

Haunted Texts: Ghosts and the Literary Imagination

Course Description

Ghosts are difficult to explain; they are often meant to defy logic and even reason. They typically evoke an experience that we, as modern subjects, both fear and cherish, pursue and flee. This experience is often unnerving, traumatic, and even maddening, but it can also be funny, illuminating, and healing.

In this course, we will explore literary representations of spectrality in order to unpack their ideological and aesthetic dimensions. We will also read brief excerpts from philosophical texts that theorize supernatural appearances either as positive and actual phenomena or as negative, residual, or even nonexistent (delusional) forms of reality.

Through the careful analysis of this diverse body of texts, we will pose a series of questions about the spectral genre and, perhaps, identify some tentative answers. Why are ghosts and modernity so deeply intertwined? What are the moral and even didactic implications of ghost stories? Are there appropriate epistemological approaches and sensory tools for perceiving and understanding ghosts? What are the politics of these apparitions and their often veiled connections to revolutionary movements and conservative counterrevolutions? Why has the literary ghost established such a privileged relationship with female characters and subjectivities? Finally, how are we, as readers, to reconcile history and time with the emergence of beings from another time—or perhaps from a non-temporal dimension?

Ultimately, ghosts provide a remarkably productive point of entry into a wide range of cognitive, social, cultural, and political questions that remain deeply relevant today.