

**Ghosts and Angels in the House:
Cecilia de Noel and the Search for Faith in the Late Nineteenth Century**

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<1>The nineteenth century, so often thought of as the age of scientific theory, technological change, and realism in fiction, abounds with supernatural phenomena. Reports of psychical research, spirit and fairy photographs, ghost stories and poetry about haunted houses and fairy realms attest to a fascination with beings and experiences science had not explained. Popular interest in spiritualism began as early as the 1850s but intensified in the later decades of the nineteenth century evidenced, in part, by the establishment of the Society for Psychical Research (1882). While some readers and observers of culture could define practices and texts related to the supernatural as pernicious because irreligious or unscientific, others could appreciate ghost stories at least as imaginative entertainment resulting in pleasurable fear but not otherwise significant. However, these stories can be read as serious and profound explorations of the unknown and the moral, philosophical, and spiritual questions with which we continue to struggle.

<2>Ghost stories of the period rarely dramatize séances or psychical research⁽¹⁾ but they are in dialogue with such activities, commenting – sometimes obviously, sometimes obliquely – on the issues raised by belief in an afterlife or a realm of spirits whose denizens could communicate with the living. Typically, ghosts in fiction are not invoked by living characters who instead seek to banish or liberate them.⁽²⁾ Yet the stories themselves invoke the possibility of ghosts, making them powers that must be interpreted and therefore invite speculation about just the kinds of questions spiritualists engaged. Of all the ghost stories published during the period, perhaps none enters the debate about faith, doubt, and doctrine so compellingly as *Cecilia de Noel* (1892) by Lanoe Falconer (Mary Elizabeth Hawker). *Cecilia* is particularly helpful in understanding the epistemological and spiritual conflicts of the time since it employs ghost story conventions to question prominent Christian doctrines and religiously inflected gender conventions.

<3>Before discussing *Cecilia's* contribution to discourses on spiritualism and conventional Christianity, I want to emphasize that ghost stories engaged with issues far more complex than

a disagreement between the material and the spiritual, the scientific and the religious.⁽³⁾ While some spiritualists distrusted science, psychical researchers defined themselves precisely by their desire to use scientific methods to investigate the spiritual. Some of them were skeptical, while others believed that science would eventually affirm the existence of life beyond death. Some spiritualists were anti-religion, while some regarded spiritualism as a religion, and many combined spiritualist and Christian beliefs (Owen 22; 91-94). Institutional religion, which often took issue with scientific epistemology and conclusions, had a complex relationship with spiritualism as well. Arthur Conan Doyle asserted, “No class has shown itself so sceptical and incredulous of modern Spiritual manifestations as those very clergy who profess complete belief in similar occurrences in bygone ages, and their utter refusal to accept them now is a measure of the sincerity of their professions” (2:247). Doyle found the Jesuits and the Evangelicals “his most persistent enemies” (Kerr 205) due to their “literal interpretation of the Bible” (Doyle qtd. in Kerr 205). Significantly, in the Bible ghosts are rare, and as Sze-kar Wan explains, were demonized by biblical writers. However, Georgina Byrne argues that spiritualists were increasingly “likely to emphasize [spiritualism’s] presence in the Bible,” that Doyle later recognized that many clergymen were sympathetic to spiritualism (103), and that the Anglican church was eventually influenced by spiritualist ideas about the afterlife, particularly the repudiation of eternal suffering, progress of the soul, and universal salvation (3-10; chs 5, 7-8). For example, Frederic Farrar, Canon of Westminster, supported these ideas in sermons delivered in 1877, citing early Christian writers. His sermons were controversial; only a few commentators granted his argument some merit. However, evidence of partial acceptance of the progress of the soul after death is evident in a collection of essays published in 1889 and in the growing acceptance of prayers for the dead in the last decades of the century (122- 29). Byrne writes that “[b]y 1915 . . . Hastings Rashdall could even, publically and without fear of reprisal, describe Jesus’ own teaching as ‘latent Universalism’” (qtd. in Byrne 125).⁽⁴⁾

<4>This acceptance developed over time, however, and Spiritualism was also controversial because, as many writers have pointed out, it threatened established authority in both scientific and religious communities, particularly in the power often attributed to women as mediums and leaders of spiritualist circles and sometimes of a lower class than their clients. Although historians disagree about the degree of power women attained through spiritualism, women had for some time had an equivocal power in spiritual matters. In the domestic sphere, middle-class women were supposed to exert a religious influence on their families, ideally serving as self-sacrificing domestic moral monitors or “angels in the house”⁽⁵⁾ Middle-class morality gained in influence with some upper-class and aspiring working-class people as well. Given that ideology, as Vanessa D. Dickerson argues, women seemed to have affinities with ghosts as “invisible” but also powerful beings: “Little wonder that in Victorian England women could and did discover in the supernatural some of those ‘new and compensatory fields’ [Olive] Schreiner mentions, not only playing key roles in the popularizing of . . . mesmerism and

spiritualism, but also contributing to the tremendous output of ghost stories(6) that provided a counter to the scientism, skepticism, and materialism of the age” (5).

<5>Writers of ghost stories held a significant position in the debate because they could experiment without committing themselves. They could, in a sense, contact the ghostly “other” without risking denunciation, except from those who still equated fiction with lies or frivolity or thought that fiction should strive for realism. Precisely because ghost stories were a popular genre, they might escape some of the criticism accorded longer, apparently more significant works (Dickerson 110-11). Presented as popular entertainment, ghost stories might work subversively in ways that “serious” literary genres and arguments could not. Dickerson argues that ghost stories written by Victorian men are generally “more diagnostic, clinical, journalistic, and vested in mensuration” (note 8; 7) than those written by Victorian women who are more likely to identify with the visibility/invisibility or “in between” state of the ghost (7). Identifying and sympathizing with the ghost could subvert orthodox doctrines in ways that spoke to changing sensibilities.

<6>Discourse on the spiritual that avoided strict doctrine was attractive to Victorian audiences, according to Christopher Lane, who explains that scientific discoveries were not the sole, or even the main, reason some people turned away from Christianity, or in many cases, as Byrne demonstrates, modified their Christian beliefs. J.S. Mill criticized “religious hatred,” arguing that doctrines were simply justifications for “whatever people do that they think laudable” (qtd. in Lane 74). David DeLaura contends that alienation from established religion resulted primarily from “a growing repugnance toward the *ethical* implications of what [many] had been taught to view as essential Christianity—especially a set of interrelated doctrines: Original Sin, Reprobation, Baptismal Regeneration, Vicarious Atonement, Eternal Punishment” (qtd. in Lane 74). It seems especially ironic that the loving angel in the house should be supposed to support such views as eternal punishment. Moreover, many people wanted to connect with lost loved ones, particularly children. Regardless of doctrine, they wanted to believe that these spirits were safe and happy (or at least, redeemable) and would be reunited with their loved ones.

<7>The idea of universal salvation did not originate with spiritualists but was prominent in their discourse.(7) Eventually, Byrne argues, universal salvation and other tenets of spiritualism would have a strong influence on Anglican belief since religions are not static, monolithic entities but “dynamic process[es] of negotiation, susceptible to the common culture of which [they are] a part” (17). This common culture included ghost stories as part of a discourse that helped people engage with and revise beliefs about the metaphysical. Even frightening ghost stories, as Julia Briggs notes, might reassure readers of existence beyond the material (24).

<8>Significantly, Falconer’s contribution, the novella *Cecilia de Noel*, presents an appalling ghost with the apparent purpose of ultimate reassurance. The work is little known today even with

the resurgence of interest in the supernatural. Although Falconer's writing was popular during her lifetime, illness limited her career.⁽⁸⁾ Additionally, the length of *Cecilia* may have discouraged its inclusion in most ghost story anthologies. This neglect is unfortunate because Falconer's work uses the humor, irony, and pathos of a sympathetically developed narrator to illuminate ethical, spiritual, scientific and gender questions. Some might dismiss the title character as conventional, but if Cecilia ultimately seems an angel or "miracle" (53), the qualities she possesses are presented as both rare and ordinary (in the sense that they are not brilliant or flamboyant). Moreover, these qualities cross gender lines, not possessed by all women nor impossible to men. Reading *Cecilia* within the conversations of its day allows us to understand more fully what was at stake for spiritual seekers and suggests why this story might have especially engaged the attention of such readers.

<9> Cecilia is at first a ghostly presence/absence in the story that bears her name, often mentioned but not appearing until nearly the end. As the skeptical George Atherley comments about ghost sightings revealing their tellers' preoccupations, descriptions of Cecilia may tell more about the speaker than about her. Talked of but not seen, she cannot be the controlling consciousness of the text. While she is consequently in the "in between" state Dickerson posits for women and ghosts, engagement with the *problem* of being in between, of an ambiguous gender and an ambivalent state of mind, is personified by the narrator, Lyndsay. Accused by a devout curate of "dallying between belief and unbelief" (233) Lyndsay is actually searching for a conviction that will relieve what, at times, amounts to psychological and spiritual despair. He can be read as a representative of the spiritual seekers at the end of the nineteenth century, dissatisfied with traditional revelations.

<10> His ambiguous gender is not incidental to his spiritual and emotional difficulties. As Mrs. Molyneux, who is also seeking spiritual knowledge says to him, "you know what it is to be weak and suffering; you are as sympathetic as a woman, and more merciful than some women" (242). As a sympathetic listener and spiritual seeker, Lyndsay is qualified to hear the stories of those who experience the ghost. Like the women in Dickerson's study, he may be said to be both powerful and powerless, but in a somewhat different way. As a landowner, he has typically "masculine" duties and status, but because of a spinal injury suffered in a riding accident, his stamina is limited, and he attributes the breaking off of his engagement to his disability. He cannot, as his friend George Atherley points out, "hunt or shoot or fish off the blues, like other men" (200). More problematically, like so many "privileged" women of his time, he cannot "work them off. . . . I possessed no distinct talents, no marked vocation" (200). That Lyndsay's in between nature is not entirely the result of his accident is suggested by George's opinion that he is "as well-behaved as a woman, without a woman's grand resources of hysterics and general unreasonableness all round. *You always were* a little too good for human nature's daily food (189, italics added). Such a description sounds like the angel in the

house. George feels that he must protect Lyndsay, while Lyndsay, “help[s] himself from step to step by Atherley’s arm, as instinctively, as unconsciously almost, as [Atherley] offered it” (102). Maureen O’Connor contends that Oscar Wilde’s work employs “an adaptation of ‘feminine’ rhetoric as a means of affronting masculinist imperatives of orthodoxy and order, what Wilde deplores as the ‘brutality of plain realism’” (qtd. in O’Connor 331). She cites Alan Sinfield’s argument that “[e]ffeminacy correlates with a readiness to overthrow received categories, and with slighting masculine rationality” (qtd. in O’Connor 331). Lyndsay’s amorphous position contributes to his difficulties, yet gives him the capacity to cross gender lines, to be accepted as a peer by both men and women who trust him to listen both rationally and sympathetically to their stories.

<11>These stories appear in chapters dramatizing the experience and beliefs of the characters who have a stake in Lyndsay’s spiritual questions, each one named for the character’s creed (i.e. “Atherley’s Gospel”). George Atherley appropriates the first chapter, in fact, the first words of the story: “There is no revelation but that of science” (185). George continues to expound this gospel, providing a “scientific” reading of each ghostly experience. Much of the story’s humor comes from Atherley’s attributing “unreasonableness” to others. He marvels, for example, at the “amount of information [that] is always forthcoming about things of which nobody can know anything – as about the next world, for instance. The last time I went to church the preacher gave as minute an account of what our post-mortem experiences were to be as if he had gone through it all himself several times” (190). He also claims to have been “haunted for weeks [after a séance in which Professor Delaine’s spirit] danced on the table and spelt bliss with one ‘s’ that there might be a future life, in which we should make fools of ourselves in the same way” (226). Here George echoes the tart observations critics of spiritualism raised about an afterlife in which people would lose their intellectual abilities and have to perform parlor tricks.[\(9\)](#)

<12>Lady Atherley, George’s wife, while orthodox in religion, undermines the idea that domestic women are angels with her consistently worldly approach to every subject. Lyndsay finds her “presence, so much more fatal than [George’s] eloquence to all but the tangible and the solid. . . . [T]he universe itself appears to me only a gigantic apparatus especially designed to provide Lady Atherley and her class with cans of hot water at stated intervals, costly repasts elaborately served, and all other requisites of irreproachable civilization” (189). Lady Atherley forbids her servants to mention the ghost haunting her home and excludes “religious discussions” from her dining and drawing rooms because “they make people so cross” (208). She fails to see why Mr. Austyn, the curate, should object to dining out in Lent “because it is possible to have a very nice dinner without meat” (227). The materialist gospel, although Lyndsey can make fun of it, oppresses him because it gives no answer to his agonized desire to

“pierce through sense, time, space, everything” and find sympathy and meaning beyond the life he knows (194).

<13>This materialist approach is shared by another representative of science, the doctor, who believes in ghosts “just as I do in all symptoms” (201). However, his face, “so virile, yet so delicate, so young and yet so sad” (203) and his tendency to “individualise like a woman” (202) in caring for his patients suggests that he shares Lyndsay’s in between state. He appears unhappy with his “gospel” that all humans can do is make the world a little less miserable to those who suffer. Moreover, this “conviction has wavered” because he has known a few “unremarkable” people, such as “Mrs. de No—” (203). This interrupted speech indicates that he is not, as George claims to be, impervious to doubt about his creed, but he cannot fully articulate his meaning. He only voices one of the many hints that Cecilia de Noel, as her name implies, could be the source of a new and saving belief, although she is unremarkable.

<14>Perhaps the most disturbing gospel belongs to Mrs. Mostyn, a vigorous, elderly woman who seems at first to be an angel in the house: Lyndsay thinks of her home as like “a glowing hearth . . . to the beggar on the doorstep” (206). He is just beginning to be soothed by his visit to her when she gives him her interpretation of the ghost, which she saw when she was young. She reads the spirit as an eternally “lost soul” (212) and attributes the beginning of her godly life to her experience with it. Emphasizing that the suffering of the condemned is eternal pain and that they can never be forgiven, she points out that preachers avoid this truth as “[i]t is considered too shocking for our modern notions” (112). These “modern notions” are similar to the spiritualist beliefs that Byrne argues were changing the church’s discourse. In fact, Byrne thinks spiritualists tended to exaggerate “hell-fire teaching” in the Church of England but admits that it was “certainly present and implicit” (139) and that “[t]he possibilities for post-mortem repentance, forgiveness and spiritual progress gradually emerging in academic theology were not widely or publically offered to ordinary church goers in the late nineteenth century” (143). Mrs. Mostyn, however, has noticed a lack of emphasis on eternal torment, which suggests that theological debate was influencing religious discourse in Falconer’s experience. Mrs. Mostyn’s brand of Anglican Calvinism allows her to assure herself that she and even her materialist nephew George are of the chosen. She insists gently that Lyndsay has “only to believe. . . and then you are safe . . . for evermore” (213). When Lyndsay thinks of the souls in hell, she replies that “[o]nly the wicked!” will be there (213). The soothing tone in which she delivers this cruel gospel is especially disturbing. Lyndsay concludes that her doctrine “drives men to madness or despair” because it evokes the idea of “illimitable omnipotent Malice” (213). The “phantom” (214) of Mrs. Mostyn’s revelation vanishes only with the concerned touch of one of George’s little sons, hinting at Cecilia’s gospel at the end of the story.

<15>Ministers of the Anglican church might be thought capable of taking on a ghost, but Briggs notes “the inadequacy of the Church, now largely deprived of its magical powers to cope with insubstantial ‘spectral illusions’” (22). Exceptions in fiction do exist; for example, in Margaret Oliphant’s “The Open Door” (1881), a kindly rural clergyman succeeds in sending a wandering soul home to God. Although he is a representative of the church, however, he also seems “unremarkable”—not highly educated or traveled in contrast to the story’s doctor and the former colonial officer who are baffled by the supernatural. Still, only men and a boy are directly engaged with “The Open Door’s” spirit; middle-class women and girls are protected from knowledge of it even though Oliphant’s ghost is more pathetic and not nearly as frightening as Falconer’s, which is described as “dreadful” (211, 242), “horrible” (223), “evil” (232), “much worse than I had dreaded it would be” (251). Falconer’s ghost presents a far more formidable challenge to the male authority of the church.

<16>Canon Vernade, who preaches against the vanities of earthly life, is undercut even before his encounter with the ghost. George opines that Vernade’s sermon “was really a splendid performance. But who on earth was he talking about—those wonderful people who don’t care for money or success, or the best of everything generally? I never met any like them” (218). George has certainly pegged Vernade who a few paragraphs later laments that his old school friend Jackson will never get ahead in the church because he “has an unhappy knack of blurting out the truth” offending potential patrons. Moreover, Jackson made “such an imprudent marriage – a woman without a penny!” (219). That the ghost’s expression of despair challenges Vernade’s faith is not surprising. He can only ask “What if [faith] were all a delusion?” Lyndsay, helpless in the face of the Canon’s doubt, thinks of “the brotherhood which united us, poor human atoms, strong only in our capacity to suffer, tossed and driven, witherward we knew not, in the purposeless play of soulless and unpitying forces” (223). The man conventionally supposed to be Lyndsay’s spiritual guide has nothing to offer him.

<17>Beautiful and brilliant Mr. Austyn, the curate, seems to be one of those people George has never met who do not care for fine living, money, or promotion. In Lyndsay’s view Austyn speaks “in the manner of a man well informed, cultured, thoughtful, original even, and at the same time with no warmer interest in all he spoke of than the inhabitant of another planet might have shown” (228). These characteristics make Lyndsay feel “repelled as well as attracted” (230) and suggest that Austyn is in this world but not of it, like a chilly space alien rather than a ghost, transcendent and not human.

<18>With his deep commitment to religion and his detachment from earthly life, Austyn may seem to represent those attracted to mysticism. Significantly, his trouble putting his experience into words is typical of those experiencing the mystical as described by William James in *The*

Varieties of Religious Experience (1902) (290-91). Austyn “know[s] no words that could depict [the ghost and his reaction to it], no images that could suggest it; you might as well ask me to tell you what a new colour was like. . . .” (231). Yet, though this experience is new, it affirms Austyn’s already strongly held belief in a vengeful God, not unlike Mrs. Mostyn’s: “Here the witness of science and of history is in accord with that of the Christian Church; their first manifestation of God is always of ‘one that is angry with us and threatens evil.’ . . . Many different voices call to us in this age of false prophets, but one only threatens as well as invites” (233). Austyn sees the ghost as evil and “hold[s] it at bay . . . with a great strain of the will and of course . . . in virtue of a higher power” (233). But Austyn is not an instrument of salvation: his vision of God as bully causes Lyndsay to think “I was hungering for bread; I was given a stone” (233). Both the canon’s High Church worldliness and the curate’s Low Church austerity are found wanting.

<19>Austyn’s vision of God, as noted earlier, was precisely why some Victorians began to question orthodox doctrines. Mrs. Molyneux is presented as typical of those who seek a new revelation, think they have found it, become disillusioned and move on to another belief. At first, she is the subject of satire. George knows before reading it that Molyneux’s letter says that [s]he has at last found the religion which she has been looking for all her life, and she intends to be whatever it is for evermore” (225). Initially, Molyneux is presented as a frivolous woman, repeating what she has been told with little analysis. Even as she claims that her religion desires “universal brotherhood,” she reveals an attitude that would have disturbed J. S. Mill: “I have heard it said that it was a kind of spiritualism. On the contrary, it is very much opposed to it, and has quite convinced me for one of the wickedness and danger of spiritualism” (235). Her new religion avoids common religious difficulties by teaching

that it is worse than useless to try and think of [God], far less pray to Him – because it is simply impossible. And that is quite scientific and philosophical, is it not? (237). He cannot be merciful or loving . . . because mercy and love are only human attributes; and so is consciousness too, therefore we know He cannot be conscious; and I believe, according to the highest philosophical teaching, He has not any Being. . . . Indeed, even to speak of Him as *He* is not right; the pronoun is very anthropomorphic and misleading. So, when you come to consider all this carefully, it is quite evident—though it sounds rather strange at first—that the only way you can really honour and reverence God is by forgetting Him altogether. (238)

<20>Her explanation parodies the ideas of “esoteric, intellectual and exclusive [occult] societies” that regarded spiritualism as “vulgar” and “naive” (Byrne 11) and attempted to create religions that would be “quite scientific and philosophical”(10) George who believes that “our first duty is to be as irreligious as possible—to believe in as little as we can, to trust in

nobody but ourselves" (238) hardly finds Molyneaux's new faith scientific. And what Lyndsay ironically calls their "symposium" does not enlighten him, suggesting that didactic, adversarial debate will not help people develop spiritually. The downplaying of mercy and love as "only human" again suggests a failure of sympathy that cannot meet Lyndsay's need for "bread."

<21>Mrs. Molyneaux is enlightened by her encounter with the ghost, but not in the way she expected. No longer frivolous, she tells Lyndsay that "[p]art of what I used to play with was true enough; it is all Maya,⁽¹¹⁾ a delusion, this sense-life—it is no life at all. The actual life is behind, under it all" (243). This revelation "brings such a want with it. . . . And now I have found my real self, now I am awake, I want much more, and there is nothing – only a great silence, a great loneliness like that in the [ghost's] face" (243). At this point of spiritual despair, she significantly turns to a person who lives a restorative faith rather than to a creed.

<22>Molyneaux's description of Cecilia does evoke the angel in the house: if every other resource failed, Cecilia could still be counted on because her "pity is so reverent, so pure" (244). Like a doctor, she would not see suffering as "disgusting or shocking . . . nor ridiculous nor grotesque." Like a saint, she would attend to "one's ugliest wounds" (344). In an explicitly sentimental gesture, Molyneaux points to a painting of "the Magdalene, kissing the bleeding feet upon the Cross" (244). This kind of image is echoed when Lyndsay first sees Cecilia at the railway station, holding a poor woman's baby and lit by the sunset, looking "like a new Madonna, holding the child of poverty to her heart" (344). Such conventional comparisons appear to promise only the cliché of ideal womanhood.

<23>Yet because Lyndsay's acute depression and need are convincing and because the other characters' creeds have failed to help him, the rhetoric of the story builds hope that Cecilia will offer something beyond the conventional. Carefully considered, even the biblical references are not as trite as they might appear, for rarely is a character of the late nineteenth century compared with both Magdalene and Madonna. That Christ suffers the "ugliest wound" and Mary Magdalene fills the role of saint/savior also suggests possibilities beyond the obvious hierarchies.

<24>The story subtly undercuts exalted images of Cecilia by denying her physical beauty. Cecilia's effect on others is difficult to explain in "material" terms and arises from her genuine interest in them. Lyndsay is so convinced by her direct but tactful expression of sympathy for his injury that he confides to her "the story that had never been told before" (346). Lyndsay has been both listener to and teller of other people's stories. As George notes, "Lyndy will never see the ghost; he is too much of a sceptic. Even if he saw it he would not believe in it, and there is nothing a ghost hates like that. But he has seen the people who saw the ghost, and he tells their several stories very well" (348). Although Lyndsay has not seen the ghost, he is certainly

haunted by his injury and his doubts, and the fact that he tells his previously untold story to Cecilia emphasizes the profound impression she makes.

<25>Ultimately, Cecilia *is* the angel who provides hope to Lyndsay, but she also avoids convention. The implications of angelic womanhood were not always carefully worked out in Victorian discourse. The respectable middle-class woman was supposed to be infinitely loving, yet many limits were set on her sympathy. Her sphere was typically supposed to be that of her own home, although increasingly, reformers suggested that women should take their traditional, caring qualities out into the wider world (Richardson). Certainly, people of Cecilia's class do not expect her to open her home to invalids, idiots, and alcoholics, guests of whom Lady Atherley specifically disapproves (228). Such behavior, as well as lending a field to Methodists for a camp-meeting (217) and making toffee on Sundays (216), marks Cecilia as odd (228) within her community.

<26>Far from idealizing women as angels, the story suggests that the angel – whether woman or man—is rare. Cecilia's rarity is remarked, even by the cynical George, who uses the language of spiritualism to introduce the story of her encounter with the ghost: "I am up to a delicate psychical investigation which requires the greatest care. The medium is made of such uncommon stuff, she has not a particle of brass in her composition. So she requires to be carefully isolated from all disturbing influences.⁽¹²⁾ I allow you [Lyndsay] to be present at the experiment because discretion is one of your strongest points. . . . Besides, it will improve your mind. Cissy's story is certain to be odd, like herself, and will illustrate what I am always saying" (250). In a sense, the story supports George's reading that people see the ghosts they expect to see since everyone has interpreted the ghost as a sign of what they already believe. Even Canon Vernade's disillusionment acknowledges the lack of conviction implied by his inconsistent rhetoric.

<27>If Cecilia is like others in seeing a ghost that fits her own perspective, she is capable of seeing beyond the conventional beliefs of others. Neither beautiful nor brilliant like Austyn, she sees what he cannot: an interpretation that challenges her initial fear. Cecilia and her story are odd because she is the only ghost seer to consider that "the more I thought, the more sad and strange it seemed that not one of those who saw it, not even Aunt Eleanor [Mrs. Mostyn], who is so kind and thoughtful, had had one pitying thought for it" (250). Cecilia is as terrified as the others, but instead of running from the ghost or praying against it, she responds to its need: ". . . I was not afraid any more, I was too sorry for it; its poor poor eyes were so full of anguish. I cried: 'Oh, why do you look at me like that? Tell me what I shall do'" (251). Cecilia, too, has trouble articulating her experience; she is not sure how the ghost communicates with her that it had led a wicked life and after death had found itself utterly alone. It "thank[s] her so meekly for speaking to it" and explains that it felt it must seek comfort from humans, but "the bravest

and most benevolent rushed away in terror, or would not let it come near them” (253). Even as the spirit tells her that it does not know what God is and warns her that she risks her life by approaching, Cecilia embraces “the shadowy form . . . [and] I felt as if I were pressing to me . . . air colder than any ice, so that my heart seemed to stop beating, and I could hardly breathe.” Gradually, however, the ghost “grow[s] less chill. And at last it spoke, and the whisper was not far away, but near. It said: ‘It is enough; now I know what God is!’” (253). Cecilia believes the ghost is now free of torment and “will trouble you no more” (253). George’s interpretation is still that “visions are composed by the person who sees them. Nothing could be more characteristic of Cissy than the story she has just told us” (254). George’s version makes sense rationally and psychologically. His pronouncement leaves open the possibility that the ghost is a projection of human fears and desires as many critics have argued is true of a far more famous ghost story at the end of the century: Henry James’s *The Turn of the Screw* (1899).

<28>Falconer’s story points up an important question infrequently emphasized in the discussion of *Turn*, a question related to the well-known debate on whether the ghosts are real or projections of the governess narrator. Martin Scofield claims that the psychological interpretation has “carried the day” (100), but critics continue to argue about James’s equivocally stated intentions, the evidence in the text, and ways in which the story may be about interpretation itself. Given the traditional dismissal of ghost stories as “merely entertaining,” *Turn*’s equivocation is probably necessary to warrant so much critical attention. In 1958 R. P. Blackmuir assumed that if “the ghosts are ‘real,’ the story must be “frivolous” (169), and many critics since then appear to share that view. Yet *Turn* may be a ghost story with serious spiritual implications, made more obvious by reading it with *Cecilia*. In the interests of examining the spiritual debates of the period, we can assume that the ghosts are the kind of manifestations reported by the Society for Psychical Research, reports that James studied (Roellinger). Critics have pointed out that James attempted to make his ghosts like those in the reports: they are essentially passive, leaving the viewer and readers to interpret their significance. Whether the governess sees the ghosts because she is particularly sensitive to such phenomena or whether she imagines them, the way in which she interprets them remains the same: she never considers them anything but evil.

<29>One explanation for this lack of nuance in her perspective may be that her story is set in the 1840s before spiritualism became widely popular. Even then, however, folklore and popular fiction suggested other possibilities: ghosts were often thought to return to right a wrong or with helpful information for the living. The governess’s genteel upbringing may have taught her to discount such popular material, and she has not changed her perspective at a more mature age, when she gives the frame narrator her manuscript. Moreover, as a clergyman’s daughter, she might be expected to abide by the orthodox Anglican doctrine that ghosts do not haunt the living, but she has no trouble believing that the figures she sees are genuine manifestations of

the dead. Her readiness to demonize the ghosts is ignored by most critics, except for a few brief comments. Ned Lukacher brings up the governess's "strange predisposition to despise her precursor as one of the most disturbing features of her illness" (120). T. J. Lustig also notes that "[t]he governess shows little compassion for the 'infamous' predecessor she constructs from the shadowy details provided by Mrs. Grose. She is in fact unique amongst James's ghost-seers [in other stories] in viewing the spectral as a manifestation of unmitigated evil" (xxiv).

<30>While any reading of this highly complex fiction must be reductive, in the context of the spiritual, gender, and class discourses of the day, a compelling interpretation is that the governess does indeed see ghosts and reads them according to her absolute values. The ghosts' crossing lines of sexual propriety and class seem, as Bruce Robbins suggests, to be at the root of her horror of them (201-03). Her lack of feeling for Miss Jessel is particularly odd since the governess's own observations and language imply that Miss Jessel should be a recipient of sympathy: she seems as sad as the ghost in *Cecilia*. At one point, the narrator sees the apparition of Miss Jessel seated on a staircase "her body half-bowed and her head, in an attitude of woe, in her hands" (42). Given this description, the governess's later reference to her as "the most horrible of women" (57) is strikingly hyperbolic. When the narrator sees Miss Jessel in the school room, the language although melodramatic, hardly supports her denunciation, instead emphasizing Jessel's "indescribably grand melancholy . . . haggard beauty and . . . unutterable woe" (57). However, the governess's lack of sympathy may arise from her status as a young woman from a family living in genteel poverty. Although she is virtually the head of the household at Bly, she has no traditional authority. The only power she has is vested in her respectability. That being the case, she cannot afford to sympathize with Miss Jessel and demonizes her in order to assert her own contrasting moral purity, even as she expresses her sense of being an intruder.

<31>Cecilia, far from being an intruder, is an invited guest and a member of the same land owning class as the Atherleys and Lindsay. Perhaps her sympathy for the Other is possible because she does not have to worry about status as the nameless governess in *Turn* does. Cecilia, a well-to-do married "lady" wears "delicate" gloves and a fur trimmed cloak even as she takes care of a working-class woman's baby. While the master's absence in *Turn* gives the governess only an equivocal authority, Cecilia's husband's frequent absences and her power to make decisions without asking permission give her freedom for her charitable projects. Class privilege does not save her baby, who died years before, but she can use her wealth and status to try to help others. George does suggest that Cecilia represents a potential disruption of class hierarchy: "Cissy is accustomed to look upon a servant as something to be waited on and taken care of" (187). While such caring is not systemic equality, it does indicate Cecilia's capacity to see servants as individuals who sometimes need care, not just invisible Others (like ghosts)

whose work is mystified (like women's). Still, Cecilia's class status empowers her in ways that *Turn's* governess cannot share.

<32>Class status is embedded in the narrative structure and characterization as well. Servants do not have gospels attributed to them. The kitchen maid reacts hysterically to the falling plaster she thinks is the ghost, and the cook Mrs. Mallet's amusingly breathless monologues support a long tradition of superstitious and comic servants. The story makes clear, however, that the Atherleys are dependent upon their servants and that Cecilia is being called in to handle a domestic crisis as well as a spiritual one.

<33>That class considerations motivate James's governess and that they are implicit rather than openly expressed is understandable. More difficult to comprehend is why she never frames her crisis as a Christian might be expected to do. She never calls on God to aid her or prays for strength. She even avoids going to church. Since the governess believes that the ghosts are in hell and want to impose a similar fate on the children, it seems likely that she would invoke supernatural powers to combat them, but she seems to face the challenge unaided. This significant absence in the text may be, as Mark Steensland argues, evidence of the governess's assuming the savior role herself, "not allowing Christ to act through her to save [the children] (458), but it might suggest that both angel in the house ideology and conventional Christian beliefs are inadequate to the task of dealing with spirits. It could be argued that both ideologies fail to help the governess interpret the ghosts in ways that would elicit her sympathy. Most critics, including Steensland, accept her assessment of the ghosts' evil, however they interpret the ghosts' origin, which suggests that while critics know about spiritualism's influence on the story, they do not take it seriously, perhaps because the governess herself has not apparently experienced those influences.

<34>Although Falconer's story, like James's, leaves open the possibility that the ghosts are not "real," it suggests that seeing ghosts as simply evil is misleading. Cecilia, living her fictive life in an era when spiritualism's influence is widely felt, seems to be a better "reader" than James's governess. Her role also suggests the power that women sometimes achieved through spiritualism as she even influences the cynical George. Lyndsay notes a difference between George's interpretation of Cecilia's narrative and his interpretation of the other characters' accounts, a difference that reminds us that George's role is not entirely to debunk the supernatural: "But there was a tone in his voice I had heard once—and only once—before, when, through the first terrible hours that followed my accident, he sat patiently beside me in the darkened room, holding my hot hand in his broad cool palm" (254). If George does not usually take this tone with Lyndsay, he continues to express his sympathy in unobtrusive ways, such as a gentle touch (189), revealing that he is not opposed to Cecilia's vision. When asked to

“explain the miracle of [Cecilia’s] existence . . . Atherley was silent” (254). He cannot debunk the spirituality she expresses and in fact, when he offers Lyndsay help, he confirms her gospel.

<35>Cecilia’s success with the ghost vindicates attributes traditionally considered feminine, a vindication that could support an argument that Falconer’s story does not demystify angel in the house rhetoric. *Turn* might seem more of a challenge to this rhetoric because most readers agree that the governess fails to save her charges. However, although the governess tries to take on the salvific angel role, she is deeply invested in male authority: she wants to impress the absent “master.” Cecilia’s interpretation of the ghost challenges male dominated scientific and religious discourses, supporting Jenny Uglow’s point that conventional masculine authority is powerless to deal with ghosts in Victorian women’s stories (xvii). Angel in the house ideology operates within conventional masculine authority, which includes the punitive religious doctrines Cecilia refutes.

<36>The failure of masculine authority does not mean that men are incapable of experiencing Cecilia’s revelation. Although Lyndsay romanticizes Cecilia as a “miracle,” the story makes clear that the qualities she represents are not those of all women and are demonstrated by some men, and not only men of ambiguous gender like Lyndsay. George, for all his bluster, seems more capable of compassion than the other conventional characters of both sexes. Nor does Cecilia seem angelically self-sacrificing or self-deprecating. She initially feels that the ghost’s coldness will kill her, but she has come through the experience brisk and light of step (253), confirmed in the spiritual path she has chosen.

<37>Readers disappointed by the limits of science and repelled by a doctrine of eternal suffering would likely have been moved by Cecilia’s inclusive understanding and compassion. According to Peter Rowland, most reviews were positive. On the negative side, the religiously and politically conservative George Saintsbury thought the story typical Christmas fare “watered down,” and considered George “an intolerable creature” (qtd. in Rowland 198-99). Charlotte Young thought it “a pity that so fine a book . . . should be injured by the entire absence of Christianity” (qtd. in Rowland 207), and a “Lady A,” quoted in Falconer’s diary, wanted Cecilia to be “more truly perfect, more truly Christian” (qtd. in Rowland 200). However, the book sold well, and the *Scotsman*, *The Anti-Jacobin*, and the *Spectator* all approved, the latter stating that the work was not overly polemical (Rowland 196). One of Falconer’s best friends wrote to tell her that a guest had said that *Cecilia* “has been a baptism to me . . . a message to the world,” and Archibald Grove, editor of the *New Review*, thought it “welling over with the best spirit of the age!” (qtd. in Rowland 200). The “spirit of the age” was represented by a search for new spiritual revelations as well as for new science and technology and for workable negotiations between these systems of meaning. A comment from Falconer’s diary indicates that she was engaged in the sort of negotiation Byrne describes when she responds to

“Lady A,” “But was [*Cecilia*] not Christian? I meant it to be. Where else could you find so much love?” (qtd. in Rowland 200).⁽¹³⁾ *Cecilia* (and Falconer) seem to be trying to synthesize Christianity with some of the beliefs about the afterlife that spiritualism helped to make popular. *Cecilia* is moving because it works aesthetically and rhetorically to win sympathy for both doubters and demonized Other in response to a more categorical doctrine of good and evil.

<38>If *Cecilia*’s belief in the power of human goodness seems naive, it is worth remembering that William James argued that religions should be “valued according to their fruits,” their consequences in the world (21; 186). This is not to deny that most characters in *Cecilia de Noel* are very much concerned with consequences in an afterlife as were (and are) many spiritual seekers. Belief in the spiritual power of human compassion and its consequences in the material world is also an orthodoxy with questionable premises not precluded by *Cecilia de Noel*, which depicts many failures of sympathy. *Cecilia* never claims that the fruits of her belief are easily attained. The Victorians and their heirs were certainly aware of the so-called “ape and tiger” (Tennyson 118; 28) attributes of humans. This knowledge did not erase all hope, however, or all interest in the ways in which belief informed consequences. *Cecilia*’s “gospel” was designed to appeal to those who were struggling to negotiate a humane and ethical faith.

<39>In this struggle, spiritualism clearly played a part. I am not suggesting that *Cecilia* is presented as a spiritualist, only that her gospel has affinities with spiritualist teaching regarding the soul’s progress after death and the value of good works (Byrne 101). Significantly, *Cecilia* wants the spirit to tell her what to do for it, not what to believe about it. As Mrs. Molyneaux says, “It is not what [*Cecilia*] believes, it is what she is” (243).

<40>In a departure from spiritualist teaching, the ghost does not return with the purpose of instructing the living; instead, the living person helps the ghost. However, the encounter is instructive to *Cecilia*, affirming her belief in love and good works, and is instructive to her hearers as well. George’s idea that *Cecilia*’s story “will improve [Lyndsay’s] mind” (250) has more meaning than he originally intended. The real question in this story is not so much whether ghosts have agency as whether the living do. Lyndsay has felt powerless, but *Cecilia*’s actions indicate that he does not have to hold a particular doctrine (like Mrs. Mostyn) or have a particular vocation (like the doctor) to aid others. Spiritualist belief in the power for communication between living and dead empowered the dead in some ways, but may have been particularly popular because it empowered the living who felt helpless when faced with loss and absence.

<41>Whether interpreted as supernatural or psychological or both, *Cecilia de Noel*, like the ghostly in late Victorian fiction more generally, offers opportunities for understanding the stakes in the period’s religious debates. Falconer’s little-known story, which explicitly takes on

these issues, increases awareness of the possible religious implications in other ghost stories of the time, such as “The Open Door” and *The Turn of the Screw*. Falconer doubted that *Cecilia de Noel* would be popular or that most readers would understand it (Rowland 187). While the present reading does not exhaust the story’s possibilities, it would have appealed to an audience at the time who were involved in and affected by some of the most profound discussions of life’s meaning. *Cecilia* still speaks to those interested in teasing out the complicated threads of the past’s discourse on spiritual questions.

Endnotes

(1)Two famous literary works of the mid-to-late Victorian period depict spiritualism and spiritualist healing in an unfavorable light: Robert Browning’s “Mr. Sludge, ‘The Medium,’” and Henry James’s *The Bostonians*.[\(△\)](#)

(2)See Briggs. For a recent argument on the ghostly in Modernism, see Noakes. Numerous collections of Victorian and early twentieth-century ghost stories are available: see Cox and Gilbert; Collings and Davies; Dalby.[\(△\)](#)

(3)For extended discussions of Victorian/Edwardian scientific and spiritual issues, including people prominent in psychic research, see Blum, Owen, and Warner. See also Diakoulakis; Ferguson; Grimes; Noakes. For sources on the exploration of the spiritual/supernatural at the turn of the nineteenth century and the present, including UFO phenomena, see Kripal; for sources on alternatives to materialist science, see Miller.[\(△\)](#)

(4)Byrne confines her study to the English Anglican Church, a limitation appropriate to an analysis of *Cecilia de Noel* since its Christian characters are English Anglicans. She argues that spiritualist ideas were incorporated in popular thought in the late nineteenth century and influenced Anglican doctrine most significantly in the context of World War I. On Dissent and spiritualism, see Owen 15-16; 21-22; “At Home with the Theobald Family,” 75-106.[\(△\)](#)

(5)For discussion of the issues surrounding women, power, and Victorian spiritualism, see Dickerson; Grimes, especially ch. 4 “Ghostwomen, Ghostwriting” 83-109); Owen; Warner. In “Professions for Women” Woolf referenced the title of Coventry Patmore’s popular poem *The Angel in the House* to describe the supposedly ideal, self-sacrificial woman of Victorian domestic ideology. See also Ellis’s *The Women of England*, a popular conduct book that recommended selflessness to middle-class women and asserted their power to serve as moral monitors for the men in their families.[\(△\)](#)

(6)According to Makala, women wrote far more ghost literature than men did. Her introduction provides an excellent summary of attitudes and theories about ghost literature and gender. *Cecilia de Noel* is not part of her study, probably because it is not particularly Gothic.(^)

(7)Concepts of universal salvation are attributed to Origen (c. 186-c.255), Gregory of Nyssa (c. 335-c.395), and Catherine of Genoa (1447-1510). For a discussion of whether Origen originated the concept and the possible influence of Syrian philosopher Bardaisan (c.154-c.222), see Ramelli. Byrne claims that Spiritualists did not cite early scholars but usually argued from the information they received from the dead (107-08). Two famous nineteenth-century literary examples of belief in universal salvation, which Byrne does not mention, predate the popularity of spiritualism: See Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* chs. 6, 70 and Anne Bronte's *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall* chs. 20, 177, 178. See also Barker 580-81. The Brontes' ideas seem to come from inner conviction rather than religious sources.(^)

(8)I have not found literary criticism of *Cecilia de Noel*. Due to space considerations, the present discussion does not develop fully the class and gender implications of the story, nor its use of comedy. See Rowland's biography of Falconer for information on publication and reception. For more of Falconer's work, see Rowland's *Collected Stories*. References to *Cecilia* in this discussion are from Dalby.(^)

(9)See "Latest Intelligence" and Byrne 54-55.(^)

(10)See Owen's *The Place of Enchantment* for discussion of the major occult societies and their differences from spiritualism, especially their exclusivity and hierarchy as opposed to the wide popularity and democratic tendencies of spiritualism.(^)

(11)This reference to "Maya" (Sanskrit) indicates the influence of Hinduism and Buddhism in the search for religious revelation outside Christian traditions. "Maya" is variously defined in different traditions, but Mahayana Buddhism teaches that material reality and experience obscure "cosmic consciousness" (Goudriaan).(^)

(12)George alludes to the claim by mediums and their supporters that adverse influences—such as the skepticism of séance participants—might interfere with the ability to contact spirits (Owen 62, 82).(^)

(13)With characteristic humor and self-deprecation, Falconer undercuts the moving scene in which she explains the story's meaning more fully and Lady A's eyes fill with tears: "Afterwards I am less gratified when I learn that they filled with tears when dry-rot was discovered in her husband's yacht" (qtd. in Rowland 2000).(^)

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