]
Mad from the horror of the light –
The light is mad, too, flecked with blood, –
We dance, we dance, each night.

While God is invoked in this poem, the divine figure ultimately seems apathetic to the hell on earth the dancers and soldiers are both experiencing. The psychological warping, in which both civilians at the home front and soldiers are cohesive – both in God’s ambivalence and in their exchanging of breath/life force – speaks to Elaine Freedgood’s psychological insight that ‘ghost stories narrate the punishment of the guilty’.²⁹ Sitwell and the ‘we’ of home front civilians, many of whom were women, were bound under intense feelings of guilt. As war propaganda historian Jaap Van Ginneken explains:

A community of thinking does not, then, result from a herd instinct, but rather from a common responsibility (of a nation,

for instance) for past and present actions, at home or abroad. This is reflected in the consequences of war and the mood of people. *We flee our guilty feelings and repress our conscience* (emphasis mine).³⁰

Sitwell's 'we' may be dancing, but this dance (in some mythic contexts, life-giving, and in general, refreshing or exciting) is a self-flagellating enactment of guilt-ridden trauma brought on by World War I. The ghostly figures of dying soldiers, who breathe life into those on the home front, only exacerbate the frenzy of self-punishment that these dancers enact, entering a Gothic realm of a horror-ridden dance floor where corpses charge dancers to keep up their movements under the bloody light of God.

The women war-poets I have treated in this discussion all express trauma on the home front during World War I. Ghosts haunt their lives and writings. Instead of limiting our conceptualization to the haunted home, we must also consider a haunted home front. The psychological trauma of being a civilian in an era in which non-combatants were targets, along with the hardship of losing loved ones – both men killed in battle and other women in air raids – was pervasive. Even though class and geography varied among these female writers, all were bound by the same home front civilian dangers. A clean division between safety and danger, between home front and front lines, did not exist, as noted by Heather Jones: 'This myth of the Great War as a conflict that was limited spatially to the battlefield and to combatants is, of course, wrong'.³¹ Not only were these women poets engaging the ghosts in their own homes, but the ghosts that haunted their cities and towns, their times. As Jones plaintively notes, 'the reality is that there are no reliable global statistics for how many civilians died in the First World War'.³²

Yet, reflections both contemporary to the time these poems were written and to today tend to underemphasise or completely disregard women's wartime trauma, as Keith Gandal observes.³³ This misunderstanding might be rectified by examining women's wartime poetry and the traumatic home front they present, and

considering the dire need that inspired them to resort to a Gothic lens to give proper voice to their experience.

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NOTES

¹ Paul Fussell, *Thank God for the Atom Bomb and Other Essays* (New York: Ballantine, 1988) cited in Margaret R. Higonnet, *Lines of Fire* (New York: Plume, 1999), p. xxxii.

² Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995) pp. 7-10.

³ Jane Potter, "The Essentially Modern Attitude Toward War:" English Poetry of the Great War', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Twentieth-Century British and American War Literature*, ed. by Adam Piette and Mark Tawlinson (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), p. 24.

⁴ Vivien B. E. Newman, *Women's Poetry of the First World War: Songs of Wartime Lives* (Essex, England: University of Essex, 2004), p. 4.

⁵ A. H. S. Ng, 'Introduction: The Subject of the House in Gothic Narratives', in *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), pp. 1-2.

⁶ Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, 'Introduction: Defining the Female Gothic', in *The Female Gothic*, ed. by Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), p. 2.

⁷ Catherine Reilly, *Scars Upon My Heart: Women's Poetry and Verse of the First World War* (London: Virago Press, 2006), pp. 133-34.

⁸ Teresa Hooley, 'A War Film', in *Scars*, p. 56.

⁹ Seth Feldman, 'Battle of the Somme: What the Audience Saw', *Revue Canadienne D'Études Cinématographiques / Canadian Journal of Film Studies*, 27 (2018), 3.

¹⁰ Anna Gordon Keown, 'Reported Missing', in *Scars*, p. 58.

¹¹ John Stephens, "The Ghosts of Menin Gate": Art, Architecture and Commemoration', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 44 (2009), 11.

¹² May Wedderburn Cannan was a British poet and novelist who served in France as a canteen volunteer, later working in Paris with the British Bureau Central Interellie. May Wedderburn Cannan, *Grey Ghosts and Voices* (Kington, Warwick: Roundwood Press, 1976), pp. 94-127.

¹³ May Wedderburn Cannan, 'Lamplight', in *Scars*, p. 16.

¹⁴ I have been unable to find out much about Nora Griffiths's life or death, and 'The Wykhamist' seems to be one of a slim number of surviving poems.

¹⁵ Nora Griffiths, 'The Wykhamist', in *Scars*, p. 44.

¹⁶ Andrew F. Hermann, 'Ghosts, Vampires, Zombies, and Us: The Undead as Autoethnographic Bridges', *International Review of Qualitative Research*, 7 (2014), 333.

¹⁷ See Richard Carder's essay, 'Graves, Ghosts, Madness, Magic & Religion' for examples of Robert Graves's confusion of the living and the dead in this issue.

¹⁸ I have been unable to find out much about Helen Dircks.

¹⁹ Helen Dircks, 'London in War', in *Scars*, p. 30.

²⁰ Cara Chimirri, "'The End is where We Start from": Spatial Aspects of Retrospection in 'The Good Soldier' and 'In Parentheses'', in *Ford Maddox Ford's 'The Good Soldier': Centenary Essays*, ed. by Max Saunders and Sara Haslam, *International Ford Maddox Ford Studies*, 14 (2015), pp. 240-252, (p. 242).

²¹ Carol Margaret Davison, 'The Female Gothic', in *History of the Gothic: Gothic Literature*, ed. by Andrew Smith and Benjamin F. Fisher (Wales: University of Wales Press, 2009), pp. 85-87.

²² Margaret Sackville, 'A Memory', in *Scars*, p. 95.

²³ See Anna Akhmatova, Anna De Noailles, Anna Radlova Dmitrievna, Henriette Sauret-Arnyvelde, and Marina Tsvetaeva, among others.

²⁴ Sara Wasson, 'Gothic and the Built Environment: Literary Representations of the Architectural Uncanny and Urban Sublime', in *The Edinburgh Companion to Gothic and the Arts*, ed. by David Punter (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 36.

²⁵ Helen Hamilton, 'The Ghouls', in *Scars*, p. 47.

²⁶ Derek Lee, 'Dark Romantic: F. Scott Fitzgerald and the Specters of Gothic Modernism' *Journal of Modern Literature*, 41 (2018), 129.

²⁷ Keith Gandall, *War Isn't the Only Hell: A New Reading of World War I American Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), p. 23.

²⁸ Edith Sitwell, 'The Dancers', in *Scars*, p. 100.

²⁹ Elaine Freedgood, 'Ghostly Reference', *Representations*, 125 (2014), 51.

³⁰ Jaap Van Ginneken, Kurt Baschwitz: *A Pioneer of Communication Studies and Social Psychology* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2017), p. 101.

³¹ Heather Jones, 'Violent Transgression and the First World War' *Studies: An Irish Quarterly Review*, 104: 414 (2015), 130.

³² Ibid.

³³ Keith Gandall, *War Isn't the Only Hell: A New Reading of World War I American Literature* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2018), pp. 103-05.