

# A Haunted House



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF VIRGINIA WOOLF

Virginia Stephen was born in 1882 to the author, historian and critic Leslie Stephen and his second wife, Julia Duckworth, a model for the Pre-Raphaelite movement. She had three siblings, including the painter Vanessa Bell, but lost most of her family early on in her life, including her mother, her stepsister, her father, and her brother Thoby. She married Leonard Woolf in 1912, and her first novel, *The Voyage Out*, was published in 1915. With her husband, she founded Hogarth Press, a small press intended to publish unconventional and experimental literature (including Woolf's novels). Between 1922 and 1941, she had a long-term relationship with writer Vita Sackville-West, during which she published three more novels and a number of essays. However, her mental health worsened and she died by suicide in 1941, drowning herself in a river near her home. Her last novel, *Between the Acts*, was published posthumously.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

It's often argued that the reason grief and loss pervade Woolf's fiction is because of the many losses in her own life. The impact of those losses on "A Haunted House" is apparent. Though she had not lost a spouse, the deaths of her mother, stepsister (to whom she was close), father, and older brother in rapid succession (1895, 1897, 1905, and 1906, respectively) led to a focus on the nature of death and grief in her own writing. "A Haunted House" is one of her more positive depictions of death, as a continuing state of being where love and joy can still exist. In her novel *Mrs Dalloway*, in contrast, she represents ghosts as deeply horrific, and death as something at best ambiguous and at worst to be feared. Another event in Woolf's own life reflected in "A Haunted House" is her purchase of a house in the South Downs (very similar to the house described in the story, with two stories and a garden almost an acre in size) with her husband Leonard in 1919. Woolf treasured the house, called Monk's House, until the end of her life, and spent some of the happiest periods of her life there among friends and family and the Downs, which she described as "too much for one pair of eyes." It's easy to imagine why, when writing "A Haunted House," she chose Monk's House as the setting that represented both couples' profound love.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The primary literary traditions that influence this story are the development of modernism in the early 20th century and the so-called "Golden Age of the ghost story," lasting, according to

the literary historian Jack Sullivan, from the mid-19th century to the start of World War I in 1914. Woolf was at the center of the evolution of literary modernism, contributing to it both with her own writing and with her support of other well-known modernist authors, including E. M. Forster and T. S. Eliot. Like the majority of her fiction, "A Haunted House" bears many hallmarks of modernism, among them an unusual form (micro-fiction), a bending of traditional tropes (the frightening ghost story), and use of the "stream-of-consciousness" style, which modernist authors like Woolf helped to pioneer. Though the "Golden Age" of supernatural fiction had ended before the publication of "A Haunted House," Woolf's story shares concerns with both ghost stories of the Golden Age and other ghost stories published in the 1920s, like those of Edith Wharton. Tropes of Gothic fiction were popular in ghost fiction of the Golden Age; Woolf also plays with the Gothic tradition, setting the story in an ancient and drafty house and signaling the ghosts' presence by the opening and closing of doors.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** "A Haunted House"
- **When Written:** circa 1921
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 1921
- **Literary Period:** Interwar, modernism
- **Genre:** Micro-fiction, modernism, "ghost story"
- **Setting:** A large, old house in the South Downs
- **Climax:** The narrator seeing the ghosts for the first time and realizing the nature of their treasure
- **Antagonist:** Death, loss, absence
- **Point of View:** First person

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Woolf's Writing Hut.** While at Monk's House, Woolf wrote in a wooden toolshed in the garden that she had turned into a "writing hut." It was reportedly noisy, often in disarray, and so cold that her fingers became numb in winter. However, she completed several of her novels there, including *Mrs Dalloway*, perhaps her most well-known work.



## PLOT SUMMARY

A "ghostly couple" is moving through the halls of a house, opening and closing doors and sifting through the house's contents, clearly looking for something. They tell each other, "Here we left it," "Oh, but here too!" and decide that thing

they're looking for must be upstairs—or maybe in the garden. They whisper to one another quietly as they search, careful not to “wake them.”

The narrator says that “one might” overhear the ghosts but continue to read quietly as the ghosts carry on their search. When one becomes convinced that the ghosts have finally “found it,” he or she might set the book down and get up to look for the ghosts. However, that person would find the house completely empty, doors all flung open, with the only sounds coming from the birds chirping outside.

The narrator asks himself or herself, “What did I come in here for?” and notes that his or her hands are empty. Going upstairs to look for “it,” the narrator just finds apples in the loft and heads back to the garden, which is “still as ever.” Meanwhile, the ghosts have “found it” in the drawing room, but they are invisible to the narrator. When the narrator enters the drawing room, trying to catch a glimpse of the ghosts, all the narrator sees is that an apple has shifted. Meanwhile, “the pulse of the house beat[s] softly,” saying, “Safe, safe, safe.” Someone or something says “The treasure buried; the room...” but trails off, and the pulse of the house stops abruptly. The narrator wonders if “that [is] the buried treasure.”

Looking out the window, the narrator remembers the history of the dead couple: the woman had been the first of the pair to die, “hundreds of years ago,” and her husband left the house to travel the world soon after that. Eventually, he returned to their old home, which had “dropped beneath the Downs.”

A storm rages in the dark outside, but the inside of the house is bright and still. The ghosts continue to move through the house, “seek[ing] their joy.” The ghosts reminisce about their own life in the house as they approach the bedroom of the narrator and the narrator’s partner, who are sleeping. The ghosts stand over the bed, peering down at the sleeping couple for a long while, and conclude that “Here we left our treasure—” The narrator, wakes up due to the light from the ghosts’ lamp and exclaims, “Oh, is this *your* buried treasure? The **light** in the heart.”



## CHARACTERS

**The Narrator** – The narrator, who is given no name or gender, is one half of the living couple who now live in the “haunted house.” The narrator seems to be the only living person able to perceive the ghostly couple, at first hearing them and, finally, at the end of the story, catching a glimpse of the ghosts in the **light** of a lamp. In the story, the narrator leads a leisurely life, reading in the garden, and “rolling apples in the loft.” The narrator seems likely to be well-off, based on the size of his or her house, while the narrator’s tone and vocabulary suggest a significant degree of education. The narrator is deeply curious about the ghosts, searching through the house for them and

attempting to find out what they themselves are searching for. The narrator also clearly has a deep love for his or her spouse, and it is this love that seems to allow the narrator to realize that “the light in the heart” of a loving couple is what the dead couple are searching for.

**The Husband** – The husband, also unnamed, is one of the two ghosts who figure in the story, searching the house for the dead couples “treasure.” He lived “hundreds of years ago” in the house with his wife, but after her death, he fell into mourning and left the house to travel the world. Eventually, however, he returned to the house, “dropped beneath the Downs,” and—presumably after his own death—was reunited with his wife’s ghost. Though the story provides little space for either of the ghosts to be given a unique personality, Woolf establishes the husband as a romantic and poetic person who cares deeply for his wife. When the dead wife comments only, “Here we slept,” the husband responds, “Kisses without number.” The husband is also the one to notice the “love upon [the] lips” of the living sleeping couple. He and his wife are never separated during the story, emphasizing how profound their love for one another is.

**The Wife** – The wife, the other ghost who appears in the story, spends it searching the house with her husband for their “treasure” and reminiscing about their lives together. During their lives, she died first, “hundreds of years ago,” and Woolf implies (“left it, left her”) that she became a ghost immediately and was left alone for some time while her husband traveled. His desertion does not seem to have affected her love for him, however—as ghosts they are always together, going through the house “hand in hand.” Based on the dialogue she shares with her ghost-husband, she seems to be the more confident and authoritative of the two: she declares, “Here we left it,” before her husband adds, “Oh, but here too!” She is also the first to speak in the next paragraph of dialogue, recalling, “Here we slept,” and, eventually, the one to realize, “Here we left our treasure.”



## THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



### LOVE

Love is the central strand of Virginia Woolf’s “A Haunted House,” bringing comfort and happiness to everything from the undead to the titular **haunted house** itself. Far from being a typical ghost story, “A Haunted House” details a much gentler kind of haunting. In the

story, two ghostly lovers glide through the house where they once lived, searching for a “treasure” that they had buried there before death. In the end, it seems that the so-called treasure is simply the love they shared in life, which is alive and well in the living couple to whom the house now belongs. In “A Haunted House,” Woolf ultimately suggests that love knows no bounds—it survives the test of time, it overcomes boundaries between people, and it even endures beyond the grave.

As the story unfolds, it’s clear that the ghostly couple’s love still lives on in the house and in the garden even though the ghosts haven’t lived there in several centuries, suggesting that love can survive the passage of time. The ghostly couple’s exchange at the beginning of the story—“Here we left it.” “Oh, but here too!” “It’s upstairs.” “And in the garden”—grounds their treasure in the house. Though the living couple has “inherited” the treasure, it is the house, which has safeguarded it for many years, that makes that possible. The representation of the house as a living creature also indicates that the house itself embodies the couple’s love and lives on. Throughout the story, Woolf repeats the refrain, “‘Safe, safe, safe,’ the pulse of the house beat.” The house protects the “treasure” in it, suggesting that the love will be passed on to the next couple to live in the house. The use of “pulse” and, at another point, “heart,” to describe the life of the house also connects it with the organ traditionally associated with love, and suggests that even as time goes by, the couple’s love will continue to “beat” in the house. Similarly, the garden functions as a symbolic connection between the living couple and the dead couple. The first location the dead couple gives for the treasure is “in the garden,” and the narrator (half of the living couple) makes mention of reading in the garden, which is “still as ever”—suggesting that for many years the garden has remained as it is now, as when the woman of the dead couple remembers being “in the garden reading.” Also, though the narrator is not able to see the ghosts, they see “reflected apples, reflected roses; all the leaves [...] green in the glass” where the ghosts should be, so that the ghosts are in a sense reflected back to her in the form of the garden, the repository of the love that connects the two couples.

Not only does love transcend the boundaries of time and death, it also transcends the boundaries between individuals. This is clear through the way that the ghostly couple is described as a unit, like two strands woven into a single cord. The ghostly couple is unified throughout the story, acting and speaking in concert. They drift through the house “hand in hand” like two puzzle pieces snapped into one. They complete each other’s sentences and are referred to with the pronoun “they,” as though talking in exact unison. Later in the story, they interrupt one another rhythmically, almost like a song in harmony: “Waking in the morning—” “Silver between the trees—” “Upstairs—” “In the garden—.” Love makes it possible for them to have an intrinsic understanding of one another’s minds and

to act like a unit.

Most radically of all, the story suggests that love endures even after death. Although the ghostly couple is searching for the love they shared as living people, it’s clear that they are devoted to each other beyond the grave. The story introduces them going “hand in hand” through the house, and they complete each other’s sentences and speak as a unit, as in, “‘Quietly,’ they said, ‘or we shall wake them.’” Once again, the pronouns “they” and “we” emphasize that the two lovers are truly a pair and speak with one voice. They may have been dead for hundreds of years, but they are the model of a loving couple. Later, the narrator describes how “death [came] to the woman first, hundreds of years ago, leaving the house [...] He left it, left her [...] sought the house, found it dropped beneath the Downs.” When death divided the couple, the man left his house behind, the symbolic home of his love. However, the story then transitions into the refrain of “‘Safe, safe, safe,’ the pulse of the house beat gladly. ‘The Treasure yours,’” suggesting that even in light of his wife’s death and his own absence, the love he shared with his wife is still pulsing through the home.

At the end of the story, the ghostly couple’s love supersedes death in a new way: by inhabiting the young couple who live in their home. As the ghostly couple leans over the sleeping lovers, the woman sighs, “Here, [...] sleeping; in the garden reading; laughing, rolling apples in the loft. Here we left our treasure—” The living lovers mimic these activities, sleeping in the bedroom and reading in the garden. When the narrator wakes, they say, “Oh, is this *your* buried treasure? The light in the heart”; Woolf’s italics suggest both that the narrator has realized what the treasure is—love itself—and, furthermore, that the treasure was previously the ghostly couple’s, positioning the living couple as inheritors of the dead couple’s life and love. In “A Haunted House,” love is able to overpower any barrier it faces, from separation to death to the ravages of time. Even the individual self is not impervious to the force of love, which seems at times to combine two people into one.



## HAPPINESS AND THE HOME

The title of the story, “A Haunted House,” demonstrates the importance of the house to the story’s narrative. The story takes place almost completely within the house’s walls, as a ghostly couple drifts quietly through the house they once lived in hundreds of years ago. As the ghosts recall their fond memories of things that happened at the house and admire the living lovers who now inhabit it, Woolf suggests that the concept of home is central to one’s happiness, and that one will always be pulled toward home.

As the ghosts search for their “treasure,” they swap fond memories of living in the house, highlighting how their joy in life was intimately connected to the home. Approaching the living couple, the ghosts exchange brief recollections of moments in

the house: “‘Here we slept,’ she says. And he adds, ‘Kisses without number.’ ‘Waking in the morning—’ ‘Silver between the trees—’ ‘Upstairs—’ ‘In the garden—’ ‘When summer came—’ ‘In winter snowtime—.’” Their memories, and their love for one another, are so intrinsically connected to the house that they do not even need to specify *what* took place upstairs or in the garden; the place itself brings to mind their love and their joy. At the end of the story, as the ghosts watch the living couple sleep, the dead woman recalls, “Here, sleeping; in the garden reading; laughing, rolling apples in the loft. Here we left our treasure—.” She reminisces about the same activities the living couple is depicted doing in the story, all of which take place in and around the titular “haunted house.” Like the dead couple, the things that bring the living couple joy seem to be founded on their life in the house itself.

The story’s description of the world outside the house’s doors also suggests that the home is a place of warmth and safety. While searching for the ghosts in the house, the living narrator describes “the house all empty, the doors standing open, only the wood pigeons bubbling with content and the hum of the threshing machine sounding from the farm.” Even at this point in the story, when the ghosts have not yet been revealed to be harmless and benign, the soothing atmosphere of the house and yard suggests to the reader that this isn’t a classic ghost story—the titular haunted house is a wellspring of peace and comfort, not horror. At one point while the ghostly couple is searching for their “treasure,” Woolf explicitly contrasts the wild weather outside with the comfort and safety of the house: “The wind roars up the avenue. Trees stoop and bend this way and that. Moonbeams splash and spill wildly in the rain.” The outside world is cold, wet, chaotic, and at the mercy of nature and the weather. Inside the house, however, “the beam of the lamp falls straight from the window. The candle burns stiff and still.” The lamp and candle carry associations of **light** and warmth, making the house a safe haven from the storm. In addition, the detail that the beam of light from the lamp “falls straight” and the candle’s flame “burns stiff and still” suggests that the inside of the house is calm, silent, and peaceful. In contrast to the blustering wind and rain that’s whipping the landscape up into a frenzy, the house is a refuge, warm, safe, and unmoving.

Furthermore, the ghosts’ presence in the house hundreds of years after their respective deaths also suggests that it was an important part of their lives and emphasizes how strong the pull toward home can be. Throughout the story, the repetition of the word “here” affirms the intensity of the ghosts’ connection to the house. At the beginning, the dead couple exclaims, “Here we left it,” “Oh, but here too!” The appearance of “here” in their dialogue throughout—“Here we slept,” “Here, sleeping”—continues to underline the powerful importance of the house in their minds and lives, both before death and after. The story also reveals that the house had a strong pull on one

half of the ghostly couple, the man, while he was alive. The story notes that death “[came] to the woman first, hundreds of years ago, leaving the house, sealing all the window; the rooms were darkened,” before noting that the man “left it, left her, went North, went East, saw the stars turned in the Southern sky.” As his travels draw to a close, the man “[seeks] the house, [and] [finds] it dropped beneath the Downs.” While the story doesn’t make it explicit why the man leaves (perhaps because the house reminded him of his late wife) or why he returns, it is clear that the house has a strong pull on him. Furthermore, it seems that the house welcomes him warmly—as soon the man returns, “the pulse of the house beat[s] gladly” once again, repeating the word “Safe, safe, safe.” Even though the house was a source of pain for the man in that it was “darkened,” literally and metaphorically, after his wife’s death, the house’s steady “pulse” in light of his return suggests that it once again becomes a place of love and joy for him. While “A Haunted House” focuses on this one particular house, it also deals with the concept of home more broadly, suggesting that warm feelings like joy, safety, and contentment are intimately tied to the home.



## DEATH

Though the concept of a “haunted house” assumes a certain degree of tragedy and horror—the death of the people who previously lived there and who have taken to harassing the house’s new residents—Woolf presents an entirely different depiction of death and haunting “A Haunted House.” Through the ghostly lovers that gently float through the house’s halls, reminiscing about their past life, Woolf suggests that death is not the tragic or terrifying end that most people assume it to be but simply the beginning of a new stage of existence.

While the very existence of the ghostly couple in the story speaks to Woolf’s suggestion that death is not as final as it seems, the things that carry over from the ghostly couple’s old life to their new “life” further suggest that death is simply the beginning of a new stage of existence rather than a true end. In the story, the ghostly couple appears quite human. Even though they’ve been dead for hundreds of years and are now ghosts, they’ve retained their respective genders, as the story refers to them as “she” and “he”: “‘Here we left it,’ she said.” And he added, ‘Oh, but here too!’” In addition, they still appear to be very much in love, as they finish one another’s sentences, haunt the **house** while holding hands, and speak with one voice just like they were a living couple. That these characteristics have carried over into death strips death of its finality—the ghostly man and ghostly woman, a couple even in death, are, in a sense, still living. With tenderness, they recall sharing “kisses without number” and “laughing, rolling apples in the loft.” The very fact that they are able to reminisce also renders death less of an end than a continuation, albeit in a new form, of their old

existence. They seem to retain all memories of their life before death, and thus seem to be essentially the same people they were before they died. With this, Woolf crafts a nontraditional picture of death—one that doesn't look too different from life.

Of course, this new "life" isn't exactly the same as the old one, as the couple's nostalgia for their old life suggests that they've moved on to a new kind of existence. Woolf depicts the couple almost solely in the act of reminiscing about their previous life and searching for an artifact of it, as though, rather than finding joy in new activities after death, their sole pleasure consists of nostalgia for their old life. They talk about themselves and their relationship almost wholly in the past tense—"Here we left it," "Here we slept," "Again you found me." These memories emphasize that the ghostly lovers are leading a new kind of existence; if their life has simply continued exactly as it was before their death, their nostalgia would be pointless. Though the couple remains in love as ghosts, the "treasure" they are searching for, the "light in the heart," seems to be the specific experience of love while one is alive. The reader can reasonably assume based on the ghostly couple's search that there is something different and more meaningful about the love and joy of the living that leads the ghosts to pursue their treasure after death. The phrase "buried treasure" at the end of the story emphasizes this distinction—the couple's "treasure," their living love, was buried with them when they died, and although they find it reborn in the living couple, they can never regain it for themselves. Thus, even if death is a kind of continuation of life—a new existence in a new form—it pales in comparison to the richness and joy of living.

While Woolf's depiction of death as a continuation rather than an end in "A Haunted House" is in some ways comforting, tucked inside the ghostly couple's quest for their "treasure" is the idea that with death comes a heightened appreciation of life. While the ghostly couple still have one another and their memories, nothing measures up to the joy they experienced while they were alive.

understanding as being like light "behind [...] glass." Finally, at the end of the story, when the narrator is for the first time able to see the ghosts, the narrator sees the ghosts holding a lantern and also understands that the ghost's "treasure" is "The light in the heart." In other words, the ghost couple's "treasure," the "light in the heart," is revealed to be the love of the living couple—the warmth and joy that "burns" within them. Throughout the story, light represents both connection and love.

In contrast, darkness symbolizes isolation and the painful loss of love and connection in the story. Recalling the death of the ghostly man's wife many centuries ago, the narrator describes the woman as "leaving the house, sealing all the windows; the rooms were darkened." With the loss of love due to the death of the wife, the "light" left the house, and darkness reigned.



## THE HOUSE

Throughout the story, the titular house of "A Haunted House" represents safety, contentment, and the recovery of lost things, and in particular the ability of love to offer all of these things. From the beginning, it is clear that whatever the ghosts are searching for is somewhere in or associated with the domestic space of the house—"It's upstairs," "And in the garden"—indicating the symbolic significance of the house as a place that protects and safeguards important things like the "treasure." Also, before the reader learns what the ghosts are looking for, Woolf uses the house and its safe and comforting atmosphere to reassure the reader that this ghost story is not a frightening one: "the house all empty [...] only the wood pigeons bubbling with content and the hum of the threshing machine sounding from the farm." The house seems to "pulse," "beating softly." This pulse is not at all malevolent. Quite the opposite, it connects the house to the beating of a heart, and, further, to the love that is commonly believed to be associated with the heart. In fact, it is notable that when, in the distant past, the husband of the ghost couple loses his love because of the loss of his wife, he leaves the house, symbol of all that love has been to him, to go travel. And he can only be reunited with his love and achieve contentment again when he returns to the house and to his love.



## SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



## LIGHT AND DARKNESS

In "A Haunted House," **light** symbolizes the joy that can be found in love and human connection.

Throughout the story, "light" is connected to the ghosts's search for their "treasure." When the ghosts are moving together through the house, reminiscing about their life together, "the beam of the lamp falls straight from the window. The candle burns stiff and still." At the same time, the narrator seeks to understand the ghosts, and envisions this



## QUOTES



Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dover Publications edition of *Monday or Tuesday: Eight Stories* published in 1997.


## A Haunted House Quotes

☞ Whatever hour you woke there was a door shutting. From room to room they went, hand in hand, lifting here, opening there, making sure—a ghostly couple.

"Here we left it," she said. And he added, "Oh, but here too!" "It's upstairs," she murmured. "And in the garden," he whispered. "Quietly," they said, "or we shall wake them."

**Related Characters:** The Husband, The Wife, The Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 



**Page Number:** 1


### Explanation and Analysis

This quote comes from the opening of the story, as a pair of ghostly lovers search a house for something that they've lost. While much of the story is told from the perspective of an unnamed first-person narrator—one of the living people who now inhabits the ghosts' old house—the phrase "Whatever hour you woke" creates uncertainty about who's speaking here, as it's unclear who "you" refers to. It seems at first to refer to the narrator, who is indeed sleeping for part of the story and wakes up at the end. But much of the story is told *by* the narrator, so "you" also seems to refer to the reader or perhaps the narrator's partner. This isn't the only moment of ambiguity in the story surrounding speakers—Woolf creates a similar haziness with the repeated use of "oneself" or the lack of specificity in dialogue tags. With this technique, Woolf makes it difficult to pin down the specifics of her story right off the bat—echoing, it seems, the hazy and mysterious nature of the ghosts and their search for whatever "it" is. Woolf also makes known the significance of love right away by describing the ghostly couple "hand in hand" and having them speak in unison, which indicates the strength of their intimacy and connection even after death.

☞ "They're looking for it; they're drawing the curtain," one might say, and so read on a page or two. "Now they've found it," one would be certain [...] And then, tired of reading, one might rise and see for oneself, the house all empty, the doors standing open, only the wood pigeons bubbling with content and the hum of the threshing machine sounding from the farm.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), The Wife, The Husband

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 1

### Explanation and Analysis

In passage the narrator describes how "one might" search for the ghosts, who are searching for their "treasure." This passage makes it clear that while the narrator is aware of the ghosts' presence and even of their specific purpose in the house—"They're looking for it," whatever "it" is—the narrator isn't able to actually perceive the ghosts except in small, fleeting ways, occasionally hearing them or accurately pinpointing their location. Yet, notably, Woolf still does not confirm that these are the narrator's actual actions; the narrator says only that "one might" rise to "see for oneself," for instance, once more blurring the boundaries between the narrator and the reader as the reader is drawn into the action. Woolf also emphasizes the house and its grounds as a symbol of comfort and safety in this passage—seen through the wood pigeons "bubbling with content," or the "hum," a soft, pleasant noise, of the threshing machine—contrasting it with the increasing tension of the ghosts' presence and mysterious search. However, because the scene is so peaceful, it seems unlikely at this point that the ghosts haunting the house are classic sinister specters.

☞ So fine, so rare, coolly sunk beneath the surface the beam I sought always burnt behind the glass. Death was the glass; death was between us; coming to the woman first, hundreds of years ago, leaving the house, sealing all the windows; the rooms were darkened. He left it, left her, went North, went East, saw the stars turned in the Southern sky; sought the house, found it dropped beneath the Downs.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), The Husband, The Wife

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 2



### Explanation and Analysis



In this passage, the narrator recounts the ghostly couple's history: how they lived and died, and why the house is so powerfully important to them even after death. Following the death of his wife, the husband, robbed of his love, abandoned the house as well, leaving behind the symbol of their closeness, their love, and the happy life they had had together. However, he was not able to stay away for very long before he "sought the house," returning to the wellspring of his happy memories with his wife and, presumably, reconvening with her spirit after his own death.

Another noteworthy element of this passage is the use of light as a symbol of connection and intimacy, which is a thread that runs throughout the story. Searching for the ghosts, the narrator identifies them as "the beam I sought," representing potential connection with the ghosts in terms of light. In contrast, when the husband's connection with his wife is temporarily stripped away at her death, the rooms in the house "were darkened," suggesting the loss of their intimacy and the pain it caused him.

☞ The wind roars up the avenue. Trees stoop and bend this way and that. Moonbeams splash and spill wildly in the rain. But the beam of the lamp falls straight from the window. The candle burns stiff and still. Wandering through the house, opening the windows, whispering not to wake us, the ghostly couple seek their joy.

**Related Characters:** The Narrator (speaker), The Wife, The Husband

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis


This passage, which appears near the middle of the story, illustrates the stark contrast between the warm and comforting world inside the house and the dark and stormy one outside. The house is glowing with light—from both a lamp and a candle—making it appear like a cozy haven from the storm. Although outside the wind "roars up the avenue" and the rain hammers down, inside everything seems peaceful as "the beam of the lamp falls straight" and the candle burns "stiff and still." The fact that both sources of light in the house (the candle and the lamp) seem to

emanate from the ghosts also affirms that, far from being in any way dangerous or even frightening, as one might expect of ghosts, they actively contribute to the comforting, loving quality of the so-called "haunted house." In addition, Woolf begins to indicate the actual nature of the treasure in this quotation—rather than simply their "treasure," it is now "their joy," foreshadowing the revelation that the treasure itself is the joy and love the ghosts experienced in their lifetime.

☞ "Safe, safe, safe," the heart of the house beats proudly. "Long years—" he sighs. "Again you found me." "Here," she murmurs, "sleeping; in the garden reading; laughing, rolling apples in the loft. Here we left our treasure—" Stooping, their light lifts the lids upon my eyes. "Safe! safe! safe!" the pulse of the house beats wildly. Waking, I cry "Oh, is this *your* buried treasure? The light in the heart."

**Related Characters:** The Wife, The Husband, The Narrator (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Related Symbols:**  

**Page Number:** 2

### Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, which comes from the very end of "A Haunted House," the narrator finally interacts with the ghosts directly, exclaiming, "Oh, is this *your* buried treasure? The light in the heart." With this, the secret of the couple's treasure is finally revealed: it seems to be the love and joy that they experienced in life that they are no longer able to experience after death. Even the ghosts are presented as still being very much in love beyond the grave, the concept of "The light in the heart" suggests that there's something richer and more satisfying about the love and happiness that one can experience in life.

The moment at which the narrator figures out what the ghosts are looking for is also the first moment in which the narrator interacts directly with the ghosts, when the light from the ghosts' lamp "lifts the lids upon [the narrator's] eyes." Light, once again, becomes a symbol of connection: the understanding that has come into being between the narrator and the ghosts is made physical in the form of the lamplight.



## SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

## A HAUNTED HOUSE

"Whatever hour you woke" there are doors closing in the house. Holding hands, "a ghostly couple" works their way through each room in the **house**, rifling through its contents, "making sure."

The ghostly couple debates where they have "left it," suggesting possibilities. The woman thinks "It's upstairs," but the man whispers "And in the garden." They remind one another, "Quietly, or we shall wake them." The narrator comments, however, that "it wasn't that you woke us."

The narrator suggests that "one might say" that the ghosts are "looking for it" behind the curtains, and thus one would continue reading, letting the ghosts carry on with their search. But when one becomes certain that "Now they've found it," one would abandon one's book and go "see for oneself." However, one would find the **house** empty and doors thrust open, "only the wood pigeons bubbling with content and the hum of the threshing machine."

Woolf introduces the confusion of the speaker's identity in the very first line—who is the "you" waking up? The reader, the narrator, a generic "you"? Also, Woolf brings in the theme of love immediately with the "ghostly couple" holding hands, indicating to the reader that whether or not the ghosts are benevolent, they care in some way for each other.



Woolf demonstrates the ghostly couple's closeness and affection for one another by having them speak in unison and even complete one another's sentences. The importance of the house also becomes apparent for the first time: whatever the ghostly couple is looking for, it is somewhere in the house. The ghosts' intimate familiarity with different parts of the house—and the implication that they've been here before, since they "left" something here in the past—suggests that this house once belonged to them but now has new, living residents.



In this passage, the narrator describes a hypothetical situation, explaining what "one might" do and leading the reader to consider if these are perhaps the narrator's own actions. This passage also begins to suggest that the ghosts are not malevolent: the scene is quiet and peaceful, the ghosts keep to themselves, and the narrator suggests that "one" has no reason to interfere with the ghost's search and can read peacefully while the ghosts rifle through the house. The narrator's search for the ghosts parallels the ghosts' search for whatever they lost, both of which will eventually be resolved in one simultaneous moment.





The narrator muses, "What did I come in here for? What did I want to find?" Emptyhanded, the narrator goes to look upstairs to find "it" but just finds apples in the loft. Thwarted, the narrator goes back downstairs and returns to the garden, which is "still as ever." Since the narrator left, "the book had slipped into the grass."

*The narrator is seemingly able to hear the ghosts, but not to see them, indicating the odd limbo in which the ghosts exist—not completely dead but not alive, just as they are able to be perceived with some senses and not others. That the garden is "still as ever" begins to suggest that the house is much like how the ghostly couple left it. Later, the ghosts will reminisce about reading in the garden, an activity that the narrator seems to do too, given the detail about the book in the grass. Like the ghosts, the house has been preserved in a semblance of its original form.*



Meanwhile, the ghostly couple has "found it in the drawing room," but the narrator is unable to see them—"if they moved in the drawing room, the apple turned its yellow side." The narrator envisions opening the door and seeing "spread about the floor, hung upon the walls, pendant from the ceiling—what? My hands were empty."

*The ghosts are barely perceptible—the only physical evidence of them is an apple turning or toppling over, which reaffirms that the ghosts' so-called "haunting" (given the story's title) is quiet and gentle rather than invasive and malevolent. It's difficult to say definitively what the narrator imagines is "spread about the floor" and hanging from the ceiling—it seems like the narrator senses that whatever the ghosts are looking for is embedded in the house itself.*



The narrator hears the sounds of birds and watches flitting of the bird's shadows. Meanwhile, "the pulse of the **house** beat[s] softly," "Safe, safe, safe." Someone—or something—says, "The treasure buried; the room..." With this, the house's pulse suddenly stops, and the narrator asks, "Was that the buried treasure?" However, "a moment later the **light** had faded"—the ghosts have still not found what they are looking for and continue the search in the garden.

*The first appearance of the house's refrain, "Safe, safe, safe," affirms that the ghosts are not a danger, and that the house is a place of safety and comfort. In a similar vein, that the house has a steady, gentle pulse links the house with a heart, and, by extension, love. The detail that the treasure was "buried" suggests that it was perhaps "buried" with the couple when they died and thus was something they could only access in life—which would explain the fruitlessness of their search now. Later, the story depicts the ghosts holding a lamp, so the mention that "the light had faded" suggests that the ghosts, lamp in hand, are moving down the hall to a different side of the house.*



In the garden, the narrator sees the trees "[spinning] **darkness** for a wandering beam of sun," and reflects that "the beam I sought always burnt behind the glass. Death was the glass." The narrator recalls the story of the ghostly couple, who lived "hundreds of years ago." The woman died first, "leaving the **house**, sealing all the windows; the rooms were darkened." After her death, her husband left the house, too. The man "went North, [and] went East," but he did not continue traveling for long. Instead, he "sought the house, found it dropped beneath the Downs." The "pulse of the house" beats "Safe, safe, safe," again, and adds, "The treasure yours."

*Throughout the story, light represents human connection and love. Here, light seems to refer to narrator's desire to communicate and form a bond with the ghosts, the "beam" that the narrator seeks, which is prevented by the "glass" of death that separates them. Moreover, the narrator adds that when the husband left the house many centuries ago after his wife's death, "the rooms were darkened"—the loss of love also meant the loss of light. The theme of home is also relevant in this passage, since although the man leaves the house after his wife's death, he is ultimately drawn back to it and to her memory—home, and the love and happiness it fosters, is too powerful a force to resist.*



Outside, the wind howls, trees thrash around, and "Moonbeams splash and spill wildly in the rain." In the **house**, though, a beam of **light** from a lamp "falls straight from the window," and the flame from "The candle burns stiff and still." The ghostly couple continues to drift through the house and open windows. The narrator notes that the ghosts talk softly so they don't "wake us" while searching for "their joy."

The ghostly woman of the couple recalls, "Here we slept," and her husband adds, "Kisses without number." They list their fond memories of life in the **house** to one another: "Waking in the morning—" "Silver between the trees—" "Upstairs—" "In the garden—" As they move through the house, they open and shut doors, which sounds "like the pulse of a heart."

The ghostly couple comes "Nearer" and stops in a doorway. Outside, the wind continues to roar, and rain drip down the windows. The narrator notes that "we hear no steps beside us; we see no lady spread her ghostly cloak." The ghostly man tries to block some of the **light** from the lantern with his hands and whispers, "Look. Sound asleep. Love upon their lips."

"Holding their silver **lamp** above us," the dead couple gazes down at the narrator and the narrator's partner as they sleep, lingering for a long time. Meanwhile, "The wind drives straightly; the flame stoops slightly" and "wild beams of moonlight" move through the room. The moon shines on the faces of the dead couple, who are "pondering," "search[ing] the sleepers and seek[ing] their hidden joy."

*This passage forms a sharp contrast between the comfort, safety, and loving warmth of the home, bathed in lamplight and candlelight, and the dark outside world, where the weather is wild and dangerous. This passage also gives the reader a better understanding of what the ghosts' treasure is: it has something to do with "their joy." That their "joy" is hidden somewhere in the house also speaks to the story's insistence that the home is central to one's happiness.*



*Reminiscing about their love and life, the ghosts point out parts of the house and yard where they were happy together rather than specific memories. Once again, this suggests that love and happiness are intimately tied to the home. The description of the doors as sounding "like the pulse of a heart" also depicts the house as a symbol of love and as the repository for the dead couple's love. It seems that the ghosts' love is what is still beating through the house.*



*The story once again forms a contrast between the dark and stormy environment outside the house's walls and the warm and loving atmosphere inside the home, lit by the ghost's lantern. Here, light again symbolizes connection; although the living couple is still not able to perceive the ghosts, the dead couple seems to be face-to-face with them for the first time. The ghosts are also drawn to the love that the narrator and the narrator's partner share—suggesting, perhaps, that the love the ghosts shared in life is living "upon [the] lips" of the couple who now inhabits the house.*



*Once again, light symbolizes love and connection, here in the form of the "silver lamp," the "stooping flame," and the "beams of moonlight" that light the scene. As the dead couple begin to recognize their "hidden joy" in the sleeping couple, the house is filled with light and life.*



The **house's** heart "beats proudly," "Safe, safe, safe." With a sigh, the husband of the dead couple reflects, "Long years—Again you found me." His wife softly recounts fond memories from living in the house, saying, "Here, [...] sleeping; in the garden reading; laughing, rolling apples in the loft. Here we left our treasure—"

*The house's "proud" refrain, "safe, safe, safe," reappears, suggesting that the house has preserved the ghostly couple's love and joy for centuries, and that it still beats on through the house and through the living couple that now inhabits it. Once again, the dead couple reminisce about their life together in the context of the house, recalling their favorite activities in it, "sleeping, in the garden reading." These mimic the activities the narrator does throughout the story, demonstrating the continuity between the dead and living couples; although the living couple has taken the dead couple's place in the house, the dead couple's love and happy life are embodied in the living.*



At that moment, the **light** of the ghostly man's lamp "lifts the lids" of the narrator's eyes. Suddenly, the house's pulse begins to "beat[] wildly," "Safe! safe! safe!" The narrator, waking up, cries out to the couple, "Is this *your* buried treasure? The light in the heart."

*The use of light as a symbol culminates with the narrator finally being able to interact directly with the ghosts, awoken by their lamplight. In this moment, the light represents the brief but profound connection between the dead couple and the narrator, in which the couple realize that their "treasure" is embodied in the narrator and the narrator's spouse. At the same time, the narrator realizes what the couple's "treasure" is: the "light in the heart," the love and joy that the ghosts experienced in life.*





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