

Seven Ghost Stories from American Folklore

In an article entitled “The Usefulness of Ghost Stories,” Utah State University’s Jeannie Banks Thomas writes:

Believers and nonbelievers alike tell ghost stories because the narratives contain cultural issues relevant to their audience. If the content of a narrative ceases to be interesting to its audiences, it ceases to be told. What ghost stories indicate about the culture of the living can be discerned through attention to narrative detail and storytelling context. When seeking the cultural “truths” revealed by a ghost story, the following are useful questions with which to start:

1. *Cultural Values*: What cultures does the story reflect? What cultural values or “truths” (historical or contemporary) can be discerned in the narrative? Does it reveal or reinforce cultural values?
2. *Cultural Stresses and Conflicts*: Does the story present issues about which there is fear, stress, or conflict in the culture? How are these issues handled in the narrative? What views of trauma, death, and the body emerge from the story?

DIRECTIONS: After reading Seven Ghost Stories from American Folklore, choose any THREE and complete the following activities using the Jeannie Banks Thomas’ criteria for understanding how ghost stories work as a type of cultural narrative. There is a full example on the back side of this sheet.

1. Label which story you are writing about.
2. List one cultural value that the story seems to be addressing. Cultural values are the commonly held standards of what is acceptable or unacceptable, important or unimportant, right or wrong, workable or unworkable, etc., in a community or society. For example, “Education is important,” is a cultural value, as is, “Selfish behavior should be condemned.”
3. Explain how this cultural value is related to a conflict in the ghost story. Remember, conflicts may be internal (person vs. self) or external. If they are external they can be against other people (person vs. person), nature (person vs. nature), or society (person vs. society).
4. Explain how this conflict is related to a larger anxiety or fear in society.

For example, urban legends about escaped people from mental institutions are, in part, related to the way that people feel less safe than they used to feel. Living in a city exposes people to ideas and people who are very different than themselves, and there is a fear that this exposes people to danger in a way that did not exist when people mostly lived in small, rural communities where everyone had the same ideas and lived in the same ways. The escaped mental patient is a symbol of the way that people are vulnerable to contaminating ideas in the city, almost as if the escaped mental patient were a disease. It is the fear of the unknown.

For example (using the two example from #2), one fear related to education is that it might not be enough to guarantee a middle class lifestyle in the way that it did in the past. Maybe there’s a lot more luck involved with success than we’d like to admit. Similarly, society condemns selfishness, but there have always been counter-examples of people who got ahead by not caring about others. Maybe our society even rewards those who don’t care about others and

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we are a lot less virtuous than we'd like to pretend. Everyone likes to think that they're a good person, so it's scary to acknowledge that maybe we're part of a society whose values exist more in words than in practice. It's even scarier to ask ourselves if we're part of the problem.

5. Write a short paragraph about how this conflict (both in the story and the larger cultural fear) helps to develop a theme in the ghost story. Remember, a theme is either a message that the story is trying to communicate to the reader or a description of the way the world works.

For example, "war" is a topic. However, a theme might be something like "war is terrible" or "war is traumatic for the individuals who fight in them." A theme is the point of view of the text that the author is trying to communicate to the reader. Use the resolution to the conflict to help you develop the explanation of the theme.

This should be at least four or five sentences, and it should explain it in such a way that even if you have not read the ghost story, the reader would still be able to understand your argument.

Example (using the Little Red Riding folktale in the Charles Perrault version):

1. Little Red Riding Hood
2. The story concerns the innocence of children.
3. This innocence is expressed in the person vs. person conflict in the story. The wolf tricks Little Red Riding Hood into isolating herself so that he can take advantage of her. This only works because Little Red Riding Hood is too naïve to understand that sometimes people do not want the best for others, even if they seem friendly.
4. This conflict is related to the larger cultural fear of adults who take advantage of children. The poem at the end of this version of the folktale makes it clear that the wolf is a metaphor for a sexual predator who takes advantage of young females. Society is frightened by the idea of people of this sort who take advantage of the innocence of youth because it is difficult to protect younger people, since they lack the experience to understand that the world is a dangerous place.
5. This version of the Little Red Riding Hood story argues that one should be careful of whom you trust. In the story, Little Red Riding meets a wolf in the forest and stops to talk to him, not understanding that it is dangerous to talk to wolves. Because she trusts him, the wolf is able to trick Little Red Riding Hood into isolating herself in her grandmother's cottage, far away from any help. Because she is innocent and trusting, Little Red Hood is eaten by the wolf, a metaphor for the way dangerous people try to take advantage of children who are too ready to trust friendly-seeming adults. Had Little Red Hood stayed on the path and ignored the wolf, she would have lived and (metaphorically) retained her sexual innocence. In this way, the story warns against the danger of sexual predators who trick young girls into making uninformed decisions.