

EMGT 1510-206: Concerning Ghosts / Spring 2020 Session 2
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Mondays and Wednesdays 12:30–1:45
Office Hours: By appointment.

Course Description

Do you believe in ghosts? Or rather: What does it mean to believe in ghosts? What are ghosts as objects of belief and why are they confined to the framework of belief, as opposed to knowledge? If one could “know” ghosts, how would one prove their existence—and what would proof or evidence mean in these contexts? At the same time, ghosts exist, at least in stories told across many cultures in the world and over the long histories of these cultures. And, to be sure, the representation of ghosts differs across these cultures and time spans, in ways that are often dependent on historical contexts, cultural understandings, and belief systems. For some cultures, the ghost is an unwanted guest, but for others, the ghost is connected by kinship and owed certain services and dignities; and in some periods, the ghost speaks to (and for) larger religious frameworks, while for others, the ghost is a malevolent force unmoored from all logics.

This course will take up the problem of the ghost from a variety of perspectives—aesthetic, epistemological, ethical, and empirical—though we will be grounded in ghostly representations in literature and film. As a class, we will read ghost stories, watch ghost films, and even participate in a ghost tour (and consider the critiques of such tours). Much of our work will begin with the question of how to think critically about cultural texts, whether these are literary works, films, philosophical writings, religious texts, or folkloric tales, and to be able to read these in a rigorously analytic manner. We will also discuss what the ghost represents in its specific cultural locus and historical moment, how the ghost complicates the boundaries of the living and the dead, what we owe to ghosts (if anything), what it means to be haunted, what evidence there is for the existence of ghosts, how we recognize a ghost, and above all, why there should be ghosts in the first place?

Learning Objectives

1. To be able to think and read critically across a variety of genres (fiction, film, drama, folklore, criticism).
2. To become aware of how ghost stories inform our cultures and histories.
3. To reflect on the historical, geographical, and cultural differences that shape how we imagine the boundaries between life and death.
3. To respond to and take stock of the ethical dimensions of ghost stories, and what ghost stories might tell us about moral understanding in our cultures.
4. To consider why we might choose to believe in something for which we have limited empirical evidence and what standards of evidence are.
5. To learn to express these thoughts in writing, and to consider how our thoughts and beliefs might change as we learn more about a subject.

Assessment Criteria for Graded Option ONLY

1. Attendance	20%
2. Journal Writing	70%
3. Lab Work	10%

Online Attendance is strongly recommended but each meeting will be recorded for asynchronous participation.

Journal writing is optional **unless** (a) you cannot attend the synchronous meeting; or (b) you are taking the course for a grade. If you are opting to journal please upload these to Collab Assignments as a clear photo image or type them into the text box **before 12 noon on the next day**. I will assign your entries grades of 5 (thoughtful entry complete), 3 (entry completed with minimal effort), or 0 (entry not completed). There is no make-up for this assignment.

Required Books:

Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (New York: Penguin, 2006).

August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (New York: Plume, 1990).

All other readings will be available as PDFs on the Collab Course site.

Meeting 1. Monday, March 23. Introductions

Reading: <https://www.pewforum.org/2009/12/09/many-americans-mix-multiple-faiths/#ghosts-fortunetellers-and-communicating-with-the-dead>

Discussion: We will talk about our favorite ghost stories, whether any of us have had experiences with ghosts or heard secondhand of personal ghost encounters, and what it means to believe in ghosts in different cultural frameworks. We will spend some time trying to come up with a working definition for “ghost.”

Special Visitor: Karin Wittenborg, former University Librarian and Dean of Libraries

Journal writing 1: Reflection on ghosts to begin your journal.

Meeting 2. Wednesday, March 25. Local Ghosts

Discussion: We will discuss the structure of nonfiction reportage about ghosts, with attention to issues of race, class, and Southern history. Each group will present one story and discuss.

Readings:

1. Colin Dickey, Ch. 6: “A Devilish Place (Richmond, VA),” *Ghostland*, pp. 103–17. COLLAB.
2. Selections from Marguerite Dupont Lee, *Virginia Ghosts*: “The Little Gray Lady,” pp. 51–56; “Ash Lawn,” pp. 143–44; “Castle Hill,” pp. 19–22; “Green View,” pp. 139–40; “Kinloch,” pp. 119–21; “The McChesney Ghost,” pp. 135–38; “Federal Hill,” pp. 69–71; “At the Priest’s Field,” pp. 89–94. COLLAB.

Journal writing 2: Reflection on ghosts in Virginia.

Meeting 3. Monday, March 30. The Uncanniness of Ghosts

Readings:

1. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," only pp. 1–4 (Part 1 of the essay). COLLAB.

2. Dickey, Introduction to Part I: "The Unhomely," *Ghostland*, pp. 15–20.

Film: M. Knight Shyamalan, *The Sixth Sense* (1999). This must be viewed prior to the meeting.

Discussion: We will consider what it means to be haunted, the notion of the uncanny, how film represents both the ordinary and the extraordinary, and the idea of the twist ending.

Journal writing 3: Reflection on the uncanny, *The Sixth Sense*.

Meeting 4. Wednesday, April 1. Haunted Houses

Reading: Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), pp. 1–93.

Discussion: Focusing on Shirley Jackson's short novel, we will examine how characters are established, the reliability of narrators, what it means to possess or own a space, and how ghosts are represented in literary fiction (as opposed to nonfictional reportage).

Journal writing 4: Reflection on *Haunting of Hill House*.

Meeting 5 Monday, April 6. Haunted Houses, continued.

Reading: Shirley Jackson, *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), pp. 93–182 (end).

Discussion: We will finish our discussion of Shirley Jackson, reflecting on possession (in both senses), gender roles, narrative consciousness, and the question of what *exactly* happened.

Journal writing 5: Reflection on the ending of *Haunting of Hill House*.

Meeting 6. Wednesday, April 8. Toxic Fathers and Haunted Hotels

Reading: Dickey, Introduction to Part II: After Hours," *Ghostland*, pp. 93–101. COLLAB.

Film: Stanley Kubrick, *The Shining* (1980).

Discussion: We will consider how representations of childhood, masculinity, abusive behavior, and madness inform this reimagining of Stephen King's classic novel, set in the emptied out and defamiliarized space of a hotel in the off-season. (Note that I am not asking you to read King's novel, which is very different from Kubrick's film and too long for a seven week course).

Journal writing 6: Reflection on *The Shining*.

Meeting 7. Monday, April 13. The Problem of Home Ownership

Reading: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2011/jun/17/hauntology-critical>

Film: Alejandro Amenábar, *The Others* (2001)

Discussion: Homes are rarely ever only our homes; homes have pasts and futures that we are often rarely aware of. We will conclude our discussion of home ownership and difficult guests with a film that complicates narrative perspective and employment.

Final Project: Please bring a one paragraph proposal describing your final project idea; we will spend ten minutes in groups discussing your final projects.

Journal writing 7: Reflection on *The Others*.

Meeting 8. Wednesday, April 15. Ghostly Lovers

Readings: “The Magic Sword and the Magic Bag,” pp. 168–79; “Lotus Fragrance,” pp. 211–28; “Silkworm,” pp. 238–49; all from Pu Songling, *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. COLLAB.

Discussion: East Asian ghosts are predominantly female and more often than not interested in seducing young male scholars. (the exception being ghosts in explicitly religious contexts, such as hungry ghosts). We will discuss the representation of female ghosts in the late imperial Chinese cultural imagination, with attention to filiality, religious belief, and the effects of ghosts on male health.

Journal writing 8: Reflection on Pu Songling’s stories.

Meeting 9. Monday, April 20. Slavery and Family Histories

Reading: August Wilson, *The Piano Lesson* (1990).

Discussion: Following from the discussion of haunted houses, we will turn to the haunted legacies of slavery, property, and family in this play set in post-Depression 1936 Pittsburgh. We will consider what the ghost of the slave-owner Sutter represents and what it means for Sutter’s ghost to haunt an African-American family caught between the past and the future.

Journal writing 9: Reflection on *The Piano Lesson*.

Meeting 10. Wednesday, April 22. Spirit Photography

Film: Banjong Pisanthanakun and Parkpoom Wongpoom, *Shutter* (2004)

Reading: <https://www.chronicle.com/article/Bringing-Out-the-Dead/35660> and <https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20150629-the-intriguing-history-of-ghost-photography>.

Discussion: Beginning with Spiritualism’s interest in new technologies, we will consider how photography promises the capture of things as they truly are, thereby making possible the documentation of the ghostly realm. We will discuss Asian cinematic horror and the Polaroid camera.

Journal writing 10: Reflection on *Shutter*.

Meeting 11. Monday, April 27. Accursed Technology

Film: Hideo Nakata, *Ringu* (1998)

Reading: <http://www.weirdhistorian.com/ted-serios-the-man-who-could-print-photos-from-his-mind/>.

Discussion: Mediation is central to theories of technology. We will consider how technology extends the human, how the human is a product of technology, and why certain technologies are more haunted (or afford haunting) than others. We will talk about analog vs. digital, the concept of remediation, and the thoughtography Ted Serios.

Journal writing 11: Reflection on *Ringu*.