

This Old House

by Kathleen Watt

When three-time Oscar-nominee Sir Richard Rodney Bennett sat down in 1965 to compose his first opera, he chose a Gothic thriller called "The Mines of Sulphur" which gets a good many of its shivers from the creepy house where it all takes place.

THE VERY MENTION of “haunted houses” conjures turrets and towers, cantilevered shadows, ginger-breaded gables and multichambered libraries. Remember Hill House? The Bates’s place? George Bailey’s love nest *cum* happy home was idealized in the film classic *It’s a Wonderful Life*, but everybody knows that cash-strapped George snagged that drafty old house only because it was “haunted”.

Now haunted houses have become big business. You can enjoy fine dining in celebrated crypts all over London. You can trace Jack the Ripper’s footsteps, if that’s your thing. Sleep in Lizzie Borden’s bedroom. Even order the breakfast Lizzie ate (hold the rancid mutton, please), the fateful day somebody somehow whacked her folks.

What gives haunted houses their tingly allure? Theories abound—some of which are surprisingly sturdy. Unsurprisingly, none of those mention leisure-time activity. That familiar haunted-house look is the signature architecture of the Victorian Era, which is when house-haunting came into its own. That look is familiar because it’s been canonized by psychothriller authors like Edgar Allan Poe. And those houses are still very much with us.

The Victorian Era spanned most of the nineteenth century, neatly bracketed (for haunting purposes) by Poe’s birth in 1809 and Queen Victoria’s death in 1901. The era became a winter-garden for the neurasthenic culture scholars call “Gothic”. Volatile competing social and economic developments had left people feeling shaky, and longing for the folkish culture of simpler times. Discrepancies between Victorian idealism and reality could be grotesque. Still, magic arts, hypnosis, somnambulism and freak shows

became popular. Boundaries blurred between religion and sexuality, and imagination, however aroused, seemed a likely portal to spiritual truth—wherever it may lead.

In mid-century, Britannia's Prince and Queen's consort, Albert himself, succumbed to typhoid fever, whereupon the heartbroken Queen Victoria put on widow's weeds, and reigned forty years more, over the worldwide British empire. "Bereavement and fidelity beyond the grave are the truly great Victorian themes," writes critic Michael Browning. "Death and mourning became a solemn and slow public ecstasy, charged with meaning and prolonged for decades. Death becomes better than sex, [for] Victorians were in love with mourning."

At the same time, the societal potential to advance appeared unlimited. An Industrial Revolution, first in England and later in America, seemed to secure human dominion once and for all. Science and medicine made pioneering breakthroughs. Then, if ever, it should have been understood that mysteries are ultimately knowable—if not at once, then certainly at length. Instead, miracle machinery, urbanization and organized commerce loosed contagious anxieties about the relevance of being merely human. A kind of "crypt" opened in the century's unquiet psyche, where indecorous primal fears could be stowed.

Sigmund Freud would begin to unpack them. In his essay "The Uncanny (*Unheimlich*)" (1919), Freud wrote, "Many experience [this feeling] especially in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts. All supposedly educated people have ceased to believe officially that the dead can become visible as spirits...[but]...there is scarcely any other matter upon which our thoughts and feelings have changed so little since the very earliest times."

He then suggests that this psychological "crypt" may contain "residues" left behind by former experiences (one's own or others'), that can be projected, transposed onto objects, locations, or people. Legacies, for example, through family shame or reputation, or material inheritance, may be stashed ("repressed", in Freud-speak) in this crypt. "Anything that frightens because it is a recurrence of something believed to have

been put away” most likely has escaped from the crypt, you see. “The uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but familiar, old-established in the mind, which has become alienated by repression.” Here is a clue to the power of haunted houses.

In *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1839), Poe created the primer on the haunted house. It featured:

“...excessive antiquity...crumbling stones... pestilent, mystic vapor, dull, sluggish, faintly discernible, leaden-hued...a sense of insufferable gloom...bleak walls...vacant, eye-like windows.” The interior is “airless, dismal, and repellent.” The furniture, “profuse, comfortless, antique, and tattered.”

Poe allows the house to suggest the dilapidation of the Ushers who live within. Their emotional collapse becomes physical, and the family’s demise exposes societal fallacies that have undermined them like rotten daub-and-wattle.

In *The House of Seven Gables* (1851), Nathaniel Hawthorne describes a similarly pathetic local house in Salem, Massachusetts. The “rusty wooden house,” fitting Poe’s model, channels an earlier century’s moral decay, which leaches into successive generations, through secrets and guilt:

“...its boards, shingles, and crumbling plaster... the huge, clustered chimney in the midst...the very timbers were oozy....like a great human heart, with a life of its own...as though it had secrets to keep, bearing traces...of the long lapse of mortal life, and accompanying vicissitudes that have passed within.”

Literary haunted houses gave form to smoldering anxieties already stoked regularly by sensationalized police blotters that read like Gothic fiction. Jack the Ripper cowed the civilized world in 1888 with a spree of gruesome killings, still technically unsolved, in the foggy gloom of London’s East End. In sweltering August, 1892, Fall River, Massachusetts prosecuted the double-ax-murder of the prominent Borden.

The reality of Lizzie Borden’s home was a feng-shui nightmare, well suited to haunting. Cramped, unfancy, old-fashioned. No gaslights, no toilet or tub. A “well-appointed parlor devoid of grace or charm,” with “the usual garish, flowered carpet, [and] wallpaper of a similarly disturbing pattern.” Interconnecting bedrooms were locked and

blocked by heavy horsehair furniture. Certainly the demons that haunted this sad house were all too terribly real--inside the people who lived inside of it.

You could say they made the house what it is today: The Lizzie Borden B 'n' B, triple-H rated (a *Ghost!* magazine "Highly Haunted Hotel"), restored to "its original Victorian splendor." Now offering "live re-enactments."

Lizzie occupies that crypt in the psyche where we safely face fears and fantasies. "Lizzie exists for us as an agent of disruption," writes Lizzie specialist, Gabriela Schalow Adler. "We enjoy the frisson of suspecting her."

Many who write smartly about spirits never believe in them at all. Dickens favored the gastrointestinal hypothesis: "a bit of undigested beef...a fragment of underdone potato!" Contemporary fright-master Stephen King pronounces Gothic culture "as Republican as a three-piece-suit."

Others, like Shirley Jackson ("The Haunting of Hill House", 1959), are half-seriously suspected of being unnatural themselves. When Jackson went scouting for a house to write about, she found the ideal "air of disease and decay...if ever a house looked like a candidate for a ghost, it was this one." Investigating further, Jackson discovered it had been built by her own great grandfather. "Jackson's great gift is not to create a world of fantasy and terror," wrote critic Elizabeth Janeway, "but to discover the existence of the grotesque in the ordinary world."

Not that it's all in our heads. A 2001 Gallup poll found approximately 38% of Americans believe ghosts exist. Reputable scientists have devoted significant resources to tracking them down. Concluding unequivocally that "haunt phenomena" are indeed real and measurable, *The British Journal of Psychology* reports that they "do *not* represent... ghostly activity. [They are] instead the result of people responding--perhaps unwittingly--to normal factors in their surroundings." Albert Donnay of Johns Hopkins School of Public Health has diagnosed in Poe's writings classic symptoms of chronic carbon monoxide poisoning, likely caused by coal-illuminating-gas, which also may have heightened the sensation of horror in his readers, similarly poisoned.

We may hope that modern hauntings end like one reported recently in Austria. A middle-aged woman with a grudge was jailed for scaring the bejezzus out of her husband's boss, by creeping into his alpine castle, and making ghostly sounds.

Still, to dismiss lightly the secrets of the crypt is foolhardy. Jackson writes sensibly, "People have to live and die somewhere, after all, and a house can hardly stand for eighty years without seeing some of its inhabitants die within its walls." But when Eleanor cries, "Hill House is vile, it is diseased; get away from here at once...", Jackson has descended to her crypt, as surely as Madeline Usher to the vault, or the gypsies to the cellar of Braxton manor house. We thrill with them to be touched by a faint feather of unspeakable secrets, satisfied that the crypt is not our own.

Or...is it?