"That room has an evil reputation": Gendered Spaces and Nonconformity in Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst; or, The Phantom Lover"

Emilie Laurent

Abstract

This article reads Vernon Lee's short story "Oke of Okehurst" through the lens of gendered material culture, prevalent in the Victorian times the story aims to reflect. The article argues that in this tale the wife's haunted drawing room stands as the site of a battle between competing ideologies regarding a woman's and a man's place within the Victorian household. Culturally perceived as the impenetrable space wherein the wife can channel her imaginative power into escapist fantasies, this room ultimately enables her to cross gender boundaries and to negotiate her own sexual agency outside the constraints of heterosexual marriage, morphing it into a site of male emasculation that destabilises Victorian gender roles, entrapping the husband into female roles and undermining masculine rationality. Nevertheless, the story's apparent polarisation of gender roles and domestic spaces is undermined by the narrative ambivalence of the simultaneously attractive and uncanny drawing room. This article thus also discusses the masculine narrative voice's ambiguous position as outsider and mediator in this collapsing Victorian household, aiming to determine whether this extreme portrayal of gender roles encourages readers to sympathise with the patriarchal loss of authority or with the assertion of female agency.

Keywords

Vernon Lee; "Oke of Okehurst"; uncanny; Victorian ideology; gender roles; material culture; hysteria; narration; Victorian household

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"That room has an evil reputation": Gendered Spaces and Nonconformity in Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst; or, The Phantom Lover"

Emilie Laurent

"The palace of the Sleeping Beauty": such is the comparison that the unnamed narrator of "Oke of Okehurst" (1886) uses to designate what he has described as "the most perfect example of an old English manor-house" (Lee [1886] 2022: 43). Setting aside the surface-level evocation of a fairytale-like aristocratic past, the simile is suggestive of a gendered meaning that is difficult to ignore in a ghost story concerned chiefly with the rebellion of its female character, Alice Oke, against the Victorian codes of femininity. This choice of reference cannot be dismissed as merely stylistic: this is the first, but not the last, of the ghost stories written by Vernon Lee (a masculine *nom-de-plume* meant to hide her female identity) in a literary career that showcased several nonconforming female ghostly figures. Indeed, the narrator soon realises that Mrs. Alice Oke is not the "remarkable woman," the "model housekeeper, electioneering, charity-organising young lady" that he associates with the typical English country-house (41). This metonymical relationship between the house and its mistress is revelatory of what historian Jane Hamlett calls the "gendered material culture" of the Victorian household (2009: 576). Beyond the well-known association of women with the inside sphere and the home, the narrator's disappointed expectations reflect and anticipate the Victorian reader's own, establishing assumptions regarding the Okes' domestic life. From an ideological point of view, a household such as the Okes' – who, as Kentish squires, embody an ideal of Englishness – comes with a strict gendered organisation and division. As Hamlett notes,

> … the ideal middle-class home contained distinctive gendered material cultures. […] Historians have noted the growing importance of gendered spaces for the nineteenth-century middle classes, and the increasing segregation of the middle-class home.
>
> (576)

Victorian material culture promoted an allegedly healthy segregation of the home between entirely male spaces on the one hand – the study, the smoking room, the billiard room – and

entirely female spaces on the other – the morning room, the boudoir, the drawing room. These rooms symbolically reinforced gendered roles in the household; the drawing room especially was "the woman's realm," the place in which women were supposed to channel their feminine powers into making a comfortable home for their husbands, a moral duty on which depended "long-term marital success" (Hamlett 2020: 127-8). Yet as Hamlett remarks, such ideology remained mostly an unattainable fantasy for the middle class, who typically lacked the wealth, space, and familial structure to implement that nevertheless pervasive ideology of the home. Gendered spaces, although prescribed to the middle class, were thus the prerogative of the gentry (579). The narrator's (and the readers') expectations are thus anchored in an ideological discourse that elevates the ancestral, aristocratic Oke household as the idealised incarnation of an English fantasy of the home.

Yet in Vernon Lee's "Oke of Okehurst," the female character, Alice Oke, not only fails at her feminine duties but brandishes the house's yellow drawing room – supposedly the paradigmatic locus of her femininity – as a weapon against her husband William. That room is her realm indeed, which her husband flees in fear. It is also in that room that she finds the memorandums of her gender-defying, murderous ancestress she is obsessed with; and in that room she affirms being visited by a phantom lover – the ghost of her ancestress's paramour and murder victim. The only time she acts as the good wife and hostess she should be, she shocks her guests by cross-dressing, using masculine garb found in the drawing room. The drawing room *is* the place of Alice's rule over her household, but in a way antithetical to her matrimonial duties and the gender performance expected of her. The story lends itself particularly well to analysis through a material culture lens (Sally Blackburn-Daniels and Sophie Geoffroy in particular discussed the class and colonial legacies present in the Oke home, and Athena Vrettos studied the articulation of historical artefacts and Victorian theories about memory and transmission), yet an analysis of "Oke of Okehurst" based on the historical and ideological importance of gendered material culture has been lacking, despite the gendering of space being an essential ideological backdrop to the gender subversions that constitute the core of the story. This article aims to explore that fresh perspective by close-reading the story as a renegotiation by Vernon Lee of the cultural power of female spaces within the Victorian household. As historian Juliet Kinchin observes, feminine spaces were traditionally deemed inferior, reflecting the objectification of women in their own homes (1996: 18); yet this story highlights the potential of female spaces to assert female agency in a way that threatens the patriarchal system.

This article thus pays particular attention to the historical context of the story and the importance of material culture (i.e., the interdisciplinary field that examines the cultural relationship between people and their objects) in order to underline the significance of the story: the tale appeals to deeply-engrained Victorian cultural beliefs regarding gender roles, beliefs that are coded in relation with men's and women's culturally-imposed relationships to their house and place within the sacrosanct household. The story lends itself particularly well to analyses through the material culture lens (Sally Blackburn-Daniels and Sophie Geoffroy in particular discussed the class and colonial legacies present in the Oke home, and Athena Vrettos studied the articulation of historical artefacts and Victorian theories about memory and transmission), but studies of *gendered* material culture in the story remains lacking.

This article will demonstrate that "Oke of Okehurst" should be read as a reflection of Victorian struggles and ongoing changes regarding those gender roles, as it places terror not simply in the possibility of female agency but in the clash between cultural ideals and historical realities. For this reason, the article will also interrogate the real location of the ghostly in the story. I argue that the fictional drawing room becomes ghostly because it is a liminal space, stuck between two competing and irreconcilable sides of a gender battle. Criticism so far has

contended that the haunting presence in Okehurst was psychological rather than a 'real' apparition, in agreement with Lee's own assertion in the preface to the collection that contains "Oke" that her "tales are of no genuine ghosts in the scientific sense; […]. My ghosts are what you call spurious ghosts […] of whom I can affirm only one thing, that they haunted certain brains […]" ([1886] 2022: 297). Emma Liggins contends that the ghostly effect of the story resides in its refusal to reveal whether it is the wife's or the husband's projection of their inner struggling with gender, but also argues that Alice Oke is the real uncanny presence of the tale, embodying her haunted surroundings (2013: 46). Barbara Ferguson recently followed on that analysis of Alice's uncanniness, although for her the yellow room is a "time capsule, a repository" for female crimes of the past (2020: 49). Drawing on Liggins's and Ferguson's analyses that the spectral in this tale resides in its psychological depiction of a woman's gender transgression, this article argues that the story is haunted by the metaphorical ghost of a disrupted Victorian doctrine of separate spheres, in which the drawing room stands in the story as an uncanny space, made liminal by its conflicting functions as enforcer of gender norms and enabler of gender rebellion.

The ghostly in the tale is nevertheless mediated by the same narrative voice that is responsible for anchoring the text in a gendered material ideology. The entire framing of the story as a cultural battle of the sexes, and of the drawing room as a spectral embodiment of gender (non)conformism, thus hinges on a highly unreliable narrator who acknowledges that his tale is "entirely coloured by [his] subsequent knowledge" (Lee [1886] 2022: 44) and, necessarily, by his masculine bias and by the influence of ideological discourse on his perspective of the Oke criminal case. This article thus aims to deconstruct the perspective of all three characters, including a narrator whose perspective must be distinguished from Vernon Lee's own intent.

Prison or Escapist Fantasy?

It would be simplistic to consider that in Victorian times domestic female spaces were spaces of oppression exclusively. Hamlett points out that the ideological roles assigned to these spaces, notably in household manuals, were not systematically obeyed by women in real life (2009: 588). She also emphasises that even in theoretical representations of the ideal household, female spaces were intended to allow the expression of feminine subjectivities and the construction of a positive female identity, and to be an escape from the masculine (582). In "Oke of Okehurst," the yellow drawing room represents an extreme possibility of evasion and is a space for feminine interiority that entirely subverts the drawing room's intended role of containment.

Reproducing the Victorian dialectic between a frightening outside sphere and a comforting private sphere (Davidoff 2003: 12), the story draws a similar gendered divide in the spatial organisation of Okehurst, the Okes' manor house. The story starts by establishing Okehurst as the ideal English house:

> My host received me in the hall, a large place, panelled and carved, hung round with portraits up to its curious ceiling – vaulted and ribbed like the inside of a ship's hull. […] It was, without exception, the most perfect example of an old English manor-house that I had ever seen; the most magnificent intrinsically, and the most admirably preserved. Out of the huge hall, with its immense fireplace of delicately carved and inlaid grey and black stone, and its rows of family portraits, reaching from the wainscoting to the oaken ceiling, vaulted and ribbed like a ship's hull, opened the wide, flat-stepped staircase, the parapet surmounted at intervals by heraldic

> monsters, the wall covered with oak carvings of coats-of-arms, leafage, and little mythological scenes, painted a faded red and blue, and picked out with tarnished gold […].
>
> (Lee [1886] 2022: 41-2)

The repetition of the adjectives "carved" and "vaulted" and the word-for-word comparison with the ship's hull – of a similar shape as a vault, and which according to Blackburn-Daniels and Geoffroy point to the Okes' colonial heritage (2021: 580-1) – are redolent of oppressiveness and entrapment. The magnificence of the mansion, as observed by the male narrator, thus resides in its potential for imprisonment. The descriptive insistence on the oaken quality of the Okes' mansion Okehurst – their very name testifying to its importance – is also relevant. Masculine spaces in the household were supposed to be "decorated in dark and sombre colours with furniture of oak" (Hamlett 2009: 576); the detail that Okehurst itself is made out of oak suggests that masculinity is deeply embedded in the mansion, itself transmitted through the husband's lineage, making it a fundamentally male space. Additionally, Oak was chosen as the prime masculine material for its symbolic "representing notions of rugged masculinity [which] conjured up patriotic and martial overtones" (Kinchin 1996: 15), making Okehurst stand as a metaphorical embodiment of the English patriarchal order.

Conversely, the yellow drawing room is fashioned for escapism:

> It was long and low, with something that made you think of the cabin of a ship, with a great mullioned window that let in, as it were, a perspective of the brownish green park-land, dotted with oaks, and sloping upwards to the distant line of bluish firs against the horizon. The walls were hung with flowered damask, whose yellow, faded to brown, united with the reddish colour of the carved wainscoting and the carved oaken beams. For the rest, it reminded me more of an Italian room than an English one. […] The panes of the mullioned window were open, and yet the air seemed heavy, with an indescribable heady perfume, not that of any growing flower, but like that of old stuff that should have lain for years among spices.
>
> (Lee [1886] 2022: 57-8)

While the drawing room is only a lonely "cabin" in the ship that is Okehurst, it provides Alice with freedom. The window carved into her prison gives her a view on the forest where Alice's ancestress murdered her lover, the Renaissance poet Christopher Lovelock. Windows are also presented in the story as the means of communication between Alice and her phantom lover: not only is she constantly glancing outside, but this is how the phantom lover appears to her husband William, who asks "Who's that fellow looking in at the window, and making signs to you, Alice?" (72). The drawing room thus allows Alice to cross gendered boundaries, by giving her contact with the outside, masculine sphere and by sparking forbidden fantasies in her. The "union" of the yellow wallpaper with the "carved oaken beams" symbolic of masculinity also suggests a form of gender ambiguity, a mix of opposite identities, that echoes Alice's crossdressing throughout the story. More than impersonating manhood, Alice impersonates a mix of masculine and feminine gender presentations. She is able to appear in public dressed as Lovelock, or to go outside where Lovelock was killed while wearing "her mannish little coat and hat, driving a powerful young horse with the utmost skill," but she also remains confined in her drawing room, being a "delicate, morbid, exotic, hot-house creature, unable to walk or to do anything, who spent her days lying about on couches" (64). The drawing room represents an androgynous space for escape as it provides her both with a vision of the outside, but also with the manly clothes necessary to venture there. Indeed, while William Oke carefully and lovingly keeps his ancestors' garments safe in a "carved oaken press" (60), the narrator discovers that the masculine clothes of the first Alice Oke are kept by Alice herself, in a location that a stammering William refuses to disclose and which reveals to the narrator that they are,

in fact, kept in the drawing room (61). William's embarrassment reveals the social unacceptability of the clothes – a signifier of male authority – being overtaken and transferred from the patriarchal domain (symbolised here by the description of the press that mirrors that of the house) to the feminine one. Alice's crossdressing, enabled by the drawing room where she can safekeep the offending garments away from her husband, thus corresponds to a toppling of the very boundaries that ensure her "conformity to the putative public/private divide" and thus her "gentility" (Davidoff 2003: 19).

Nevertheless, if we agree that the spectral in the story is actually a projection of deeper psychological trouble, then the eroticisation of Alice Oke's moments in the drawing room hints not at an affair with a ghost, but at an assertion of Alice's auto-eroticism and self-sufficiency. The narrator emphasises several moments in which Alice spends time all alone in that room,

> She seemed to spend her life […] in an eternal daydream, […] I believe, lying for hours, doing nothing, on a couch in that yellow drawing-room, which, with her sole exception, no member of the Oke family had ever been known to stay in alone.
>
> (Lee [1886] 2022: 60)

Yet unlike the Sleeping Beauty she is supposed to be, she is not comatose or inactive. The narrator calls her activity "day-dreaming" and "strange self-engrossment" (62), yet the time spent alone in that room hints at self-pleasuring. The description of her reading Lovelock's poems that she found hidden in a secret drawer unbeknownst to her husband is telling:

> She held the papers in one hand, and leaned the other, as if for support, on the inlaid cabinet by her side. Her voice, which was delicate, shadowy, like her person, had a curious throbbing cadence, as if she were reading the words of a melody, and restraining herself with difficulty from singing it; and as she read, her long slender throat throbbed slightly, and a faint redness came into her thin face. She evidently knew the verses by heart, and her eyes were mostly fixed with that distant smile in them, with which harmonised a constant tremulous little smile in her lips.
>
> (58)

The sensuality of this excerpt, coupled with its concealment from the husband, is highly suggestive of another form of liberation: female pleasure, found exclusively in the privacy of the drawing room, away from the constraints of normative heterosexual marriage. Alice also challenges heteronormativity by the queer nature of her desire: it is queer by virtue of being abnormal (felt for a dead man, and mingled with criminal desire) but also suggestive of homoeroticism, because despite her claims of being fascinated by Lovelock it is her *ancestress's* clothes she wears with unconcealed pleasure. As Athena Vrettos underlines, materiality in "Oke of Okehurst" is imbued with a queer eroticism that turns the mere historical artefact into a medium capable of transmitting forbidden histories and, as such, of awakening illicit desire (2013: 209), stripping Victorian material culture of its intended enforcement of propriety.

The very function of the drawing room as escapist female realm thus ends up defying the very system that produced it. The orientalising of the room – called "more of an Italian room than an English one" (58) and associated with "spices" (58) and the "scent of heady flowers" (74) – also refers to the standards of drawing-room decoration. The drawing room was supposed to be "ornate" and "associated with French femininity" (Hamlett 2009: 580), yet in the story this continental femininity becomes vaguely threatening, highlighting Alice's failure to comply to her English wifely duties and the foreignness of female sexuality. The arts

of music and literature typically practiced in the room (Kinchin 1996: 19) become an orgasmic opportunity, as seen above; indeed, while painting is supposed to maintain women "against the backdrop of the drawing room, stuck there, subject to the visual control and aesthetic judgement of the (usually) male artist and critic" (18), the narrator never manages to paint Alice's portrait. As Virginia Woolf would point out nearly forty years later in *A Room of One's Own*, the female room was ultimately a necessary site for female creativity and artistic emancipation, and confinement indoors only led to an accumulating of "creative force, which has, indeed, so overcharged the capacity of bricks and mortar that it must needs harness itself to pens and brushes and business and politic" ([1929] 2015: 66). It is thus no wonder that the drawing room appears corrupted to the members of the household, prompting Alice to explain with glee that "… that room has an evil reputation. No member of our family, they say, can bear to sit there alone for more than a minute. You see, William evidently cannot" (Lee [1886] 2022: 56)**.** The room almost supernaturally repels William not because it is a female space, but because it is *aggressively* so – it is female in a non-feminine way that is terrifying to the conforming Victorian man, accustomed to the absolute repression of taboo female desire. The drawing room thus becomes a haunting locus as it serves to defy gendered ideology. Haunt*ing*, rather than haunt*ed*, for the narration points towards the room having a direct action and effect on the husband: the narration describes the room *itself,* and the gender transgression it embodies, as the ghostly agent.

"He was growing unstrung, like a hysterical woman": The Emasculatory Female Space

The story puts William Oke in the position of the feminised victim of the haunting, terrorised in his own home and metaphorically emasculated by the room in a process that Liggins has termed "gender reversal" (2013: 44). In contrast with Alice, the narrator consistently depicts William in feminine terms, insisting on his blushing "as easily as a girl of sixteen" (Lee [1886] 2022: 69). Before the narrator even discovers the room for himself, Alice already describes it as a force that has William reverting to a childish, impotent, and effeminate behaviour: "you run out of it, like a child, if I happen to leave you there for a minute" (56). Conversely, the room's empowering effect on Alice metaphorically castrates William:

> It was next to inconceivable that this poor excited creature, speaking almost with tears in his voice and in his eyes, was the quiet, well-got-up, irreproachable young ex-Guardsman who had walked into my studio a couple of months before.
>
> (75)

The "poor excited creature" "growing perfectly unstrung, like a hysterical woman" (75) that William has become echoes Alice's description as a "delicate, morbid […] creature, unable to walk or do anything" (64), and is redolent of hysteria. Alice's hysteria is coded in terms of her rebellious nature. It is the kind of hysteria diagnosed "when women defied their 'nature,' attempted to compete with men instead of serving them, or sought alternatives or even additions to their maternal functions" (Showalter 2011: 123) – maternal functions that Alice is not fulfilling, as she has no children and no desire to have any – or when women "expressed 'unnatural' desires for privacy and independence" (134). William's condition appears as a mirror of Alice's own: if Alice's hysteria is dependent on her challenging her female 'nature' and refusing to serve her husband, William's stems from his threatened role in the household as Alice's actions push him into a feminine position in defiance of *his* 'nature.' This analysis

is supported by the narrator's realisation that William's illness is really jealousy: "He was simply madly in love with his wife, and madly jealous of her. Jealous – but of whom? He himself would probably have been quite unable to say" (Lee [1886] 2022: 76). This simple three-word question ("*but of whom?*") undermines the idea that William is merely angry at being cuckolded, and suggests that he is actually jealous of Alice – of her independence, her agency, her masculinity that makes him redundant in his own marriage, her success at performing masculinity more successfully than him.

Alice's emancipation indeed raises an important ideological question: what is a man's place within the Victorian household if gender roles are renegotiated? Hamlett hints at such an ongoing conflict:

> Late nineteenth-century men [became] increasingly anxious to carve out a space for themselves in the home […]. […] the gendering of space was constantly contested and negotiated […]. Spatial segregation did not simply enforce the gendered status quo: rather, space was gendered in a variety of ways that could ensure the empowerment or subjection of women.
>
> (2009: 582)

The household was also, theoretically, dependent on a balance of the masculine and the feminine, "brought together in a proper relation of complementarity" (Tosh 1999: 7). But the reality of this balance was more delicate, as it could mean either complete patriarchal control *or* exclusive female dominance, leading to disharmony in the home and in the spouses' intimacy (7). While Lee's story relies on cultural codes of gender spatialisation and gender roles, it also echoes ongoing fights of her time as regards female emancipation, which were aiming to undo the inherent inequality of marriage. In 1891, only five years after the first publication of "Oke of Okehurst" and after years of fighting, the Court of Appeal would pass judgement on the R. v. Jackson case, a highly publicised case regarding a man's abduction and forceful confinement of his wife in their marital home following her refusal to live with him. The husband's solicitor pleaded that "if a wife refuses to live with her husband, he has a right by law to take possession of her person by force, and keep her, not imprisoned, but confined, till she consents to do so" (Queen Bench's Division 1891: 674), whereas the wife's solicitor contended that "Every confinement is an imprisonment by law, whether it be to one room or to one house" (677). The final decision ruled that "Where a wife refuses to live with her husband, he is not entitled to keep her in confinement in order to enforce restitution of conjugal rights" (671). This decision was "widely glossed as placing liberty and power in the hands of the wife" (Tosh 1999: 181), with some vituperating that "marriage, as hitherto understood in England, was suddenly abolished one fine morning last month! […] The husband may be left without a wife and without the possibility of taking another" (Linton 1891: 961) while others rejoiced and saw the decision as the long awaited for "outcome, the latest, though not the last stage, of a change of sentiment which has been slowly and silently revolutionising the position of women" (Manson 1891: 244). "Oke of Okehurst" echoes both sides of the growing conversation that would ultimately result in the R. v. Jackson decision, and more especially the debate around the notion of female confinement to the house and its perceived necessity as regards conjugal harmony. Lee's story thus showcases a slow, contemporary undoing of gendered culture and of the "implied contract of master and protector in relation to dependent subordinate" that Lee must have witnessed (Tosh 1999: 182).

The undoing of that gendered contract is culturally equated to a perceived failure of masculinity, showcased by William Oke's feminisation throughout the story. His transition from proud ex-*Guards*man to hysteric signifies a failure in his status of guardian of the home, in his "duty to protect the home […] with physical self-reliance and personal bravery" (3).

Alice's whims – which William attributes to hysteria in an attempt to feminise his wife – control the household while William cowers from the drawing room that he should be able to face like the knightly ideal he believes in: he is "the perfectly conscientious young Englishman, the sort of man who ought to have been the Christian soldier kind of thing; devout, pure-minded, brave, incapable of any baseness" (Lee [1886] 2022: 49). As a result, he experiences what Tosh calls the discontent and "sexual antagonism" stemming from the Victorian men's forced stay in the household in times of peace; the home becomes a stifling space, too feminine and feminising for them (Tosh 1999: 179-80). One of the effects of that cultural discontent, which led to an adversarial relationship between husband and wife, was boredom, which the narrator refers to by repeatedly calling William's life "remarkably solitary," "horribly dull," a "monotonous life of solitude" "producing a vague depression and irritation in this young man, so evidently cut out for a cheerful, commonplace life" (Lee [1886] 2022: 48). Domesticity itself is implicitly charged with effeminising the husband:

> "I suppose you are a great sportsman?" I asked from sheer despair, nodding in the direction of the whips and guns and fishing-rods.
> "Oh no! not now. I was once. I have given up all that," he answered, standing with his back to the fire, and staring at the polar bear beneath his feet. "I – I have no time for all that now," he added, as if an explanation were due. "A married man – you know."
>
> (42)

William frames marriage as the reason behind his giving up culturally masculine social activities, preventing his forming the homosocial relationships necessary to a young Victorian man (Tosh 1999: 126-9) and divesting him of his status as relatable male companion.

William's feminisation, while exemplifying a fear of contamination by the feminine, is also implicitly hinted to be an attempt at compensating for Alice's failure and restoring the harmonious male/female balance of the household. As she assumes an increasingly masculine persona, so he assumes her wifely duties as mistress of the home: the narrator underlines that during their party "all arrangements, as usual, had been made, and all orders given, by her husband" (Lee [1886] 2022: 63). The roles she is supposed to fulfil in her drawing room are taken over by William from his study, which is, as mentioned above, the masculine counterpart to the drawing room, making both rooms stand as cultural and narrative parallels. The importance of male spaces in the household was also a reflection of the changing relationships between the sexes, and Victorian men became insistent on "carving out their own exclusive space" to escape the pervasive femininity of the home – by definition *the* feminine sphere (Tosh 1999: 182). William reenacts this real-life masculine anxiety and takes refuge in the room containing the vestiges of his masculine days. Yet the result of locking himself in the man's realm is less gender-affirming than he thinks, as it becomes apparent in the narrator's description:

> He spent hours every day in his study, doing the work of a land agent and a political whip, reading piles of reports and newspapers and agricultural treatises; and emerging for lunch with piles of letters in his hand, and that odd puzzled look in his good healthy face, that deep gash between his eyebrows, which my friend the mad-doctor calls the *maniac-frown*.
>
> (Lee [1886] 2022: 49)

His trying to emulate a certain English, knightly, aristocratic ideal of gender, taking seriously the historically-masculine roles of land administration and politics, fails. He spends his time locked-up inside the house – like a woman – and walks out of the room with a "maniac-frown" redolent of hysteria. William himself describes his ailment in terms that paint him as the

proverbial madwoman in the attic: "I feel sometimes as if I were mad, and just fit to be locked up. But don't think I don't struggle against it" (80-1).

And a struggle it is; Lee's story exemplifies the real-life "sexual antagonism" theorised by Tosh. The tragic ending of the story can be seen as William's battle against his metaphorical emasculation. At least this is exactly how William frames it when he explains to the narrator, in a scene where he exceptionally takes him to walk outside instead of remaining confined in his study, an evident attempt at assuming a male persona again.

> "You see," he went on, "the man […] feels that [his wife] is on the brink of dishonouring herself – because I don't think a woman can really dishonour her husband; dishonour is in our own hands, and depends only on our own acts. He ought to save her, do you see? He must, must save her, in one way or another."
>
> (79)

The framing of William's motive exemplifies his struggle. By presenting this case to the narrator as a fictional one because he is too prude to speak out his own feelings, William unintentionally realigns himself with a feminine pole associated to a hysterical refusal to live in reality. This fiction of the self embellishes his motive and cloaks it in chivalric terms of gendered honour that symbolically restore a narrative of female subjugation and male heroism.

Fittingly, his attempt at "saving" his wife occurs in the drawing room. His relationship with the inside and outside spheres reflects his attempt at saving his own masculinity. The first step in his plan consists in taking the narrator outside, while the narrator is reading

> in a corner of the drawing-room […]. He did not enter, but beckoned to me to come out to him. […] "I have something to show you," he said, leading me through the vaulted hall, hung round with ancestral pictures, into the gravelled space that looked like a filled-up moat, where stood the big blasted oak, with its twisted, pointing branches.
>
> (83)

William's uncanny fear of the yellow drawing room has now extended to each of the drawing rooms in the house: he is unable to enter, opting to remain strictly outside of it. His way out is reflective of an attempted redemption of masculinity, from the "feminine" drawing room to the oak, the ultimate symbol of heroic masculinity. The first step in his attempt at restoring the upset Victorian doctrine of separate spheres, he then reveals, has been to lock his wife inside the room, when he is under the delusion that she and the ghost are in there. "I have locked the door inside, and, by God! he shan't escape" (83) he tells the narrator. "He shan't escape" – or "*she* shan't escape?" The narrator cannot see any ghost; for all intents and purposes, it is *Alice* who is contained, even though it is the masculine that William intends on exorcising from the yellow drawing room – the masculine side of Alice, who comes out of that room dressed as a boy. In his attempt at being a knight and saving Alice from the danger, William metaphorically becomes the dragon guarding the tower of the Sleeping Beauty, imprisoning her forever and plunging her into an eternal sleep in which he can finally claim her, as the feminine, passive member of the weaker sex she should have been.

This protection turned violent claiming results in a final scene in which William violates his wife's sanctuary:

> I felt myself struggling with him silently outside that window. But he broke loose, pulled open the window, and leapt into the room, and I after him. As I crossed the threshold, something flashed in my eyes; there was a loud report, a sharp cry, and the thud of a body on the ground. […] With her blond head resting on its seat, lay Mrs. Oke, a pool of red forming in her white

> dress. Her mouth was convulsed, as if in that automatic shriek, but her wide-open white eyes seemed to smile vaguely and distantly.
>
> (83)

His invasion of his wife's private sphere violates the principle of healthy segregation between the spheres in the household, but is also redolent of sexual assault, as if it were an endeavour to reassert his power and sexual dominance on a wife who has been rejecting her hetero-normative, male-centric conjugal duties. Alice Oke is killed in the middle of her fantasising, her orgasmic-looking body emphasising the transgressive sexuality she is punished for:

> Her body registers both horror and the smile of erotic satisfaction. The red and white imagery, picked up in the locket containing Lovelock's hair mentioned in the final sentences which was 'all stained with blood' (153), reinforces the 'stain' of female passion, the loss of purity of the wife who gives herself to a phantom lover. But this scene also reproduces the 'fixing' of the unstable disorderly feminine […]; the excessive, gender indeterminacy of Alice Oke, which has manifested itself in a refusal to play by the rules of polite society, and her penchant for male clothing, can now be exorcised.
>
> (Liggins 2013: 44)

Yet Alice's orgasmic look upon death suggests a partial failure on William's part: her transgressions prevent her from embodying the fixed, feminine, non-threatening Beautiful that the female corpse is supposed to represent (Ventrella 2023: 254-5). William can neither possess her nor annul her transgression: her gaze still has the "curious, distant-looking" quality she had when alive (Lee [1886] 2022: 72), indicative of her looking through her window rather than inside, that look that had the narrator observe that she "took no more heed of [her husband] than of a table or chair" (48). Her smile, too, proves a satisfaction in her own death that reveals that she played an active role in the murder that should have turned her into a passive victim: by suggesting that she has manipulated her husband into killing her, the text signals that agency remains in *her* hands rather than his, and that masculinity has not been reconquered. This reconquest also fails because William's actions betray his cultural role as protector, hence the scene does not end with Alice's dead body and instead alludes to an unresolved tension. After invading the room from the outside – from the window Alice used to communicate with the masculine sphere – William unlocks the door that he locked to trap Alice: "'The damned rascal has given me the slip again!' he cried; and quickly unlocking the door, rushed out of the house with dreadful cries" (83). This unlocking hints at a failure to contain Alice. This spectre, which metaphorically represents William's failure, must be chased outside, because how could it be locked up in a female space? The pursuit of masculinity is a parody of his hunting days, undermined by his hysterical madness and by the destruction of the institution of marriage that he purported to re-establish. His chase can end but in one way – suicide – because he cannot survive the forsaking of his oath of protecting his wife, nor can he exist alone in a household dependent on a healthy balance between masculine and feminine.

"A rather unusual kind of man": Hermeneutic Indeterminacy and the Mediating Narrator

A question that remains to be asked, at the end of such a narrative, is whether the blame for that destruction should be laid on Alice, on William, or on both – or perhaps on neither, the true guilt belonging to a patriarchal system that confines both women and men into places and spaces that imprison them. Nevertheless, the polarisation of the tale naturally invites the reader

to take a side between husband and wife. To determine Vernon Lee's intent in deconstructing gender ideology, I propose to look at the narrator and at his unique position as the third character in a story of binaries. The narrator stands as an outsider: a painter from London, come to Kent to paint them both, and laden with certain prejudices regarding what Londoners would perceive as the ideal, pastoral country life. It is actually the narrator who models the readers' gendered expectations regarding the Oke household: he sets up a detailed picture of "the modern Gothic country-house, with the usual amount of Morris furniture, Liberty rugs, and Mudie novels," accompanied by "five or six little Okes […]; the eternal routine of afternoon tea and lawn-tennis" (41). The narrator implicitly orientates his contemporary reader's expectations by locating his immediately-shattered impressions within a *décor* that is solidly anchored in Victorian material culture: the references to furniture anchor the story in the 1870s or 1880s and appeal to implicit gendered bias, setting up the idealised Mrs. Oke as a fashionable, fertile, happy woman. It is thus the narrator who places the story within a material and cultural understanding of gender roles, his rigid prejudice highlighting his ambivalent relation to the drawing room: though he despises the tokens of nascent consumerism he associates with femininity, he is unsettled and frightened when he fails to find them in this room.

As the mediator, constantly put in-between both spouses, the narrator is the only one to set foot in both spouses' private sanctuaries, i.e., William's study and smoking-room, and Alice's drawing-room. The fact that he is admitted in both realms – and especially in the realm of transgressive female sexuality – would be puzzling if the story did not cast doubt on the narrator's sexuality. Indeed, when Alice talks about Christopher Lovelock, he confesses to being "equally interested in the strange craze that fascinated her" (61), while also defending himself from the accusation that he might have been in love with her – an accusation that leaves the reader wondering whether it is in fact true, or whether he is protesting too much. He also calls their relationship "of a very unusual kind, as she was herself a very unusual kind of woman; and I, if you choose, am a rather unusual kind of man" (44). By calling the narrator as unusual as the queer-coded Alice, but without ever explaining the nature of his peculiarity, the story suggests a potentially queer interpretation that explains the narrator's admittance into Alice's realm, but also his split allegiance. The story thus places the narrator outside of the gender binary, making him a non-conforming figure capable of belonging both to the male and to the female spheres. The interpretation is supported by his refusal to side with either one of the spouses when they find themselves in the same room. That room is consistently the dinner room, which the story leaves undescribed; despite its being traditionally a masculine space (Hamlett 2009: 580), its gendered role is ambiguous as it is the stage where Alice and William act out their fights about the drawing room and the ghost of Lovelock – echoing the narrator's own ambiguous role as a man who is able to feel sympathy for both spouses.

The narrator thus feels sympathy for William, repeatedly saying he feels "sorry" for him and calling him "so magnificent a specimen of the handsome Englishman; […] a knight for the Black Prince or Sidney" (Lee [1886] 2022: 68). Yet his actions also reveal a natural sympathy for Alice. The story repeatedly pictures him lying down, caught in a sensory reverie reminiscent of Alice's own time in her room:

> To sit in a room like the one I was sitting in, with the figures of the tapestry glimmering grey and lilac and purple in the twilight, […] the overhanging mantelpiece of inlaid Italian stonework, a vague scent of rose-leaves and spices, put into the china bowls by the hands of ladies long since dead […]; – to do this is a special kind of voluptuousness, peculiar and complex and indescribable, like the half-drunkenness of opium or haschisch […]. Gradually […] my eyes wandered to the mullioned bow-window, beyond whose panes, between whose heavy stonework, stretched a greyish-brown expanse of sore and sodden park grass, dotted with big oaks.
>
> (44)

The Italian decoration, the oriental description, the heady smell of spices, and the mullioned window make his bedroom the narrative mirror to the yellow drawing room, making it an androgynous third space stuck in-between its status as a masculine sanctuary and its identity with the feminine. The trance-like state, the addictive undertones, and the gradual change in focus from inside to outside echo Alice's fantasising: the gaze of the narrator reproduces the same movement as hers, looking through the window into the park where the oaks are. The narrator is also able to empathise with her feelings of *ennui* and loneliness, going so far as to experience, right before her death, "this particular, not at all unpleasurable, restlessness" (82) that he diagnoses Alice with. His activities at that moment echo those he observed on Alice's part during the narrative: she is described "strolling about the house and grounds, arranging the quantities of flowers that always filled all the rooms, beginning to read and then throwing aside novels and books of poetry, of which she always had a large number; and, I believe, lying for hours, doing nothing" (60). The narrator imitates every single one of her actions: "I wandered up and down the corridors, stopping to […] stare at the autumn flowers […]. I took up one book after another and threw it aside; then I sat down to the piano and began to play irrelevant fragments" (82), before settling in a drawing room and reading love poetry. Despite cultural expectations of the division of gender roles in the household and criticising the very behaviour that he unconsciously imitates, the narrator's first and last experience in the house are a sympathetic mirroring of the feminine transgressive experience. The reader is thus forced to either sympathise with Alice, or to acknowledge their own hypocrisy in judging her but sympathising with the male narrator.

Nevertheless, the narrator's split sympathy and his ambiguous gender performance lead to a dual, irreconcilable perception of the yellow drawing room. The room is uncanny and liminal, as he perceives it from both spouses' point of view: it is simultaneously "the most beautiful room" in Okehurst, yet "as it seemed to me now, the most strange" (57) – his first, instinctive reaction clashing with his retrospective, rationalising judgement. From its first description the room is thus granted an uncanny aspect, the narrative refusing to decide between pleasure and dread, and sympathy and antipathy for either spouse:

> "It is a beautiful room!" I exclaimed. "I should awfully like to paint you in it"; but I had scarcely spoken the words when I felt I had done wrong. This woman's husband could not bear the room, and it seemed to me vaguely as if he were right in detesting it. […] I scarcely know why, but I neglected Mrs. Oke that afternoon. I went to Mr. Oke's study […].
>
> (58-9)

The changes of loyalty are constant throughout the story: he alternates between admiration for one spouse and simultaneous disgust towards the other, depending on his perception of Alice's and William's compliance to gender roles. Even after Alice's murder, he cannot choose. One of the sketches the narrator draws of her depicts her "walking quickly out of the room" (38) as if to metaphorically celebrate her breaking away from the patriarchal prison, yet the narrator cannot begin his tale without a precaution: "Wait; I must turn her face to the wall" (39) he warns, as if he cannot speak of her transgressions before first containing her and turning her away from the outside world. This maintains the reader in a state of perpetual questioning that the story refuses to solve: are we supposed to sympathise with the patriarchal loss of authority, or with the doomed assertion of female agency and sexuality? Should we see the drawing room as a haunted locus guilty of destroying the institution of marriage, or as a normal and lovely space only reviled by men who think a liberated woman *must* be under an evil spell? The indeterminacy in the text thus creates suspense and ambivalence as to its meaning. Zoe Lehmann Imfeld writes about the Victorian ghost story that spectrality is achieved by an

ambiguity between "the *possibility* of the supernatural and the *actuality* of the supernatural" that constantly repositions the reader and gives the text a "monstrous quality" (Lehmann Imfeld 2016: 15, 24); it is thus this hermeneutic tension, rather than the never-seen phantom lover, that really grants Lee's story its spectral dimension.

This spectrality is reinforced by the reader's inability to categorise the narrative experience according to cultural types. The narrator's ability to share Alice's dreamlike trance, as well as his inability to see her ghost, create ambivalence as to the reality of the events and the possibility of categorisation. In her study of female dreams in fiction, Margaret Anne Doody demonstrates that as creatures of authority, men must be impervious to superstition and are supposed to "be in touch with reality" and to "exert rational control" else "they are failures, deserving of pity or contempt" (Doody 2004: 72). On the other hand, women are "weaker" and "living an inward life rather different from that of men […] and closer to the dream-life," making their dreams socially acceptable (73). In Lee's story, the dreamlike and hallucinatory apparition of the ghost echoes that cultural differentiation. When evoked in relation to Alice, the ghost takes on the identity of a fantasy, associated with daydreaming; yet William's perception of the same ghost is nightmarish and confines to insanity. Female superstitious perception is a natural, if unwelcome, phenomenon, while the corresponding male experience signals the undoing of masculine rationality. Yet the narrator occupies an ambiguous position: while his *words* reinforce a rational and rationalising understanding of the events, his *actions* accomplish the opposite, placing the story itself in a liminal position between masculine and feminine, and between rational and fantastic. Categorisation is impossible, as the reader is never frankly told whether the supernatural or the rational explanation of the tale is to be believed, placing reader, narrator, and story in a constant wavering between rationality and irrationality. The ending itself creates more confusion. The narrator constantly rationalises the events, implicitly diagnosing both spouses with hysteria. This rationality is undermined by the very last line, as the narrator relates that a locket was found on Alice's dead body, containing hair that was not William's. The narrator concludes the story with these words: "I am quite sure it was Lovelock's" (Lee [1886] 2022: 83). The statement places the story in the realm of feminine irrationality and simultaneously undermines the explanation with its use of the nuance of the adverb. The closing statement draws the narrator closer to the feminine realm, having him share Alice's fantasy without sharing William's insanity. The narrator's sojourn at Okehurst, the embodiment of the ideal patriarchal household, ultimately becomes transformative, as the narrator's cultural prejudices are slowly infiltrated by the feminine perspective… but also a divergent masculine one: the narrator is as receptive to Alice's forced containment as he is to William's struggle with cultural ideals he cannot live by. The tale thus suggests the possibility of a different gendered culture, and especially of a different masculinity that, by remaining receptive to feminine sensitivity, is capable of sympathy for both gender experiences.

Conclusion

Originally published in 1886 in *Blackwood's Magazine* and republished in Lee's 1890 collection *Hauntings*, "Oke of Okehurst" was simultaneously lauded as "a masterly story" yet labelled "not a true ghost story" ("VERNON LEE'S HAUNTINGS" 1890). Lee's writing of the ghostly indeed would have felt destabilising to a readership used to shilling shockers and Gothic apparitions; yet "Oke" represents an important and early transition of the ghost story towards a more psychological understanding of the genre, which Henry James (who was famously influenced by *Hauntings*) and the modernists would come to adopt represent. What

was initially branded as "morbid psychology" by contemporaries (("VERNON LEE'S HAUNTINGS" 1890) can in hindsight be appreciated as an exploration of deeply ingrained cultural ideals. Its ghostly yellow drawing room, threatening site of confinement and emancipation, anticipates but also paves the way for major tales such as Mona Caird's "The Yellow Drawing Room" (1892) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's "The Yellow Wallpaper" (1892), inscribing Lee's story as the earliest in a series of works that are now considered capital within *fin-de-siècle* fights for female independence. As it was hinted in the opening paragraphs of the story, Okehurst indeed is a subverted palace of the Sleeping Beauty: Alice is the prisoner who refuses to remain passive, William is the gaoler/protector who fails at his mission, and the narrator incarnates a troubled middle ground in this battle of the sexes. What is truly at stake in the tale is the inevitable destruction of both spouses and of social harmony by cultural ideals that assign constraining and untenable roles to both women and men. The downfall of the Oke family may thus be perceived as a fictional echo to the real-life toll this culture had on Victorian households. The hermeneutic tension of the story adds to the uneasiness of the subject matter: the readers will remain haunted by the unanswered, troubling questions raised by the Okes and their drawing room.

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