Exploring the Nature of the Ghost in *Hamlet*

The Ghost in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* remains a literary fascination because it is impossible to deduce the actual intent and essence of what seems to be no more than a contradiction. The tug-of-war between the “pneumatological” (Gottschalk 86) and dramatic has played a significant role in lending *Hamlet* its genius and keeping readers captivated for centuries. Critics and scholars have tried for years to answer exactly what Shakespeare intended by the Ghost, but such an answer would be detrimental to the function of the play. When the audience questions the Ghost, the play takes on a more dramatic and personal feel because the audience is not omniscient and thus is unwittingly more involved in the doubt and emotion within the play. Examining the evidence for the Ghost both as honest and as diabolic is crucial in understanding the impossible complexity that *Hamlet* creates so that every audience across time can only speculate. Each person may draw his or her own conclusion, but with multiple possibilities and no concrete explanation, tension and suspense are accomplished in the story in a way that could not be accomplished if the audience were sure one way or another, thus the ambiguity of the ghost is intentional and necessary.

Historically, Elizabethan audiences would have been familiar with classical and Senecan ghosts, but very few revenge ghosts had come to the stage prior to *Hamlet* (Garber 485) (Spinrad 458). The ghost of a more classical work most often returned to “demand proper burial” since its body required specific arrangement in order for its soul to be at peace (Garber 485). The Senecan ghost more often represented loss of “order, stability, and sometimes even reason” and endeavored to “restore the order whose absence he represents through reparation” or revenge.
While the ghost in *Hamlet* does partially fit the Senecan revenge classification, it is also identified by the text as potentially being a purgatorial ghost, introducing the complexity of religious views on pneumatology, the study of spiritual beings.

Shakespeare boldly uses the controversial issue of the differences between Protestants and Catholics to add a complex dimension to an already vague character. While Protestants and Catholics agreed that ghosts were “more likely to be evil spirits than purgatorial or heavenly beings” (Spinrad 459), Catholics accepted that there *could* be purgatorial spirits, but according to Lavater, the Protestant view would deny that any “spirit can be released from hell, so the ghost [in *Hamlet*] must be a liar, and hence, a demon” (Gillespie, Stuart, and Rhodes 137). Protestants were especially anxious about the theatre in general, so the combination of what could easily be taken for an evil spirit and the existing “distrust of those engaged in the manipulation of appearance and reality” would lead to a variety of audience reactions (Freeman 246).

Shakespeare uses the Ghost to deliberately accentuate the “divisive issues separating Catholics and Protestants in the last half of the century” (Freeman 246-7) in another layer of controversy over the Ghost.

Interestingly, *Hamlet* is written in a way that reflects a more positive view of Catholicism, even though Protestantism was more prevalent at the time. The play chooses scenarios and elements that highlight the religious controversy of the “suppression of Catholic beliefs” (Freeman 247). Shakespeare’s allusions to Henry VIII’s marriage to his “dead brother’s widow” with the incestuous relationship of Claudius and Gertrude and a given defense of Purgatory are the most notable instances (Freeman 247). The more subtle jab at the differences of religion comes from Shakespeare’s decision to make both the Ghost and Hamlet
representatives of suppressed Catholic ideals while assigning the Protestant ties to the antagonist, Claudius, as in the instance of his prayer (Freeman 247).

In this way, critics have commented that Shakespeare uses Christianity for aesthetical and dramatic impact: “showing as he does a ruthless subordination of religious matter to dramatic effect, and a preference for eclectic imaginative synthesis over theological consistency” (Shell 116). For some, *Hamlet* has been labeled a “dramatic failure” due to this idea that it is neither “properly religious” nor “properly aesthetic” and thus falls somewhere in the middle, yet the play is a continued fascination and success (Fernie 166). Allison Shell counters this opinion with the words: “Shakespeare was a subsumer, someone who could be interpreted as sacrificing theological coherence on the altar of imaginative amplitude; and the result is that *Hamlet* is universally agreed to be great writing” (Shell 117). While the use of the word “universally” is a bold claim, Shakespeare’s use of controversy to provoke dramatic and religious effect is highly successful in triggering a strong audience reaction.

Shakespeare knew his audience. It would have been highly diverse, containing both the wealthy and the lowly, well-educated and illiterate, and people of various spiritual orientations. No matter how diverse their lives or beliefs may have been, everyone would have had a working knowledge of the same issues. Ewan Fernie offers the vivid comparison that “just as a jealous lover can know as much about the erotic as a happy one, so those offended by the religious can be just as insightful about its beliefs.” Shakespeare was not afraid to offend. With his understanding of the current culture and the controversies that caused passionate reactions, it becomes clear how Shakespeare prompted so much wide speculation on the true nature of the Ghost since the supposed meaning of the Ghost as intended by the writer could not be decided by personal opinion, but only interpreted by speculation. The conclusion one draws or fails to draw
plays a significant role in the final interpretation of the play, but even though there is strong evidence to support many positions, the true nature of the Ghost remains as much a mystery today as when *Hamlet* was first performed on stage.

In a literary sense, the identity of the Ghost seems certain – it is real. While some may speculate that the Ghost is no more than Hamlet’s subconscious, the opening scenes discredit this supposition since all four men (Bernardo, Marcellus, Horatio, and Hamlet) see the spectre: “That four men of varying temperaments and capacities should see and believe in the same ghost outlaws the possibility that any one of them is the victim of hallucination” (King 25). As observed by Walter King, the phrase “like the king” is unmistakably repeated five times, leading the viewers to believe that the Ghost was indeed the spirit of Hamlet’s father. Yet the emphasis on the word ‘like’ instead of ‘king’ leaves the more Protestant view open that the “ghost may be something other than Hamlet’s father” (King 23). This distinction in the Ghost’s identity “is left deliberately uncertain” (King 23) by Shakespeare in order to keep the audience in the same state as Hamlet in wondering whether the Ghost “is actually the spirit of the late king or a demon sent to tempt Hamlet to murder and suicide” (Gillespie, Stuart, and Rhodes 137). Both of these ideas have great appeal, support, and dramatic effect, but as the audience knows, only one of them can be correct. Since Shakespeare deliberately refrained from providing an answer, he gives his audience freedom to interact with his plot and provides researchers with another unanswerable question, which has been offered many different viewpoints and hypotheses, but none have resulted in more certainty than a broader appreciation for the complex catalyst of the play.

In examining the type of ghost that Shakespeare employs, the influence of the Senecan ghost is obvious, but not that of the classical ghost. The Ghost expresses that it is for his
“unabsolved sins that he is punished” not because his murderer still lives without punishment (Pearce xv):

I am thy father’s spirit,
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature
Are burnt and purged away. (1.5.9-13).¹

If it were a classical ghost, Hamlet would have been called to revenge for the purpose of allowing his father’s soul to rest in peace, but there is no mention of the Ghost escaping his ‘purging,’ only that of revenge. If it is assumed that the Ghost can be viewed from a Christian perspective as either a heavenly or purgatorial being or else a demon, many more possibilities and complex postulations exist. It is a very real possibility that the Ghost could be a demon, but it could also be a purgatorial ghost, a belief rejected by practicing Protestants. In addition, the motives and values behind dialogue in the play become deeply entrenched in the moral issues of any form of Christianity. The ambiguity that Shakespeare presents forces the audience to “move through” the characters in determining belief (Gottschalk 57). In other words, the audience responds to the feelings and viewpoints expressed within the play and considers the characters their most reliable source.

Most notably, Hamlet wrestles with doubt of the Ghost’s nature and intent continually through the play, beginning with immediate trust: “it is an honest ghost” (1.5.138), but upon further reflection observes:

The Spirit I have seen
May be a devil, and the devil hath power

T’ assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,
As he is very potent with such spirits,
Abuses me to damn me. (3.1.565-570)

But toward the end of the play (after the *The Mouse-trap*) he gradually seems to accept the
Ghost’s credibility and purpose. Horatio displays the same struggle, first showing a “frightened acceptance” of the Ghost’s identity (Gottschalk 79) and as Joseph Pearce speculates, he is of the opinion that the Ghost is genuinely purgatorial when he claims during his description to Hamlet that the Ghost had “a countenance more in sorrow than in anger” (1.2.31), implying “a penitential spirit from Purgatory, not a demon loosed from Hell” with a desire for justice, not vengeance (Pearce xvii). However, Horatio also makes strong references to the possibility of it being a malicious spirit. This continual contradiction and grappling in the characters’ own minds sharpens the doubt and suspense felt by Shakespeare’s audience.

Considered outside the rigid standards of a religious perspective, Marjorie Garber asserts that “old Hamlet appears to the audience as a virtuous and positive force, recalling a decaying kingdom to the time of its pride and strength” (491) and as “the voice of an older age of stable values” (488). Viewed as a stable memory of a better past and a positive voice of change, the Ghost has the potential to be believed and accepted as having a purpose based on justice, simply carried out in a theatrically dramatic way.

To introduce another viewpoint, Pearce has commented that “it should also be remembered that the Ghost sees things differently from every other character in the play. He has the eyes of eternity. He sees things as they are and not merely as they seem” to every other character (xv). This idea is especially fascinating because if it were true it would make the Ghost
the most reliable source of truth within the play, stating what “is, as opposed to what merely seems” (Pearce xv). The Ghost uses the word “revenge,” but when the situation is broken down and accepted as true, “there is a cold-blood murderer on the loose who has escaped the justice of the law” (Pearce xvii). That the Ghost represents truth and justice is one valid interpretation that may or may not have been Shakespeare’s intent. It may arguably be the most compelling argument since Hamlet is supposed to gain the audience’s sympathy in his actions which are prodded by the Ghost. But, sympathy due to pity and actual sympathy with both Hamlet and the Ghost are entirely separate and touch on the raw nerve of personal and moral interpretations. And with the strong presence of religion in Hamlet, it is hard not to consider the Ghost within a religious context as betraying the potential of a malicious being.

The tone of the initial meeting with the Ghost actually gives the impression of a sinister being. While the book form of the play gives the reader the benefit of the stage direction, “Enter the Ghost,” the Ghost is anything but concrete to the viewer (Garber 479). It is introduced as “this thing” (1.1.19), “this dreaded sight” (1.1.23), and an “illusion” (1.1.108), all of which are compounded by the sense of dread and fear experienced by the players who encounter it. So from the opening of the play, the audience associates a feeling of dread with something they quickly recognize as an apparition. The spectre consistently has the effect of inspiring terror (especially for Hamlet) throughout the play, causing Hamlet to “call [to God] for protection from ‘this thing’” (1.4.39) (Guilfoyle 63-4), a dynamic that forces tension and yet another perspective on the plot and deepens the ambiguity of the Ghost.

The religious twist in the Ghost’s character that adds the most complexity to the plot and character development is the claim that the Ghost is from purgatory. Fernie highlights the contradiction that it “is a creature come, not back from heaven as we would expect from such a
noble father but from Hell or Purgatory” (158). This registers as contradictory to a man described as:

So excellent a king, that was to this

Hyperion to a satyr, so loving to my mother,

That he might not beteem the winds of heaven

Visit her too roughly. (1.2.139-142)

This adds to bewilderment as too many perspectives blur and truth seems to be lost in the confusion.

Cited in defense of the ghost in fact being evil by many researchers, Lewis Lavater gives four conditions that a true purgatorial ghost should fulfill. The first is that “the ghost will at first somewhat terrify, but soon revive and comfort” (Spinrad 459). This condition is certainly not true of the ghost in *Hamlet*. It does terrify, and it never gives any semblance of comfort to those who see him, appearing numerous times with the same effect:

Thrice he walked

By their oppressed and fear-surpriséd eyes

Within his truncheon’s length, whilst they, distilled

Almost to jelly with the act of fear,

Stand dumb and speak not to him. (1.2.202-206)

Second, a purgatorial ghost “will answer and respond to invocations of God and his angels” (115). Rather than responding, the Ghost “stalks away offended when Horatio first charges it” (Spinrad 459):

If thou hast any sound or use of voice,

Speak to me.
If there be any good things to be done,
That may thee do ease, and grace to me,
Speak to me.
If thou art privy to thy country’s fate,
Which happily foreknowing may avoid,
O, speak! (1.1.128-135)

The whole of Horatio’s speech to the Ghost charges it to respond if he is a thing that is ‘good,’ but the Ghost immediately stalks off without speaking at the cock’s crow, leaving behind a solemn dread. Third, a purgatorial ghost “will not teach or require anything contrary to the teachings of the church” (Spinrad 459). The Ghost’s charge to “revenge” seems to be out of keeping with a soul who is supposed to be atoning for his sins. Finally, a purgatorial ghost would be “humble, repentant; no groaning, weeping, complaint, boasting, threatening, etc.” (Spinrad 460). Instead, the Ghost appears in a show of armor, power, and dread, and although Shakespeare included previously mentioned detail of being originally sorrowful, not angry, the Ghost’s purpose and conversation is not in keeping with a humble and repentant soul and does not resist anger for long.

By these standards, it is easy to reason that the Ghost is, in fact, evil. Further, the spirit “relies on sensual imagery of lust and incest to arouse Hamlet’s emotions,” appealing to “what is violent in Hamlet’s nature, not to what is reasonable” (Gottschalk 57):

that incestuous, that adulterate beast,
With witchcraft of his wits, with traitorous gifts –
O wicked wit and gifts that have the power
So to seduce! – won to his shameful lust
The will of my most seeming virtuous queen. (1.5.42-45)

In view of such, its warning to Hamlet: “Taint not thy mind,” (1.5.85) seems backward and hypocritical since in stirring Hamlet to unchristian acts, it can be argued that the Ghost has been tainting his mind (Gottschalk 57), “pouring poison in the ears of Hamlet, inflaming him to agony, soul-searching, and revenge” (Garber 489). Yet the question of “whether Shakespeare’s audience on the whole was nearly as strict as Lavater in its views on the ghost” (Gottschalk 143) remains highly doubtful. The subject was too prevalent in the popular culture of ballads and learned writing to assume that the presence of the Ghost would not have been so scandalous as to deserve so severe an analysis and may not be as large a factor in interpreting a literary character as the source might claim.

It was the diversity of audience beliefs and potential reactions that gave Shakespeare so much flexibility in creating the Ghost, achieving the contradiction of both a brilliantly artistic and developed character and a frustrating and inscrutable one. Gottschalk says it best: “Shakespeare’s handling of the ghost opens up numerous roads of interpretation, none of which, however, are exclusively indicated by the text” (147). So one cannot possibly claim with confidence that the Ghost matches his or her view, but is forced to adopt the changing and doubtful viewpoints of the characters within the play: “If Hamlet, for whatever reasons, says he will test the Ghost, and afterwards is convinced that the Ghost has passed the test, then so is the audience” (Gottschalk 59). It is “not a question of whether Shakespeare or even the audience believed in purgatory or even approved of it, because the play accepts that there is” (Spinrad 460). This is a natural phenomenon; the art of a play is, in fact, make believe, and so is not meant to be taken entirely literally. Coleridge claimed that “great literary art requires of its audience the willing suspension of disbelief” (King 22). Certainty of the nature of the Ghost is impossible, yet
the spirit serves as the catalyst for all the action of the play, thus the “real issue” lies in Hamlet’s reaction (Gottschalk 61).

The audience would certainly have considered various religious, cultural, and literary possibilities of the Ghost’s meaning, but the impossibility of establishing the answer is insignificant. Even if the Ghost is evil, Hamlet believes it is good. The audience accepts that as true until the actor gives them reason to doubt. Shakespeare uses the contradictions and scenes of confusion provided by the Ghost to maintain a tense and dynamic plot. Had Shakespeare offered an explicit explanation of the Ghost’s nature, he would have completely destroyed the purpose of sustaining ambiguity in the play. Hamlet’s strength is that every angle is uniquely present, but no specific one dominates, allowing each person to determine the doubts and certainties.
Works Cited


