



A Haunting in Time and Space: Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst"

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Abstract

Vernon Lee's 1886 work "Oke of Okehurst" deploys many of the tropes familiar to readers of the late-century Victorian ghost story – an ancestral country manor, an unhappy marriage, an evocative landscape, and an intrusive past – but this paper describes the ways Okehurst is haunted more by the enigmatic Mrs Oke than by any apparition. Attending to the story's multifaceted play with time, I argue Mrs Oke's eeriness is consistently linked to her atemporality within her local landscape, the resulting doublings and discomfort reminiscent of Freud's exploration of the uncanny. This paper also borrows the invocation of a *genius loci* figure from Lee's aesthetic writing to link geography and time as inextricably entwined elements in Mrs Oke's knowledge of her Okehurst ancestors' affect and behaviour. The story presents her intimate knowledge as distinct from, and apparently threatening to, her husband's more mundane citational histories, and ultimately raises questions of the repercussions of human presentism and the privileging of objective forms of knowledge over others.

Key Words

Vernon Lee; "Oke of Okehurst"; Alice Oke; *genius loci*; temporality; uncanny; history; knowledge; resistance; affect

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A Haunting in Time and Space: Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst"¹

Barbara D. Ferguson

Introduction

"The Past, the more or less remote Past," Vernon Lee declares in the preface to her 1890 fiction anthology, "that is the place to get our ghosts from. Indeed we live ourselves, we educated folk of modern times, on the borderland of the Past... and a legion of ghosts, very vague and changeful, are perpetually to and fro, fetching and carrying for us between it and the Present" (Lee [1890b] 2006: 39). 'The Past' rarely left Lee's page, no matter her subject matter. Born in France to a peripatetic English family in 1856, Lee – née Violet Paget – began writing for publication in her teens, adopting the name "Vernon Lee" around 1875 for her essays on Italian history and architecture.² In writing about the European cities she loved, it seemed Lee could "retreat at will from the present into a timeless past of which she was the interpreter and guardian" (Colby 2003: 1). Catherine Maxwell and Patricia Pulham note that, transcending lists of historical dates and names, Lee seemed "always conscious of the hidden accretions or layers of history that have built up around a particular locale" (2006: 14). Having built a circle of admiring acquaintance that included Walter Pater and Henry James, Lee added fiction to her repertoire late in the century. Her anthology *Hauntings: Fantastic Stories* features tales set in Paris, Greece, and Italy, populated by composers, sculptors, and historians tormented by long-dead figures and artistic obsession. Only one story, "Oke of Okehurst," is set in England. It was originally published as a volume-form novella by Blackwood in 1886 under the title "A Phantom Lover," and Lee's change of title is a significant one, as this story and its characters complicate the notion of a person being "of" a location or even "of" a time. Any tale of haunting explores the ways the past intrudes on the present, but Lee's novella disdains descriptions of spectres to instead position its sole living female character as a haunted and haunting figure. In this article, I examine Alice Oke's intimate relation to her home and argue that her inexplicable knowledge of its landscape and its human history are fundamental to her uncanny nature, her radical temporality contributing to her fatal end.

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² As Paget wrote to one of her earliest mentors, "no one reads a woman's writing on art, history and aesthetics with anything but mitigated [sic] contempt" (Maxwell and Pulham 2006: 9). Her attachment to her pen name seems more profound than simple marketability: she adopted it in reality, becoming known to friends as "Vernon" and answering to it as well as to "Violet" for the remainder of her life (cf. Maxwell and Pulham 2006: 9; Colby 2003: xi). Following her bibliographic listings and other scholars of her work, I refer to her as (Vernon) Lee for the remainder of this article.

The story is narrated by an unnamed artist speaking to the reader as if to a visitor in his studio, recounting the tale of his paired-portrait commission from Mr and Mrs Oke, and of his stay at Okehurst manor. He describes a marriage in which Alice pays little to no attention to her husband William, while William in turn worries about her fixation on a local legend in which a seventeenth-century Oke, allegedly with his wife's aid, kills his wife's suspected lover. The current Mrs Oke, consistently portrayed as more interested in the past than the present, shares a name with the legendary wife, owns and wears the personal belongings of the dead lovers, and delights in telling people how she and her husband are both descended from the infamous couple. Accepting without qualm that some claim to have seen or felt the presence of the murdered lover, Christopher Lovelock, she neither confirms nor denies that she herself has done so; instead, she demonstrates an uncannily intimate knowledge of the centuries-old murder. Finally, the agitated William, beset with glimpses of shadowy figures on his property and believing he sees a man with Alice in her sitting room, fatally shoots his wife. He dies in custody some days later. Having never witnessed the figures he reports, readers are left to wonder whether the ghost of Lovelock was in fact haunting the halls of Okehurst, or whether the story is instead, as its contemporary *Pall Mall Gazette* reviewer concluded, a study in "morbid psychology" ("VERNON LEE'S HAUNTINGS.*" 1890).³

By the time the novella first appeared in the 1880s, the British ghost story was an established yet adaptive literary genre. Such tales in the first half of the century established symbolic figures of tragedy or vengeance influenced by the Romantic Gothic and folkloric roots, but in the second half, ghost stories increasingly reflected a supernatural countered with skeptics and investigators. Characters determined to find a 'rational explanation' began to appear as science grew in cultural status and psychical investigation of spiritualism spread across Britain (Freeman 2012: 105; Delgado 2017: 236). Authors of ghostly tales also began to eschew the horrific supernatural in favour of "the haunted realm between dream, vision and ghostly manifestation," moving away from moors and castles and into domestic settings all the more distressing for their disrupted familiarity (Freeman 2012: 98-9). Appropriately, "Oke" seems itself a transitional story, faintly gesturing back to the mid-century's "angry or jealous revenant prompt[ing] the revelation of the secrets of the past" but also ahead to a modernist period where "the unknowability of the past is figured through the spectrality of empty, or strangely new, houses, indistinct shadows or spatial and temporal disruption in line with new formulations of the uncanny" (Liggins 2017: 32). It is simultaneously an English manor house ghost story and psychological portrait that leaves both labels inadequate.

Although this paper argues that "Oke of Okehurst" offers considerable fascinations in its play with knowledge through time, the story remains notably less studied than other tales in Lee's anthology – possibly because readers expecting a ghost story also expect the frisson of seeing the ghost themselves.⁴ Lee biographer Vineta Colby finds "Oke" lacks the vivid sense of connection

³ The *Pall Mall Gazette* reviewer felt the *Hauntings* collection almost entirely lacking in supernatural chills, but did describe all the tales as "well imagined, cleverly constructed, powerfully executed" and "'Oke of Okehurst'... a masterly story in its way" ("VERNON LEE'S" 1890). The *Birmingham Daily Post* called the tales "brief, genuine and finished works of art" with satisfying "vague mysterious touches" ("NEW BOOKS" 1890).

⁴ In the recent recuperative trend, scholars who identify Lee as an overlooked queer voice in *fin-de-siècle* literature find richer substance in her biography and aesthetic writings produced with her longtime companion Clementina "Kit" Anstruther-Thompson, as well as stories such as "A Wicked Voice" or "Prince Alberic and the Snake Lady" (cf. Colby 2003 chapter 7; also Vincinus 2004, Newman 2005, Maxwell 2007, among others).

between life and location found in Lee's continental tales, a connection which Lee herself and subsequent scholars have termed *genius loci* (Colby 2003: 236); it is a recurrent term in the scholarship and one key to honouring Lee's fascination with history and local aesthetics.⁵ Some scholars juxtapose the recurrent themes of art in Lee's fiction with her aesthetic essays, and these explorations are nearer to my reading here. Angela Leighton, for instance, argues that artefacts in Lee's fictions rouse not only a "craving for the past" in those who touch them but also release the items' "ghostly presences"; she cites Lee's claim that without the "life-blood of attention... spectres can never speak to posterity nor lay hands on its soul" (Leighton 2000: 4). "Oke" arguably positions paintings, manuscripts, and clothing in the way Leighton describes, though she mentions the tale only briefly. Elsewhere, Athena Vrettos examines the ways in which Alice Oke's fixation on the past, particularly on her namesake's belongings, may be a form of ancestral memory, essentially aligning fringe Victorian psychological theories of memory with heredity and psychometry (2013: 203-04). Vrettos's reading opens up some intriguing avenues this paper will explore in its investigation of Alice's transtemporal knowledge.

I suggest a reading of the story that attends primarily to its play with time – not simply its evocation of the past but also its entanglement with the present and even the future. To do so, I borrow from the *genius loci* concept but add the inextricability of location (that is, space) from time in the character of Alice Oke. Narrative detail and structure consistently position Alice as something akin to a *genius loci*, her knowledge and understanding of local space and time disquietingly different from those around her. Under the right conditions, place and time speak powerfully through her. We need not, I think, delve into the minutiae of quantum physics to grasp that if a *genius loci* is understood as inherent to a place, it is inherent throughout time; its intelligence refers not simply to the present moment but encompasses the lifespan of its place. This paper will first briefly examine the *genius loci* concept held by Lee and others before moving on to examine the ways the text presents Alice Oke as a figure of unrest in space through time. Contrasting her knowledge of the past against her husband's, I offer some final thoughts about the significance of a tale which suggests Alice's revisioning of time so threatens prevailing paradigms that only her destruction can restore order.

Lee and the *Genius Loci*

As already suggested, the notion of *genius loci* is ingrained in Lee's own work and many subsequent scholarly examinations of it. Roman mythology uses the term to designate a "guardian spirit of a place, often in the form of a serpent," the inclusion of 'genius' an etymological reminder that such a spirit, no matter its form, had sentient intelligence (Coleman 2007: 407). But in the introduction to her 1899 book *Genius Loci*, Lee clarifies that her use of the term should not evoke the commonly imagined "personification[s], not a man or woman with mural crown and attributes, and detestable definite histories;" rather it refers to a connection formed through "the substance of our heart and mind, a spiritual reality. And as for visible embodiment, why that is the place itself, or the country; and the features and speech are the lie of the land, pitch of the streets, sound of bells or of weirs" (Lee 1907: 5). She writes:

⁵ Colby calls the novella's *genius loci* ("the essential character of a particular place") "only a plot device, useful because a story of the supernatural requires an appropriate framework for atmosphere and mood" (2003: 234).

To certain among us, undeniably, places, localities (I can find no reverent and tender enough expression for them in our practical, personal language) become objects of intense and most intimate feeling. Quite irrespective of their inhabitants, and virtually of their written history, they can touch us like living creatures...

(Lee 1907: 3)

Attributing this affective response to the “impersonal reality whom I call, for want of a better name... the Genius Loci” (1907: 4-5), she welcomes these uniquely “intimate connection[s] between places and oneself” (8). Maxwell and Pulham cite an 1892 essay in which Lee describes how some locations elicit “the sense of being companioned by the past, being in a place warmed for our living by the lives of others” (qtd in Maxwell and Pulham 2006: 14). In expressing this aspect as something that “can never be personified” but is nonetheless often “immanent” (Lee 1907: 6), Lee imbues it with a quasi-divine nature but does not promote its worship – in her imagining, it is simply inherent to the land, awaiting those capable of feeling its presence.

Lee’s lifelong fascinations with place and history might seem ideal imaginative conditions for a writer of ghost stories, particularly at the end of a century with a capacious interest in the genre. But Leighton argues it may be more accurate to say Lee replaces the Gothic tropes of horror and terror with something nearer to “the spectre of the antique” – Lee’s own phrase for a “craving” she identified as characteristic of Victorian life (qtd in Leighton 2000: 1). In the preface to *Hauntings*, Lee assures the reader they will find “no hauntings such as could be contributed by the Society for Psychical Research” ([1890b] 2006: 40).⁶ She calls her literary ‘ghosts’ “things of the imagination, born there, bred there, sprung from the strange confused heaps... which lie in our fancy, heaps of half-faded recollections, of fragmentary vivid impressions” (39). She names them “spurious” in that “they [only] haunted certain brains” rather than the attics or moors of other fictions (40). “Oke of Okehurst” remains in many ways a ghost story without a ghost, one which teases readers’ expectations through its deployment of tropes such as an isolated manor house, a gruesome local legend, and an unhappy marriage. Instead of the traditional murdered lover crying for vengeance from beyond the grave, the tale offers Alice Oke, “companioned by the past” and demanding those around her see that past through an intimate and disquieting lens.

The Mysterious Mrs Oke

The present Alice Oke is neither a divine spirit nor a personified semi-divinity but nonetheless belongs to her landscape. Descended from the seventeenth-century Alice and thus a cousin to her husband (descended from the seventeenth-century Oke), her family is indubitably local. However, from the beginning, details suggest an otherworldliness in her. Within the first paragraph, the artist narrator names her a “singular being... [t]he most marvellous creature,” and thus something extraordinary and perhaps incompletely human. The addition of “exotic [and] far-fetched” amongst the artist’s laudatory adjectives implies a physical distance with a touch of the thrillingly foreign (Lee [1890a] 2006: 106); later he likens her to “the words to a weird piece of gipsy [sic] music,”

⁶ The Society for Psychical Research (SPR), founded in Cambridge in 1882, grew to be one of the pre-eminent collectives professing to use scientific methods to research mediumistic claims and phenomena. Its high-profile members and its satire in mass media such as *Punch* increased its name-recognition. L. Anne Delgado argues that the SPR was influential in shaping the literary ghost such that by century’s end, “the psychical and spiritualist ghost was expected to perform in such a way that its performances could be documented” (2017: 237).

separating her further from “all women of her own time” (122).⁷ Subtle details further underscore Alice’s ambiguity in time and place as the narrator refers his interlocutor to a “whole sketchbook” of drawings for her portrait: all are preliminary and incomplete, such as the one of her “leaning over a staircase” with no sense of whether she is moving up or down it; another shows “the back of her head as she leaves the room,” and, having attempted to paint her leaning against a wall, the artist dismisses the result as “a huge wreck” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 106). Every instance of a failed rendering suggests her elusiveness and the difficulty of freezing her in even the fleeting moment art seeks to reproduce. The narrator claims it is only in memory that he sees Mrs Oke clearly and even then always in motion (114). Lee provides a sly foreshadowing of these difficulties in her Preface to the tale, where she claims to have written the story only at a friend’s urging: “in such matters, to write is to exorcise, to dispel the charm... printers’ ink chases away the ghosts that may pleasantly haunt us, as efficaciously as gallons of holy water” (Lee [1890c] 2006: 105).⁸ Certainly the Okes’ story lingers to ‘haunt’ the narrator, so he should perhaps be grateful that his ink-driven exorcism failed during his stay at Okehurst.

Alice Oke’s attention is equally difficult to capture, as attention demands a presence in the now. She “always seemed to be thinking of something else” even as she participates in conversation, smiling “as if she alone had suddenly seen or heard something” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 114); she often stares into the “invisible distance” (116) but never shares what, if anything, she sees. She has, the narrator claims, “no interest in the present, but only an eccentric passion in the past. It seemed to give the meaning to the absent look in her eyes...” – the use of the definite article here suggesting that the past alone has the ability to grant meaning to thought (122). Even physically, she seems incomplete in the present, as the narrator says “I never thought about her as a body... but merely as a wonderful series of lines,” a description evocative of his perception of the “undulating” manor grounds upon arrival (114). He muses further on her allure, noting “real beauty is as much a thing in time – a thing like music, a succession, a series – as in space” (115), and later comments that her period dress brought forth “the more exotic exquisiteness and incorporeality [sic] of her person” (151). How historical clothing might simultaneously hang upon, yet de-solidify, the body beneath it, Lee leaves unexplained; the description becomes yet another indication of the fluid temporality of Alice Oke, ultimately rendering her a figure both unsettling and untenable.

The current Alice’s presence is so ambiguous the narrator deems her ultimately “uncanny” ([1890a] 2006: 106). Although the story precedes Freud’s influential article by more than a decade, the resonances between them are worth noting. Freud’s definitions of the uncanny or *unheimlich* rest on the discomfiting ambivalence produced when a familiar place, person, or object is made strange, much as Mrs Oke does to the local legend and indeed Okehurst itself (Freud [1919] 1955: 221). Since William Oke’s imaginings of a comfortable home life include normative notions of wife and children (as discussed later), Alice’s uncanniness ensures these, and indeed Okehurst itself, remain unfulfilled; for him, his home remains *unheimlich* in the most literal sense. Freud’s discussion

⁷ The unexpected choice of “gipsy” here also lends the current Alice Oke a nomadic romance unwarranted by her connections with local ancestry and landscape. Lee’s intention seems to have been simply to lend further exoticism, but the connotations are puzzling. We might glimpse correspondences between travelling and the ship-like qualities of the house, as explored later in the essay, but interpretation remains elusive.

⁸ As Leighton’s essay indicates, artistic renderings abound in Lee’s tales. At least “Oke”’s narrator survives the experience; within the same anthology, the sculptor in “Dionea” and the aspiring writer of “Amore Dure” do not; “A Wicked Voice”’s musician barely does. Ruth Robbins examines many of the same art references noted in my essay, reading them through the lens of Walter Pater’s aesthetic influence on Lee and the androgynous beauty of the spectral form in her tales, including Alice Oke’s body (2000).

of the uncomfortable effects of doubling and *doppelgänger* also suit the tale, particularly the instances of apparent telepathy whereby “one [doubled entity] possesses knowledge, feelings and experience in common with the other,” just as the current Alice increasingly replicates the past one in more than just name (Freud [1919] 1955: 234). Indeed, it occurs to the narrator that Mrs Oke’s conversations about past events proceeded “as if she were telling me, speaking of herself in the third person, of her own feelings” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 131). Lee’s story also leverages in several ways “the constant recurrence of the same thing – the repetition of the same features or character-traits or vicissitudes, of the same crimes, or even the same names through several consecutive generations,” a device Freud notes as producing an uncanny effect (Freud [1919] 1955: 234). I recall these now-familiar aspects of the uncanny because underlying all of Freud’s theory here is a sense of tangled time and space: a startling recognition of objects and people who should not be able to appear in that space at that time, because they belong elsewhere or elsewhen. Alice Oke is uncanny because she similarly unsettles Okehurst; her certainty about and replication of the past suggest a disruption of linear time more complex than any glimpse of a ghostly form. Her husband William, more traditionally situated in space and time, feels the discomfiture more keenly than anyone. Athena Vrettos describes their differing views of past and present as “profoundly divid[ing] the living Alice Oke from her husband, preoccupying the thoughts, actions, and desires of the former, while haunting the latter with an equally obsessive sense of terror, jealousy, and shame” (2013: 208). William’s disquietude, and his attempts to pathologise his wife’s disquieting self, have disastrous consequences, as this paper will explore.

There are moments in the narrative when the wider local landscape seems to respond to Alice Oke’s mood – perhaps reflecting more closely the original mythology of *genius loci* – but she seems particularly tied to the house of Okehurst itself, which has its own oddnesses. On arrival, the narrator perceives Okehurst’s grounds not as a park but as a repetitive “undulation of sere grass” with uncertain edges (Lee [1890a] 2006: 110). The grounds resound with the evidence of seasons past within the present – there remain only suggestions of a garden, of a moat (110) – but the house’s interior is unexpectedly preserved. The artist has the impression of “being led through the palace of the Sleeping Beauty” as he tours it (111); the allusion to a fairy tale famously about disrupted time draws attention to the play of temporality within Lee’s story. The narrator quickly becomes entranced by the house’s perceptible reminders of the past, “faded like the figures in the arras, but still warm like the embers in the fire-place, still sweet and subtle like the perfume of the dead rose-leaves” all of which “permeate” his every sense and, he claims, affect his mind (112). So deep is his reverie that he is startled when William Oke calls him to dinner; Vrettos notes that, like Mrs Oke, our narrator had forgotten the existence of the present man in favour of a more vivid past (2013: 207). If readers do not forget him as well, it may simply be because we lack the sensual – i.e., haptic, olfactory, visual – traces of the past the narrator and Alice Oke feel in the house’s every room.

Eventually, the narrator and Alice share another common ground, finding the yellow drawing room “the most beautiful room” in the house, though the narrator adds that in hindsight it is also “the most strange” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 126).⁹ Like Okehurst’s front hall, the yellow drawing room strikes

⁹ When I presented an early version of this paper at the 2019 Victorian Popular Fiction Association conference, the yellow room prompted some discussion about the tale’s potential resonance with Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892). Lee’s was originally published in Britain rather than in the United States, though the novella did appear in a standalone Lovell’s Library edition in 1886 – enough time, certainly, for Gilman to have seen it. However, the disparities between the female characters within these rooms strain any deeper ties between them. While both women are deemed hysterical or at least pathologically “nervous” by their husbands, Alice Oke is free to leave her yellow room and, more importantly, chooses to be there.

the narrator as being ship-like, with a long, low shape and the impression of a ship's cabin (110, 126). Though I would not go so far as to use this travel imagery to read Okehurst as a time machine, the yellow room is at least perceptible as a time capsule, a repository for the preserved poems and a miniature portrait of the legend's murdered Lovelock. In the object relations-psychological reading Vrettos suggests, these items work as psychometric amplifiers, "infused with traces of past emotions that have the capacity to absorb their present residents and guests" (2013: 207). The artifacts when touched thus open access to an inherited memory lying largely dormant below conscious thought, and provide details of an ancestor's memory, at least according to the process theorized by Victorian physician Thomas Laycock (Vrettos 2013: 204). This intersection of contemporary Victorian psychological thought with Lee's fiction is a tempting one, rooted in the aesthetic details of the story and strengthened by the era's fascinations for collections and spiritualism. I find, however, that textual detail does not consistently support a psychometric reading, as the current Alice Oke says nothing about the relics providing her the knowledge she has, nor does she fall into the trance state Laycock suggests is key to accessing ancestral memory (Vrettos 2013: 204). Alice Oke's attention to the relics of the legendary couple grows as the story progresses, but she has none of them nearby when she relates the intimate details of the attack: she simply stands on the ground upon which it occurred and shares a deep knowledge of that place and its past. How she gained such knowledge is left unexplained. The narrative suggests that Alice, and to a lesser extent the environs of Okehurst, are themselves the conduits between past and present, not the smaller pieces of historical flotsam the house preserves.

Given its temporal dissonances, the yellow drawing room is, unsurprisingly, Mrs Oke's favourite room and Mr Oke's least favourite. Alice reveals to the narrator that her husband, finding himself there alone, would "run out of it, like a child" (Lee [1890a] 2006: 124). When the artist asks if the room is haunted, the Okes provide tellingly different responses. William says, "Nothing ever happened there, so far as I know", but Alice uses no such qualifier, stating, "Nothing did happen there." She adds "Perhaps something is destined to happen there in the future" (125). This seems an instance of Lee's occasionally unsubtle foreshadowing, given that, in the pages ahead, William's jealousy-fueled murder of his wife will take place in that room, recalling the seventeenth-century legend without repeating it. However, given the certainty of her first response, Alice's follow-up speculation is worth closer consideration: it offers a theory of time with a view of causality that resonates backward from the future, even while framed as an explanation for a 'haunting' – a term most associated with past events intruding on the present. Suggesting that Alice moves from *genius loci* to Delphic oracle in that moment would merely shift mythology without recognizing the statement's radical disruption of our concept of linear time. Though its implication of a traumatic future stands alone within the text, the novella's play with time continues beyond even the descriptions of Alice Oke examined thus far.

Temporal Play

Because the story is told in retrospect within a present tense frame that periodically interrupts the narrative, the reader's own sense of time shifts throughout the tale, but, since it is a familiar convention, this goes largely unnoticed while other temporal ambiguities are made overt. Before we meet Mrs Oke, the narrator muses on whether his memory of his first impression is in fact "entirely coloured by my subsequent knowledge" (Lee [1890a] 2006: 113). He says first that he "must have

Lee's room may be a conduit or amplifier for a connection to the past but does not seem to elicit visions, as happens in Gilman's.

been immeasurably surprised” at her effect but immediately recants, saying “come to think of it, I scarcely felt surprised at all” (113). He decides that Alice Oke’s unusualness is such that she “seemed always to have been present in one’s consciousness” (113). Such musings add to the tale’s unspoken themes of knowledge and chronology: how knowledge is produced, whether through one’s own memory, senses, or other external source, and how we perceive and organize time around affect. About the climactic shooting in the yellow drawing room, the narrator says, “I know nothing of time. It all seemed to be one second, but a second that lasted hours” (153) – a familiar distortion of subjective time in the midst of trauma, made more striking in the context of Alice’s transtemporality. Similarly, the final line of the story, in which the narrator later opens a locket found around Alice Oke’s neck and discovers within it some blood-stained human hair – “I am quite sure it was Lovelock’s” (153) – mediates with a single adverb what should have been a dramatic revelation, drawing out the novella’s themes of avowed and uncertain knowledges to the very end.

Just as the story’s narrative tense shifts, Alice Oke’s speech, too, is a *mélange* of past and present tense, declarative and conditional: “If I am like that Alice Oke, why I am...She and her husband *are* just about the only two members of our family – our most flat, stale, and unprofitable family – that *were* ever in the least degree interesting” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 119, emphasis added). When the artist asks about the original Alice’s possible complicity in her lover’s murder, she blends certainty with speculation: “I don’t know... Alice Oke was very proud, I am sure. She may have loved the poet very much, and yet been indignant with him, hated having to love him. She may have felt that she had a right to rid herself of him, and to call upon her husband to help her to do so” (124). When the artist suggests it may be “easier and more comfortable to take the whole story as a pure invention,” she answers “contemptuously” that “I cannot take it as an invention... because I happen to know that it is true” (124). “I know people can’t understand such matters,” she later acknowledges, but does not elaborate whether “such matters” are the passions she describes or the fact of her knowledge of them (151). Her ‘contempt’ for the suggestion that a more normative view of past events might be more socially acceptable and convenient tells us much about the current Alice Oke: she values the true version (however she came to know it) with all its intimate messiness, over the sanitised morality of the present.

The current Mrs Oke’s attachment to the tale is such that narrator muses she “seemed to know every word that [seventeenth-century] Alice had spoken, every idea that had crossed her mind” despite the impossibility of that knowledge (Lee [1890a] 2006: 131). At Cotes Commons, the scene of the murder, she provides an astonishingly moment-by-moment account of speech and action, as if she had witnessed it herself, and does not hide the fact that the “groom” in the tale – allegedly the original Alice, dressed in men’s clothing – fatally shot Lovelock (134). While she notes that the historical Mr Oke gave an account of the events before he died (134), Alice’s re-telling is infused with intimate detail unlikely in a deathbed confession. Reincarnation or something similar may seem a potential explanation for Alice’s knowledge; Vrettos suggests Lee may have been influenced by a theory of ancestral memory posited by Samuel Butler around 1880, in which he steps beyond ancestral memory inheritance to suggest that in those moments of demonstrating the habits of ancestors, the present body and the long dead are “one and the same... the same person after all” (qtd in Vrettos 2013: 204).¹⁰ While Lee may have known of the theory, the present Alice Oke never claims to *be* the previous, however much she replicates her clothing and putative emotions. Nor does

¹⁰ Vrettos notes that while Butler’s theory remained on the fringe of mainstream science, it and others like it informed theorists of mind and memory into the twentieth century, including Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud, providing “a fertile link between evolutionary theory, psychology, philosophy, and spiritualism” (2013: 205).

she claim to be a reincarnation, though the word appears in the story as she offers her own theory of enduring affect: “[Love] can survive the death, not merely of the beloved, but of the lover. It is unextinguishable, and goes on in the spiritual world until it meet[s] a reincarnation of the beloved [then] draws to it all that may remain of that lover’s soul, and takes shape and surrounds the beloved once more” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 150). Again, Alice does not name herself or Lovelock as examples of such a love; instead, readers are invited to ponder the notion that the spatial context – the “world” – retains affective echoes until those who are particularly receptive arrive to be enfolded by them, in ways reminiscent of Lee’s *genius loci* description. For all Alice Oke’s attachment to the objects of the past, her connections to it are less tangible, recurrently tied not to things but to localised spaces such as the yellow drawing room or the legendary Commons. She draws upon them and their knowledge to powerful effect. For instance, as she relates the killing moments of the legend *in situ*, she so impresses the narrator that he later sees the landscape and the dying lover vividly superimposed over a dinner party, seemingly called into existence before his eyes by Alice’s toast to Lovelock (138-9).

Variant Histories

Alice Oke’s elusive temporality is continually set in opposition against her husband William, who is bound to the present by his political and landholding obligations. The narrator notes: “He spent hours every day... reading piles of reports and newspapers and agricultural treatises; and emerging for lunch with piles of letters in his hand” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 117). He holds “very defined political and social views, and a... desire to attain certainty and truth” (115), making him, as the narrator says, “a justice of the peace in a most literal sense, penetrating into cottages and huts, defending the weak and admonishing the ill-conducted” (123). That image of masculine power, both invasive and chivalrous, is juxtaposed against William’s repeated, ineffectual attempts to rein in what he perceives as his wife’s aberrant view of time in favour of his own.

To justify his sense of obligation, William provides the narrator with the ancestral names and allegiances that tie him to the property by succession and lawful inheritance: his knowledge, unlike Alice’s, is produced by documentation. His ability to trace his family “back to Norman, almost to Saxon times” is a source of quiet pride and, the artist notes, a certain hauteur: “We have never done anything in particular... [but] have always done our duty. An ancestor of ours was killed in the Scotch war, another at Agincourt” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 120-1). Reading the passage with Lee’s writing on the *genius loci* in mind, we note William’s sense of belonging to Okehurst relies heavily on the “definite histories” Lee so deplored (*Genius* 5). Despite his claim not to care “one jackstraw” for children (Lee [1890a] 2006: 112), William feels deeply the lack of an heir for Okehurst and his wife’s earlier miscarriage, though his “excited” outburst about it is paraphrased, distancing readers from strong emotion with indirect speech and passive tense. The narrator employs the striking euphemism “disappointed of their baby” to elide the tragedy; even the Okes’ subsequent “terrible” suffering – his emotional, hers physical, according to the narrator’s summation – becomes merely a clause in a complex sentence (144).

One evening that [sic] we were sitting alone in the smoking-room, he began unexpectedly a rambling discourse about his wife; how he had first known her when they were children, and they had gone to the same dancing-school near Portland Place; how her mother; his aunt-in-law, had brought her for Christmas to Okehurst while he was on his holidays; how finally, thirteen years ago, when he was twenty-three and she was eighteen, they had been married; how terribly he had suffered when they had been disappointed of their baby, and how she had nearly died of the illness.

(Lee [1890a] 2006: 144).

The grammatical flatness rouses less sympathy for William than it might otherwise have done, and arguably even less for Alice. Direct quotation returns in William's "there will be an end of us now, and Okehurst will go to the Curtises" (144), which, given no tonal marker by the narrator, may be read as either petulant or resigned. William's version of the legend is likewise paraphrased, perhaps saving the readers from enduring a tale told, as the narrator puts it, "about as badly and hesitatingly as was possible for a mortal man" (120). The seemingly throwaway jibe nonetheless carries the suggestion that Oke's preoccupation with present concerns is tied to his finite existence, and the contrast between his re-telling and Alice's, which occurs in a lengthy direct quotation at the scene of the murder, is a striking one. William may in fact be the anomaly within the well-preserved time capsule of Okehurst. Even when houseguests suggest a spontaneous masquerade dinner party, he chooses the military uniform of his youth rather than the haphazard historical costumes built from the house's clothing stores and artifacts.¹¹

Fixed in his present and with a citational view of history, William tries to suppress his wife's spoken invocations of the past, calling the legend "nonsense" and exhorting her not to repeat it – indeed he leaves the room when she persists (Lee [1890a] 2006: 119; 125) – but he eventually resorts to silence (139). The certainty with which Alice claims to know Okehurst's past, and her lack of shame for ancestral misconduct, seem to him a nearly pathological state of mind. He refers frequently to her delicate health, once calling it "wretched" (Lee [1890a] 2006: 132), but her isolated existence seems equally to be by choice: there is little textual evidence that Alice is an invalid or confined to her house by her "nervous constitution" (110). Only once does the artist perceive potential illness: as Alice prepares for houseguests, he sees in her an "unusual cheerfulness that was merely nervous and feverish; [I] had, the whole day, the impression of dealing with a woman who was ill and who would very speedily collapse" (132). Notably, however, this moment comes only after he realizes Alice has been wearing her ancestor's preserved clothing – "The idea gave me a delightful picturesque shudder" (130) – and his sympathies begin to shift toward William, relegating Alice to the "perverse" (135; 138). The narrator is sufficiently unnerved by Alice's costumes that the two men become more united in their view of Alice as excitable and in need of correction. Readers might note the irony, then, that William Oke is the one who hallucinates figures others do not see, and who visibly deteriorates in both physical and mental health, becoming "perfectly unstrung, like a hysterical woman" as the story nears its end (144).

Once William begins to imagine intruders on the grounds, his grasp on present certainties wavers: he "was forever alluding to steps or voices he had heard, to figures he had seen sneaking round the house" (Lee [1890a] 2006: 145). His reports – again paraphrased by the narrator rather than given in direct speech – align with Alice's earlier comment that Okehurst's servants "believe that Lovelock has been seen about the house... [and have] heard his footsteps in the big corridor" (124). Unsurprisingly, William's wife neither supports nor rejects his sightings, never admitting any visions of her own, but instead overtly links his distress to his rigid attitudes toward time: "the persons who worry you have just as good a right to walk up and down the passages and staircase, and to hang about the house, as you or I. They were there, in all probability, long before either of us was born" (145). Having already expressed to the narrator that ghosts, if they existed, "should not be

¹¹ Though the artist claims that the uniformed William was "so magnificent a specimen of the handsome Englishman" he appeared "more genuinely old-world" than his guests (Lee [1890a] 2006: 137), this seems a function of the two men's strengthening relationship and their shared aversion to costuming themselves in dead people's clothing, built from the sense that these past artifacts should remain tied to the past, not the present.

taken lightly,” and that if God allowed their existence, it would be only “as a warning or as punishment” (120), William Oke cannot reconcile that view with his wife’s more neutral vision of atemporal or transtemporal existence. As Angela Leighton notes, Lee’s “fictional ghosts have no designs on their readers’ or victims’ beliefs; rather, it is [they] who have designs on the ghosts” (2000: 2). “Oke of Okehurst” provides no spectre seeking vengeance or redemption, and William’s response to the possible entanglement of past and present is an armed and ultimately futile attempt to secure the known edges of the now: his house, his grounds, and his wife.

Resistance and Revisioning

In “Oke of Okehurst”, Alice seems less a figure of “fetch and carry” from the past (Lee [1890b] 2006: 39), than a conduit between it and the present. This paper’s discussion of the treatment of time in the story is partly offered to complicate any reading that, as the narrator seems to, attributes the tale’s tragic ending to Alice Oke’s cruelty to her husband. Her indifference to her husband’s mental state does seem to contribute to its deterioration, unwittingly or not, although I would argue that our narrator is equally complicit in William’s distress. Moreover, it is difficult to warm to any character when she is presented only through the lens of a narrator who, while repeatedly expressing his own disdain toward his hosts and the whole situation, claims that Alice “really did not care in the least about anything except her own ideas and day-dreams” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 130) and “seemed the most self-absorbed of creatures... utterly incapable of understanding or sympathising with the feelings of other persons” (131).

Alongside its victim-blaming, such a reading implies a cautionary moral lesson that living too much in the past, to the detriment of one’s relationships, is fatal. The uncanny, exotic, and far-fetched “creature” that fascinated the narrator in the early pages takes on a form both Biblical and mythic, but ultimately inhuman and incomprehensible in its knowledge of the past. Where the narrator perceives malice, however, Alice Oke is most often expressing merely a radical vision of time. Her vision, disordered and chaotic compared to established paradigms of linear chronology, pushes against William’s faith in tradition; he chooses to respond by reinforcing his rigid edges to restore the orderly march of history that has so long benefitted him and his ancestors. The narrator’s claim that “Oke of Okehurst was condemned never to understand; but he was condemned also to suffer from his inability to do so,” comments not only upon the fundamental dissonance between the couple’s worldviews, but also upon the dire consequences of refusing to reconcile them (Lee [1890a] 2006: 140). Readers are after all left with two corpses at the story’s end. Thus, being too William-ish – that is, clinging too tightly to the paper-record models of history to inform the present – is equally fatal. But what are readers to do with that realization?

Reading Alice Oke akin to a *genius loci* of Okehurst’s time and space highlights the gap between a view of history which finds only inherited embarrassment in a local legend, and her own perception of an intimate, violent killing as a truth having already happened, being always still happening, yet imminent at any moment. Her knowledge is overtly tied to affect: “How does one know that anything is true in this world?” she asks and immediately answers, “because one feels it to be true” (Lee [1890a] 2006: 124). Alice offers an apparent knowledge of place across time too disparate from the citational, historical knowledge and privileging of the present William exemplifies, and ultimately untenable in a world aligned more with his view than hers.

My time-attentive reading may not fully recuperate the character of Alice Oke for those who find her repellent, but may instead prompt a reconsideration of current understandings of space through time, always bearing in mind their inextricability. We might ask how well we understand

the history of a place as also a history of its complex and feeling people. We might scrutinize what sorts of histories we tend to trust over others: which ones we dismiss as speculation because they are tied to affect and intimacy, and which we cling to instead, preserving established models of local ownership and power. Alice's version of haunting ensures past violence is not forgotten; her daily reminders of it make her an uncomfortable body, as each "confrontation requires (or produces) a fundamental change in the way we know and make knowledge" (Gordon 1997: 7). In Lee's novella, the confrontation with Alice's version of the past is one from which William Oke and the artist choose not to learn. Whether Alice Oke is a tragic figure, or as Vineta Colby suggests, a *femme fatale*, may always be an open question, but still we may usefully examine the ways in which it is her unorthodox perception of time that informs our opinion of her as something to be suppressed, or cured, or destroyed.

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