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The Dead

Ghosts and Other Revenants

Motifs E200–E599



Thompson devotes an entire chapter (E) to the subject of the dead. Most of the chapter is taken up by motifs dealing with “Ghosts and other revenants” (E200–599); other divisions are “Resuscitation” (E0–199), “Reincarnation” (E600–699), and “The soul” (E700–799).

The belief in ghosts is nearly universal. It has been suggested that there is a correlation between the nature of child-rearing practices within a specific society and the character of that society’s supernatural beings, including ghosts (studies cited by Ember and Ember 1999, 426). Commonly, however, ghosts or ancestor spirits in any one culture can be both menacing and benevolent, and most often ghosts who appear to the living are relatives or lovers as opposed to strangers. The revenant will return for a variety of reasons, reflected in the divisions “Malevolent return from the dead” (E200–299) and “Friendly return from the dead” (E300–399).

MALEVOLENT RETURN FROM THE DEAD

Sometimes the revenant returns to inflict punishment; this is particularly true if the person was murdered, when the principal motive is to out the murderer (E231, “Return from the dead to reveal murder”). In the ballad “Young Benjie,” (Child 86), the brothers of a girl who drowned keep watch over her corpse in an effort to discover who caused her death.

About the middle o the night
The cocks began to crow,
And at the dead hour o the night
The corpse began to thraw [twist]. (Child 1965, 2:283)

The girl's ghost informs them that her lover Benjie pushed her into the water, and they then ask her what kind of punishment they should inflict.

One of the most famous ghosts of literature is Hamlet, King of Denmark, who returns to walk the battlements of his castle and urge to his son, Prince Hamlet, to avenge his murder (*Hamlet*, 1.5).

The Dead Carry Off the Living

The fear that the dead will somehow pull the living after them down into the grave is a common motif (E266, "Dead carry off living"). Often this is accomplished through a kiss (E217, "Fatal kiss from dead"). For example, "Sweet William's Ghost" (Child 77) has numerous variants in which the story line diverges somewhat, but the basic story is that the ghost of a man who died just before he was to wed appears to his lover to ask her to return his love token (E311, "Return from dead to return and ask back love tokens"). Not realizing that he is dead, the girl asks her lover to come in and kiss her. He replies that he is "no earthly man" and that if he kisses her "Thy days will not be lang" (E217, "Fatal kiss from dead") (Child 1965, 1:229, version A). When she realizes he is dead, she complies with his request and returns his token, but follows him to the graveyard, where in some versions she asks if she can accompany him into the grave (he says no) and then dies.

In his notes to "The Suffolk Miracle" (272), Child writes, "A tale of a dead man coming on horseback to his inconsolable love, and carrying her to his grave, is widely spread among the Slavic people (with whom it seems to have originated) and the Austrian Germans . . . and has lately been recovered in the Netherlands, Denmark, Iceland, and Brittany" (1965, 5:60). Child pronounces "The Suffolk Miracle" a degraded version of "one of the most remarkable tales and one of the most impressive and beautiful ballads of the European continent." The motif in question is E215, "The Dead Rider (Lenore). Dead lover returns and takes sweetheart with him on horseback. She is sometimes saved at the grave by the crowing of the cock, though the experience is usually fatal." The motif also constitutes a tale type, AT 365, *The Dead Bridegroom Carries Off his Bride*, with Finnish, Finnish-Swedish, Estonian, Livonian, Lithuanian, Lappish, Norwegian, Danish, Icelandic, Irish, French, Dutch, Flemish, German, Italian, Romanian, Slovenian, Serbo-Croatian, Hungarian, Czech, Polish, and Russian versions. In 1773, the German poet Götffried August Bürger wrote *Lenore* in ballad style; it was extremely popular and widely translated, including an English translation by Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Another Child ballad—"Fair Margaret and Sweet William" (74)—contains

an example of motif E211, "Dead sweetheart haunts faithless lover." Margaret sitting in her bower window combing her hair, sees her lover with his new bride. "Down she cast her iv'ry comb, / And up she tossd her hair, / She went out from her bowr alive, / But never no more came there" (Child 1965, 2:201, version B). The ballad continues:

When day was gone, and night was come,
All people were asleep,
In glided Margaret's grimly ghost,
And stood at William's feet.

The ghost asks William how he likes his bride and he replies that he likes her well, but better he likes "that fair lady / That stands at my bed's feet." In the morning his bride tells him she had a foreboding dream "that our bowr was lin'd with white swine, / And our bride-chamber full of blood" (D1812.5.1.2, "Bad dream as evil omen"). William goes to Margaret, finds that she is dead, kisses her corpse (E217, "Fatal kiss from dead"), and dies.

An African tale tells of a ghost who tricks a woman into going into a pit and jumps down after her and they both disappear (Krug 1912, 109). This is an example of a malevolent stranger ghost, not the spirit of a person she knew in life.

Bloodthirsty Revenants

Thompson remarks that there are many tales about the wandering and malicious dead. "They frequently make unprovoked attacks on travelers in the dark (E261), or they haunt buildings and molest those bold enough to stay in them overnight" (E282–284; Type 326) (1977, 257). The most horrific return from the dead involves those who come from the grave at night to suck the blood of the living (E251, "Vampire"). The vampire has ancient roots perhaps in Egyptian and Tibetan religious beliefs that the living must perform extensive burial rituals in order to seal the dead off from the living, whom the dead would bring into their own state. Later, the idea of the corpse thirsting for the blood of the living became the dominant theme of the vampire, and Green remarks on the significance of Christ commanding his disciples to drink the wine (a symbol of his blood) during the Last Supper: "Here, within this very cornerstone of Christianity, is located the pervasive spirit of evil in the vampire's literal interpretation of Christ's admonition; it drinks the blood for eternal life" (Green 1988, 1375)

Although it is widely believed that the folklore of the vampire became

prominent in Slavic countries, particularly in the region of Transylvania, some scholars suggest that the theme trickled down from European literature. Early works featuring the female vampire include Goethe's ballad *The Bride of Corinth* (1797), Keats's poem *Lamia* (1820), Poe's stories "The Fall of the House of Usher" (1839), "Ligeia" (1840), and especially "Berenice" (1840), and Le Fanu's "Carmilla" (1872). The male vampire appears in Stagg's ballad *The Vampyre* (1810), Polidori's *The Vampyre: A Tale* (1819), and Prest's *Varney the Vampyre, or The Feast of Blood* (1847). The culmination of the male vampire is, of course, Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) (Green 1988, 1375–1380).

In societies that honor the dead, failing to do so will result in the ghost returning. Motif E246, "Ghosts punish failure to sacrifice to them" can be found in ancient Greek, South American Indian (Brazil), and African tales. A similar motif is E245, "Ghosts punish failure to provide for their wants. Haunt man because he does not leave food and drink for them."

Motif E238, "Dinner with the dead" (also a tale type, AT 470, *Friends in Life and Death*), is extremely widespread throughout Europe. A man invites a dead friend to dinner, who then takes his host back to the land of the dead. During the journey through the otherworld they see many strange sights, and when the host finally returns to the world he finds he has been away many centuries, and he dies the next day. This motif also is prominent in the Don Juan legend, of Spanish folklore, which has been used in literary and operatic works.

FRIENDLY RETURN FROM THE DEAD

Seeing ghosts of the recently dead as relatively benign appears in anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's work with the Trobriand Islanders in Melanesia off the coast of Papua New Guinea:

The *kosi*, the ghost of the dead man, may be met on a road near the village, or be seen in his garden, or heard knocking at the houses of his friends and relatives, for a few days after death. People are distinctly afraid of meeting the *kosi*, and are always on the lookout for him, but they are not in really deep terror of him. (Malinowski 1954, 151)

Return of the Dead Mother

A mother's drive to protect her children is so strong that she can come back from the grave to suckle (E323.1.1, "Dead mother returns to suckle child"). This motif is particularly strong in Japanese death legends in oral, print, artistic, and film representations. A cluster of stories around the *ubume*—a mother who dies—explores the complex relationship of a mother, who has often died in childbirth, and her living child. Folklorists Michiko Iwasaka and Barre

Toelken note that the legends reveal ambivalence because the surviving child can be seen as causing the mother's death. "At the same time," they note, "a mother has a solid obligation to defend or nurture her child even in death; thus, not only does the child nurse at the breast, but it receives sweets or rice cakes which the mother's ghost provides at considerable expenditure of energy" (1994, 60–79).

The mother can return to help her children in other ways (E323.2, "Dead mother returns to aid persecuted children"). This motif as well as E366, "Return from dead to give counsel," is prominent in some versions of the Cinderella cycle (AT 510, *Cinderella and Cap o' Rushes*; AT 510A, *Cinderella*; AT 923, *Love Like Salt*), stories that are found virtually around the globe and go back thousands of years. The dead return to give counsel in tales from many cultures, including Irish, Icelandic, Italian, Finnish-Swedish, Jewish, Indian, Chinese, Korean, North American Indian (Iroquois, Onondaga), South American Indian (Brazilian), and African (Jaunde, Fang).

British folklorist Gillian Bennett (1999) notes that the British women whom she interviewed in her study of contemporary personal experience narratives of the supernatural, or *memorates*, distinguished between what they called "ghosts," who are malevolent (E280) and more kindly presences that she labeled "witnesses," often deceased family members, who comforted grieving relatives in some way (E366). In one interview, a woman told Bennett about the return of her deceased mother to forewarn and so prepare her children for a death in the family.

The Unquiet Grave

There is a large body of material involving the dead being unable to rest because of prolonged mourning by their survivors (C762.2, "Tabu: too much weeping for dead"), which prompts the ghost to return to ask them to cease weeping (E361). Sometimes the ghost returns to a lover, as in the ballad "The Unquiet Grave" (Child 78):

A twelvemonth and a day being past,
His ghost did rise and speak,
"What makes you mourn all on my grave
For you will not let me sleep?"
(Child 1965, 2:237, version B)

Frequently the ghost is a child returning to its parents (E324, "Child's friendly return to parents"). This motif is particularly widespread, occurring in British, Lithuanian, Spanish, Chinese, North American Indian (Pawnee), and Eskimo (Greenland) sources.

THE GRATEFUL DEAD

The motif of the grateful dead (E341) appears in a cluster of tales, AT 505–508, falling under the heading *The Grateful Dead*. In all these tales, the hero, who at the outset of his quest has spent his last penny to pay off creditors of a dead man so that the corpse can be buried, is later aided by a mysterious helper who turns out to be the ghost of that dead man. He appears sometimes as an old man, a servant, or a fox. According to Thompson the motif is ancient and probably originated in Hebrew literature in the story of Tobit (1977, 53). These tales were the subject of early monograph studies by Gerould (2000) and by Liljeblad (1927).

THE VANISHING HITCHHIKER

Most folklorists agree that the urban legend known as “the vanishing hitchhiker” (E332.3.3.1) is unique in being the only one concerned with the supernatural (Brunvand 2001), although Linda Dégh, disagreeing with Brunvand, argues that many urban legends and contemporary supernatural stories intersect (Dégh 2001). In this tale, a driver stops to pick up a young woman hitchhiker, drives her to her home, and finds that she has vanished from the car, except for leaving a scarf or sweater behind. Upon inquiring at the house about her, the driver finds that she has been dead for some time. Often the ghost has made similar attempts to return, usually on the anniversary of her death in an automobile accident.

WHY THOSE WHO DIE DO NOT RETURN TO LIFE

The dangers of speaking to the dead are illustrated in an African tale from the Bakongo. A girl whose family was dead goes one day to the market of the dead and sees the ghosts of her family members. When she tries to talk to them, they do not answer, and vanish (C497, “Tabu: speaking to the dead”). On subsequent days she repeatedly tries to talk to them until, finally, her grandmother relents. Then the ghosts warn the girl that she must not tell anyone that she has seen or talked with them. But the girl tells a friend, who, insisting on seeing for herself, accompanies her to the market the next day. The ghosts are angry and say that the friend may not leave. But when the girl leaves, her friend follows her down the road. One of the ghosts then decapitates the friend. The girl tells them to kill her too. Meanwhile, at home, when people cannot find the girls, they whistle for them. “But they heard nothing. That is how it happens that, to this day, when one is once dead, he is never seen again. Before that, if you whistled, you saw

them. It is the girl who did that by going to the market of the dead” (Feldmann 1963, 178–79).

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