Queer Specters / Fleeting Feelings: Temporalities of Affect in the Short Ghost Story

In his “Philosophy of Composition,” Edgar Allan Poe suggests that the chief merit of the short story form lies in its ability to produce particular sensations. This is an outcome of its fitness to the physical act of reading. While “worldly interests intervening during the pauses of perusal modify, annul, or contract…the impressions of the book,” the brevity of the “tale” requires no interruption, allowing it to evoke its sought-after effect. Following Poe, we might thus argue that what makes the short story “queer” is its affective vitality: its formal and temporal indulgence of the embodied condition of the reader; its ability to provoke desired affects in the reader.

Nowhere is this question of sought-after sensation more poignantly felt than in the genre that Poe himself mastered – the genre whose signature expression is found in the short-story form: the ghost story. Fittingly, this is also the mode whose attendant feeling is most frequently described as “queer.”

This paper combines Poe’s assessment of the short story’s embodied temporality with analyses of the temporal structure of queer affect by thinkers like Heather Love, José Esteban Muñoz, and Elizabeth Freeman. The (seemingly opposed) fleetingness and transhistoricity of feeling that these thinkers describe evokes the phenomenology of reading the short ghost story. Contrasting two fin-de-siècle ghost stories, W.W. Jacobs’ brisk familial drama “The Monkey’s Paw” (1902) and Sarah Orne Jewett’s persistently suspenseful and curiously anticlimactic “The Foreigner” (1900), I inquire into the relation between the short story’s temporal immediacy and its ability to evoke what we might call queer, atmospheric affects.