

THE GROWNUP BY GILLIAN FLYNN AS AN EXAMPLE
OF MODERN GHOST WRITING

Living in an enlightened, rational age and an increasingly secular society, the vast majority of us do not believe in ghosts. We tend to rely on our knowledge of science, psychology and medicine. Yet there seems to be voracious demand for the paranormal and intriguing due to the audience's wish to be terrified. While trying to evoke a sense of horror and dread, masters of suspense and terror are likely to have a challenge on their hands, because the modern reader is not easily spooked. Gillian Flynn proves that the challenge is not insurmountable by playing around with the conventions of the ghost story in her novella *The Grownup*.

The author's character development is really substantial and definitely adds to the power of her writing. The story originally appeared under the title "What Do you Do?", which is equally fitting. It is about a woman who is a sex worker, a keen observer of human behaviour, a fan of ghost stories, a con artist, a psychic and, at the end of the novella, a kidnapper all rolled into one. When people ask her this

very common question: “What do you do?” she simply says she is “in customer service”. There is hardly a better euphemism for naming her occupation, or rather occupations. After the narrator meets a rich lady named Susan and visits her eerie Victorian mansion she no longer needs to pretend to believe in ghosts. The reader becomes emotionally involved in the narrative, no matter how unbelievable it seems, and goes along with the story due to their empathy with the main character. Even if *The Grownup* is not the scariest story ever written and fails to fill the reader with extreme horror on every single page, the author deserves praise for her well-developed and highly relatable character.

The use of unreliable narrative voices is another powerful tool in Gillian Flynn’s toolkit. In fact, there seem to be three distinct ones which are worthy of attention. The story is told in the first person, the unnamed narrator being a con woman. This somehow makes her untrustworthy, especially as we learn how she hones her skills of running scams. Then there is her client Susan who thinks her home is cursed, her stepson is mentally unstable and fears that he will kill her and her own child. Finally, there is Miles, a mysterious black-eyed boy that supposedly terrorizes the family and acts strange, as if possessed. The teenager speaks to the narrator several times to explain that he is not the problem in the home and that it is Susan who plans to kill the narrator because of jealousy and anger. The reader feels unsure if the stepmother is telling the truth about the events or Miles until the final pages of the novella when the boy makes a chilling confession that he has lured the narrator as part of his devious plan to leave home and go to the biggest supernatural convention in the world: “Susan said I couldn’t go. So you can take me. I thought you’d be happy – you love ghost stories.” The unreliability of narration definitely adds mystery and suspense to Gillian Flynn’s story and proves that the modern ghost writer inherits the tradition of unreliable narrators.

Above all, ghost stories are about atmosphere. The author relies heavily on the setting which results in the dark atmosphere typical of ghost writing. The necessary mood is created, sounds are heard and there is a tense feeling that almost anything can happen in the place. Being transported into the world of the story, we never stop disbelieving, we feel that what we are reading about is really happening. Gillian Flynn’s story is rich in descriptions of the allegedly haunted Victorian estate – a mansion that “attacked and manipulated its own inhabitants”. It almost certainly becomes one of the characters in the story. The following lines are a testimony to this: “Then I shivered. It lurked. It was the only remaining Victorian house in a long row of boxy new construction, and maybe that’s why it seemed alive, calculating.” and “The house creaks all night long. I mean, it almost moans.” or “I watched the house. It watched me back.” Indeed, Gillian Flynn’s descriptions of the setting contribute a lot to the reader’s unease.

No ghost story is complete without death and destruction. *The Grownup* is no exception. When the protagonist goes online to do a search on the house she was hired to cleanse, she learns the grisly tale of the Carterhook family. The magnate moved into the mansion with his lovely wife and their two children. One of the boys, Robert, was violent – he was a bully who tortured his younger brother and neighbourhood pets. At the age of fourteen he was totally unable to control him-self,

so his parents locked him in the mansion. One night the father was found stabbed, his wife struck down by an ax, the younger brother was found drowned in a bathtub, and Robert hanged himself from a beam in his room. Yet it is not just “the bloody results” of that night that send a shiver down the narrator’s spine. There is a photo of the Carterhooks beneath the article. In it, Robert looks like Susan’s troubled stepson. So, the macabre contents of the novella can definitely rattle the reader’s nerves.

While reading the novella, we keep guessing till the very end. We continue guessing even after we have finished reading as *The Grownup* ends on a cliffhanger. Flynn has the narrator say: “I may never know the truth about the happenings at Carterhook Manor.” The narrator thinks Miles might be a sociopath, though a likeable one, and tries to convince herself that she has nothing to worry about but pulls a dresser in front of the door of her room just in case. There is ambivalence which makes the finale both exciting and frightening. It also shows that the writer is a brilliant manipulator of the reader’s expectations.

In conclusion, in her novella *The Grownup*, Gillian Flynn pays homage to the traditional ghost story by drawing on the elements traditionally associated with tales about ghosts. They include character development, the use of unreliable narrative voices, a creepy setting resulting in the dark atmosphere, macabre themes, and a twist ending. These classic elements as well as the author’s original voice turn the story into a compelling page-turner, an alluring mix of terror, suspense, sarcasm and ambivalence. In the end, it seems it is not the apparitions themselves that seduce and intrigue the reader but just a glimmer of their presence. As Roald Dahl once said: “The best ghost stories don’t have ghosts in them.”