

Through the opaque veil:
the Gothic and death in Russian realism

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‘Our life and the life beyond the grave are
equally incomprehensible and horrible ...
apparitions are terrible, but life is terrible, too.’¹

Anton Chekhov

In the 30 April 1853 issue of the *Moscow Gazette*, a commentator remarked, ‘Among current items of news, primacy must be accorded, without dispute, to that mystery which nature has hitherto hidden from men and whose traces are only now beginning to be discerned’ (quoted in Vinitzky, 2009: 3). The ‘mystery’ in question here is life after death, and the author’s suggestion that one can now ‘discern traces’ of what happens after death implies the possibility of looking through the ‘veil’ for a glimpse of the afterlife. A broader cultural impetus to understand death emerged in this period, and the question of whether an afterlife existed and its nature was a key point in scientific, philosophical, and theological inquiry and debate in the nineteenth century, which manifested not only in the rise of movements such as materialism and spiritualism, but also in increased scrutiny of both folk and religious belief systems. As a literary form that dealt ‘with life and reality in their true light’ (Belinskii, 1956: X. 16),² realism accommodated this cultural climate; realist writers, especially in the Russian tradition, actively engaged in these debates in their fiction.

Russian realism ‘aims at conveying reality as closely as possible and strives for maximum verisimilitude’ (Jakobson, 2001: 38) and one might assume it privileges a

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materialist worldview, but its form enabled exploration of varying philosophical stances. One of the most famous examples of this ability is Fedor Dostoevskii's *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880), in which the existence and nature of God is on trial and convincing arguments for both sides are embedded in the novel. Similarly, as the vogue for spiritualist activities such as séances came to prominence in the second half of the century, realism reflected and informed these debates and trends (Vinitsky, 2009: 3–13). While there is a distinction between the Gothic-fantastic, in which supernatural events might occur, and spiritualism, in which the supernatural is another aspect of the natural, Gothic language and narrative devices appear in realist texts that engage with the spirit world, as well as those that evince a materialist worldview.³ Indeed, as Christine Berthoin argues, the Gothic's engagement with spectral elements is at 'the crux of our modernity' (2010: 1).

The nineteenth-century rise of spiritualism and its attendant debates coincided and conflicted with the 'age of science', a period of intense scientific inquiry and progress. In Russia, scientific inquiry became a matter of national importance in the era of Great Reforms that followed the country's defeat in the Crimean War; thinker and revolutionary Aleksandr Gertsen emphasised the period's scientific momentum in his 1868 memoir *My Past and Thoughts*: 'Without the natural sciences there is no salvation for modern man. Without that wholesome food, without that strict training of the mind by facts, without that closeness to the life surrounding us ... the monastic cell [would remain] hidden somewhere in the soul, and in it the drop of mysticism which might have flooded the whole understanding with its dark waters' (1982: 88).⁴

Throughout the nineteenth century, scientific thought was bound up with philosophical and political positions, a coupling that manifested in literature. Ivan Turgenev's Bazarov, the nihilist and atheist hero of *Fathers and Sons* (1862), proudly holds scientific fact above all other considerations, even remaining stoic in the face of his own death, caused

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by an error made while performing an autopsy. In Lev Tolstói's *Anna Karenina* (1877), Konstantin Levin proclaims himself an atheist, but is troubled by his inability to believe in an afterlife and the implications of that for his own life's meaning. Levin's (1935) concept of death manifests in scientific terms, taken from the natural science volumes he has been reading: 'In infinite time, in infinite matter, in infinite space, is formed a bubble-organism, and that bubble lasts a while and bursts, and that bubble is I.'⁵ His inability to reconcile the meaning of his life with his inevitable death and subsequent nonexistence results in palpable terror and suicidal thoughts.

Irene Masing-Delic attributes this terror to the decline of Russian Orthodoxy as a doctrine in nineteenth-century Russia: 'Like other branches of Christianity, Russian Orthodoxy offers immortality only after death, in a spiritual dimension not to be found on earth ... But atheists and materialists from the 1860's onward did not find transcendental paradises material enough to be real. They dismissed these celestial realms and the immortality found there as fairy tales without any scientific foundation' (1992: 3). In Masing-Delic's analysis, this trend resulted in twentieth-century Russia's fascination with immortality, while in the nineteenth century, a move away from Orthodox doctrine in the upper classes arguably manifested in an increased emphasis on mortality in philosophy, pseudoscientific movements such as spiritualism, and explorations of man's relationship to his own demise in literature and the arts. Bazarov and Levin stand as characters who represent a particular philosophical stance, which is tested within their novels through narrative framing and perspective. Thus were realist writers able to access 'a full and authentic report of human experiences', encouraging readers to question their own assumptions and beliefs about death and the possibility of life beyond (Watt, 2001: 32).

This tendency of Russian realism lends its texts intensity through circumventing the 'careful distance' Sarah Webster Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (1993: 3) observe in

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writings about death. Instead, Russian realist works tap into the idea of death as a ‘collective experience’, one that all face at life’s end. Philippe Ariès identifies this collective mindset as pre-eminent in medieval Europe, observing moreover that ‘death became the occasion when man was most able to reach an awareness of himself’ (1974: 46). Ariès similarly observes this ‘medieval’ mindset among nineteenth-century Russian peasants who are able to die more authentically, without secrecy in Tolstoi’s writings such as ‘Three Deaths’ (1859) and *The Death of Ivan Il’ich* (1880) (1981: 561–2, 567). This point resonates with G. P. Fedotov’s argument that the Russian peasant lived in the Middle Ages through the nineteenth century (1960: 3). As Ivan Il’ich suffers, his family’s inability to admit he is dying proves more torturous than his illness, and in the end he can only bear the presence of a *muzhik* whose peasant background enables him to speak frankly about death.

This chapter will examine the function and effect of Gothic literary devices in the treatment of death in two short Russian realist works, Turgenev’s ‘Bezhin Meadow’ (1851) and Anton Chekhov’s ‘A Dead Body’ (1885). These works stand as examples of writers working out how to write about death within the bounds of realism. As Alan Bewell notes, ‘Since we cannot experience death and also describe it, it is necessarily primarily a product of representation’ (1989: 187). Turgenev’s anxiety surrounding death and Chekhov’s realisation of his own deteriorating body lend vibrant urgency to their exploration of death’s facets, and it is striking that both examine peasant belief systems within this context as well as turn to the Gothic.⁶ The Gothic’s forte is its expression of the mystery of death (Howells, 1982), but folk belief also provides insight into death through ritual. The Gothic becomes a mode that conveys the fear surrounding the unknown, and, through generic expectation and its subversion, manipulates reader response (Bowers, 2013). The Gothic simultaneously contrasts and resonates thematically with the folkloric beliefs of peasants, enabling a literary exploration of attitudes toward and fears surrounding death.

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‘Bezhin Meadow’ and ‘A Dead Body’ take a similar theme – fear of death – and setting – a traveller encountering peasants. In ‘Bezhin Meadow’, the narrator encounters a group of peasant boys telling ghost stories. We experience the sketch through the hunter’s first-person perspective, and our perception of the boys is filtered through his observations while eavesdropping. Turgenev’s sketch dwells on imagined death as a catalyst for fear in scary stories, relying on its reader’s ability to perceive an intertextual relationship between his narrative frame and earlier Western Gothic tropes. These had entered the Russian cultural landscape through translation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, sparking a ‘gothic craze’, which reached its peak later than in the West and proved a source of ‘remarkable influence on Russian writers’ (Tosi, 2006: 327, 328). Chekhov’s ‘A Dead Body’ has a third-person limited narrator, and the story is told from the perspective of two peasants sitting by the side of a road in a forest with a dead body; they encounter a traveling pilgrim who grows frightened at the sight of the corpse. Chekhov’s story plays with reader expectations: the centrality of the dead body in the story leads the reader (and the traveller) to anticipate an outcome such as those in Sensation Fiction, a genre that emerged from the Gothic, was intensely visual, and deliberately played with sensational themes and horrific images grounded not in the brooding past, as in classic Gothic fiction, but in modern life. As Henry James explained, ‘The supernatural ... requires a powerful imagination in order to be as exciting as the natural, as [Sensation novelists], without any imagination at all, know how to manage it’ (1865: 593).

Contemporary readers saw *Sketches from a Hunter’s Album* (1851) as part of the ‘new writing’ heralded by Belinskii and others who advocated for more naturalist literature based in verisimilitude. In this context, it is surprising that Turgenev uses a Gothic frame in 1851. By the 1880s, however, readers had more exposure to Sensation Fiction, and the movement was already becoming a cliché; one could read the major novels of Dostoevskii and Tolstoi as

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a collection of murders, suicides, passions, illicit affairs, and illegitimate children in company with philosophical discourse. In 1866, Dostoevskii's *Crime and Punishment* and Tolstoi's *War and Peace* (1865–1867) were both being serialised in *The Russian Messenger* alongside a translation of Wilkie Collins' Sensation novel *Armadale*. Dostoevskii's frenetic tale of an axe murderer's motivations and the psychology of guilt parallels Collins' stream of murders, violence, and mysterious dreams. These sensational novels resonate with the late nineteenth-century Russian interest in true crime and punishment, which coincided with the advent of the trial by jury and the rise of mass journalism (McReynolds, 2012: 113–40).

The Gothic setting tends toward the exotic, but Turgenev and Chekhov, in setting their Gothic-framed tales in rural nineteenth-century Russia, enunciate the anxiety and terror inherent in real life, what James called the 'most mysterious of mysteries ... which are at our own doors' (1865: 593). Intriguingly, both Turgenev's sketch and Chekhov's story end without resolution or explanation, leaving the reader to contemplate the conflicting views of death they raise. Just as these shorter works bookend the age of the great Russian realist novel, they also frame its existential questions about life and death.

'Bezhin Meadow' begins with Turgenev's hunter walking in the forest. As the forest darkens and the hunter-narrator realises he is lost, his description of his surroundings takes on Gothic overtones: night rises around him 'like a thundercloud' (как грозовая тучка), the mist colludes with the darkness, small creatures are mindlessly consumed by terror, and the 'sullen murk' (угрюмый мрак) looms.⁷ He concludes, 'the hollow itself was so still and silent, the sky above it so flat and dismal that my heart shrank within me'.⁸ The narrator's feelings and moods constantly shape the landscape in the *Sketches* and Turgenev uses this device to influence the feelings of his reader here as well; as the narrator feels lost and frightened, so, too, the reader, used to picking up on Gothic cues in popular fiction, begins to feel anxious for the narrator.

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Lost in this environment, the narrator stumbles across the cheerful sight of a group of peasant boys exchanging stories around a campfire. Turgenev specifically juxtaposes the Gothic frame with the tales of the boys, contrasting the traveller-narrator's literary language with the peasants' folkloric narratives. As he tells their stories back to his reader, he reveals the complicated web of folk and Christian beliefs that informs their worldview. Kostia tells of a village carpenter who encounters a *rusalka*, a folkloric female spirit who lures men to their deaths, in the forest and saves himself from drowning by crossing himself. Fedia recounts the tale of a squire, discontented after death, who haunts a nearby village. Each of the stories has elements of fear related to the contemplation of death, but only Iliusha's stories evoke real fear in the boys. Iliusha shares his terrifying encounter with a goblin or possibly a demon, then, later, tells of a mysterious demonic lamb that appeared on a drowned man's grave. In these tales, the supernatural is mysterious and lies outside of the boys' well-ordered belief system. By contrast, in Kostia's tale, the carpenter encounters a *rusalka*, but is able to save himself through ritual. In Fedia's tale, the squire's death and ghostly afterlife seem natural, the spectral squire benign, discontented in death as he was in life. Iliusha's tales, in engaging with elements that go beyond the conventions of folk belief, show the boundaries of the peasants' belief system, and the terror that the inexplicable evokes.

For the boys, the spirit world has its rules and explanations, just like the material world. Iliusha frames the story of his grandmother's death omen with the explanation that 'you can see dead people at any time [...] but on Parents' Sunday you can also see the people who're going to die that year'.⁹ Within this frame, his tale of real deaths foretold is accepted by the boys; his grandmother's encounter with her own foretold death merely elicits the remark that her death has not yet come to pass. Similarly, when Pavlusha reports that he has just heard a drowned boy calling his name from a nearby river, the boys take it as an omen. Rather than reacting with fear, Pavlusha 'declare[s] resolutely' (произнес решительно) that

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‘your own fate you can’t escape’.¹⁰ In this belief system, death is a transitional process that separates life and afterlife.

A later exchange similarly and more explicitly exposes the fluid boundaries between the spirit world and the boys’ world, and also brings the tension between the sketch’s Gothic frame and folkloric core to the forefront. The boys hear a sudden noise, which is described as ‘strange, sharp, sickening’ (странный, резкий, болезненный) (107; 114). Kostia fears the unknown sound while Pavlusha calmly identifies it as a heron’s cry. This prompts Kostia to tell a story:

<EXT>

What was it, Pavlusha, I heard yesterday evening? ... So, mates, I walked past this tarn an' suddenly someone starts makin' a groanin' sound from right inside it, so piteous, piteous, like: Oooh – oooh ... oooh – oooh! I was terrified, mates. It was late an' that voice sounded like somebody really sick. It was like I was goin' to start cryin' myself ... What would that have been, eh?¹¹

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Introduced with the narrator’s Gothic voice, Kostia’s colloquial description of his terror at encountering an unfamiliar and unidentifiable sound recalls the narrator’s Gothic descriptions of the forest at night that introduce the boys’ stories. There, however, the literary Gothic descriptions play to the readers’ expectations, evoking fear and dread, whereas here Kostia’s story relates a Gothic trope in colloquial, somewhat jovial speech. Both Gothic and colloquial descriptions emphasise aspects of the psychology of fear, but the reader, attuned to Gothic convention, is able to experience that fear from the narrator’s description. Kostia’s account discloses his fear, but, in mimicking the heron’s cry, becomes almost comical. The scene continues:

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‘The summer before last, thieves drowned Akim the forester in that tarn,’

Pavlusha remarked. ‘So it may have been his soul complaining.’

‘Well, it might be that, mates,’ rejoined [Kostia], widening his already enormous eyes. ‘I didn’t know that Akim had been drowned in that tarn. If I’d known, I wouldn’t have got so terrified.’¹²

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The subsequent discussion, in which the boys suggest both natural (frogs) and supernatural (wood-demon) causes for the sound, shows that, in their world, the supernatural is natural.

Pavlusha’s calm identification of the unfortunate Akim’s soul complaining and Kostia’s reply, ‘If I’d known, I wouldn’t have got so terrified’, underscores this belief structure.

While, within the bounds of the Gothic, a tarn haunted by a drowned man would be a catalyst for dread, for the boys it is a natural explanation for a frightening sound, like frogs or wood-demons.

Mark Simpson argues that Pavlusha acts as a Gothic hero in Turgenev’s sketch, ‘a kind of Melmoth, a sign of the dangers inherent in skepticism ... Only the Gothic hero aims to explain the many unknowns and the many fears which confront us’ (Simpson, 1986: 87). Pavlusha’s explanations are not drawn from some Melmoth-like wisdom, however, but from the peasants’ own belief system. If any character in the sketch embodies the role of Gothic hero, surely it is the narrator. His tendency to delve into a Gothic mode of description frames the boys’ stories, and ultimately gives a fatalistic, frightening context to Pavlusha’s foretold death when he leaves the boys at the story’s conclusion and adds the note, ‘I have, unfortunately, to add that in the same year Pavlusha died’,¹³ with prosaic details about his demise. Pavlusha’s reaction to hearing his name called by a drowned boy seems nearly ambivalent, accepting of his fate; this type of omen is an aspect of peasant belief, at least in Turgenev’s depiction.

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The narrator's addendum to the sketch adds a prosaic observation, an element from everyday life that disrupts the Gothic and folkloric modes of narration. The Gothic frame, however, leaves the reader feeling uneasy. Within a realist framework, the boundaries between life and death are clearly delineated, but the Gothic frame emphasises dread and mystery, and hints at the possibility that Pavlusha's death omen may have a basis in reality. The Gothic framing device brings the peasants' belief system into the bounds of a realist structure. In this way, Turgenev legitimises a belief system that offers a more comforting view of death than his own positivist and materialist views allowed. For the peasants, death is merely another facet of life, entrance into a world that exists parallel to ours, at times overlapping, whereas Turgenev viewed death as a definitive end, a state of non-existence.

Published some thirty years later, Chekhov's 'A Dead Body' similarly explores fear in the face of death. While the Gothic frame in Turgenev's sketch is in keeping with his generic experimentation in other works, the Gothic frame in Chekhov's story is unusual within his *oeuvre*. Nearly all scholarship surrounding Chekhov and Gothic has focused on the story 'The Black Monk' (1894), which deals with the notion of apparitions as a symptom of mental illness.¹⁴ 'The Black Monk' has the most overt instances of the supernatural in Chekhov's corpus, but other stories also entertain Gothic themes or tropes. In 'A Dead Body', a traveling pilgrim encounters two peasants keeping overnight vigil with a corpse. Suddenly they hear 'a long drawn-out, moaning sound in the forest':

<EXT>

Something rustles in the leaves as though torn from the very top of the tree and falls to the ground. All this is faintly repeated by the echo. The young man shudders and looks enquiringly at his companion. 'It's an owl at the little birds,' says [Sema], gloomily.¹⁵

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The younger peasant defers to the older peasant's wisdom, and finds reassurance in his explanation. Similarly, although the peasants talk about their fears, staying overnight with the corpse is a necessary part of the peasants' funeral ritual, and this sense of duty normalises the task for them. When the pilgrim comes across them, however, he becomes afraid to venture further through the woods alone, ostensibly because of the corpse. He experiences what Julia Kristeva (1982) terms abject horror, a reaction caused by a confrontation with the threatened breakdown of the boundaries between self and other. According to Kristeva, the corpse is a source of horror because it traumatically reminds man of his own demise, forcing him to face 'the border of [his] condition as a living being' (3). In Chekhov's story, the pilgrim expresses his fear of death through Gothic cliché, complaining, 'The dead man will haunt me all the way in the darkness'.¹⁶ Intriguingly, Chekhov's pilgrim demonstrates consciousness of his fear's irrationality, continuing, 'I am not afraid of wolves, of thieves, or of darkness, but I am afraid of the dead. I am afraid of them, and that is all about it!'¹⁷

The pilgrim's declaration stems from an expectation of potential outcomes for a tale of a lonely and lost traveller encountering a dead body at night: perhaps it is an unlucky omen or will be reanimated, and stands in opposition to the folkloric ritualised worldview of the peasants. Chekhov subverts the Gothic by introducing a new narrative strand, one based in economics. While the pilgrim's initial reaction is to flee, he encounters difficulty in convincing the peasants to leave the dead body and show him the way, as, for them, breaking the vigil is unlucky. Finally, he convinces the younger peasant to accompany him onwards by offering five kopecks. For this sum, the younger peasant is willing to chance bad luck. This exchange introduces the notion of an economy related to death, which Chekhov builds up to humorous effect. The pilgrim offers to leave a kopeck for the burial, but upon learning that the man is possibly a suicide, he rescinds the offer, saying that he would not stay by the body

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for a thousand kopecks. The prosaic moment of barter undermines the pilgrim's earlier, fearful exclamation and distances the characters from the reality of the corpse.

As in Turgenev's sketch, Chekhov's reader is struck by the story's Gothic frame, which evokes the sensational in this everyday setting. From the story's beginning, a Gothic landscape is in evidence:

<EXT>

A still August night. A mist is rising slowly from the fields and casting an opaque veil over everything within eyesight. Lighted up by the moon, the mist gives the impression at one moment of a calm, boundless sea, at the next of an immense white wall. The air is damp and chilly.¹⁸

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The 'opaque veil' of mist rising up from the fields at times resembles a calm but endless sea or a gigantic white wall; it recalls Turgenev's sketch. In 'Bezhin Meadow', the familiar landscape becomes a Gothic one, with a steep menacing wall, and white mist shrouding the clammy damp grass. This opaque veil shrouds the world, rendering it unfamiliar and impenetrable. In 'A Dead Body', the crackling of the peasants' cheerful fire quickly dispels this initial atmospheric description and brings the reader back to the present. However, the story ends on a Gothic note:

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A minute later the sound of their steps and their talk dies away. [Sema] shuts his eyes and gently dozes. The fire begins to grow dim, and a big black shadow falls on the dead body ...¹⁹

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The last sentence provides Gothic atmosphere, but following the humorous exchange with the pilgrim and Sema's quiet dozing, seems disjunctive. As in 'Bezhin Meadow', the Gothic

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frame, provided by the realist narrator, seems at odds with the blurred boundary between this life and an afterlife, our world and the spirit world in the folk beliefs expressed colloquially by the peasants.

Three unmistakable Gothic moments appear in the text: the ‘opaque veil’ of mist and initial landscape description; the sudden unknown cry that startles the younger peasant; and, finally, the shadow that falls over the corpse and closes the tale. These moments are what savvy readers familiar with Gothic conventions expect from a story called ‘A Dead Body’. Each could be understood humorously as melodramatic elements that contrast with Sema’s rational worldview. The older peasant’s cheerful fire chases away the initial gloom and cold mist. He recognises the unknown sound as an owl, providing it with context and so dispelling the younger peasant’s fears. Sema’s quiet dozing sharply contrasts with the black shadow falling over the dead body. However, the final ellipsis forces us to question this reading. Even if the pilgrim’s fears are gently mocked and exposed as irrational, they are nonetheless real fears.

The Gothic elements in ‘A Dead Body’ play on the reader’s irrational fears. Inserting them in the story adds to the overall feeling that something unnatural *could* happen, such as the corpse’s sudden reanimation or a ghostly apparition. Chekhov’s late-nineteenth-century reader understands that the text suggests fear because of these atmospheric set pieces. The final shadow on the corpse and ellipsis adds subtly but significantly to the story’s effect, building on the previous Gothic moments and leaving the reader with a vague sense of disquiet.

In another story from approximately the same period, the potential for Gothic atmosphere exists but is dispelled through humorous narration. ‘In the Graveyard’ (1884) features a party of friends visiting a graveyard at night. While the setting could be rendered frightening as in ‘A Dead Body’, it is not, as we understand from the opening lines:

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<EXT>

‘The wind has got up, friends, and it is beginning to get dark. Hadn't we better take ourselves off before it gets worse?’ The wind was frolicking among the yellow leaves of the old birch trees, and a shower of thick drops fell upon us from the leaves. One of our party slipped on the clayey soil, and clutched at a big grey cross to save himself from falling.²⁰

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The first two sentences conjure a classic Gothic scene – the dark and stormy night. The description that follows is far from Gothic, however. The ‘frolicking’ wind, yellow-coloured leaves, and fat raindrops, not to mention the man slipping and grabbing a cross to keep from falling, dispel any notion of the Gothic. As the story continues, the narrator introduces multiple Gothic or sensational conventions in addition to the ‘dark and stormy’ setting. For example, a mysterious stranger appears from behind shadowed gravestones.

<EXT>

‘And here, under this tombstone, lies a man who from his cradle detested verses and epigrams ... As though to mock him his whole tombstone is adorned with verses ... There is someone coming!’ A man in a shabby overcoat, with a shaven, bluish-crimson [physiognomy],²¹ overtook us. He had a bottle under his arm and a parcel of sausage was sticking out of his pocket.²²

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The appearance of a ragged stranger with a discoloured face following a meditation on tombstones has Gothic or sensational potential. However, the mode breaks with the word ‘physiognomy’. This ironic reference combines with ‘bluish-crimson’ to reinforce the humorous observation on a tombstone covered in epigrams. The second sentence, with its

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protruding bottle and sausage packet, banishes the Gothic potential entirely as we realise the mysterious stranger is a drunken vagrant.

Another example of Gothic convention later dispelled in 'In the Graveyard' is the presence of multiple coffins containing fresh corpses. In the short story, the party encounters one dead body after another until, finally, someone remarks, 'We've only been walking here for a couple of hours and that is the third brought in already ... Shall we go home, friends?'²³ In a Gothic tale, each encounter with a dead body would usually lead to a suspenseful narrative build-up and the protagonist's growing anxiety. In Sensation Fiction, the corpses would mount, culminating in some fresh, delectable horror. In Chekhov's story, the dark night, wind, storm, and even the appearance of multiple coffins containing fresh corpses and a stranger who appears from behind the shadowed gravestones, seem like classic Gothic markers. But they are not coloured with Gothic exaggeration, cause no alarm, and their inherent sensationalism is destabilised by humour.

The clichéd setting of 'In the Graveyard' allows for a humorous yet realistic encounter with prosaic death. While not so funny, the Gothic frame in 'A Dead Body' fulfils a similar role: it informs an encounter with the materiality of death. Chekhov frames the episode with Gothic convention, subverts this atmosphere with prosaic elements, then reintroduces the Gothic, and in so doing, creates a mode in which the readers suspend their disbelief and has the potential for experiencing their own fear. The Gothic frame in 'Bezhin Meadow' evoked the recent Romantic literature that still lingered vividly in the Russian reader's imagination; Aleksandr Pushkin's celebrated 'The Queen of Spades' (1834) was not yet twenty, and Dostoevskii's *The Double* (1846), with its account of a mysterious *doppelgänger* that may or may not be a hallucination, had appeared less than five years earlier. Chekhov's Gothic, however, engages with a different readership, one for whom the age of the realist novel has ended and Sensation Fiction grounded in reality is passé. For

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Chekhov's readers, the frisson of doubt at the end of 'A Dead Body' is a delicious hint that, within the bounds of literature, the possibility of corpses reanimating or a ghostly apparition exists. Neither Turgenev nor Chekhov can be called Gothic writers, but in their works the Gothic adds an extra-textual layer, a mode to direct a reader's reaction, to play with reader expectations, and to access the reader's own capacity for fear. Reading the Gothic moments in these texts becomes an exercise in experiencing terror.

In Chekhov's 1892 story 'Terror', two characters ruminate on the relationship between fear and the unknown. Dmitrii Petrovich asks the narrator, 'Why is it that when we want to tell some terrible, mysterious, and fantastic story, we draw our material, not from life, but invariably from the world of ghosts and of the shadows beyond the grave?' The narrator responds: 'We are frightened of what we don't understand.' Dmitrii Petrovich continues:

<EXT>

Our life and the life beyond the grave are equally incomprehensible and horrible. If any one is afraid of ghosts he ought to be afraid, too, of me, and of those lights and of the sky, seeing that, if you come to reflect, all that is no less fantastic and beyond our grasp than apparitions from the other world. ... What I mean is, apparitions are terrible, but life is terrible, too. I don't understand life and I am afraid of it, my dear boy.²⁴

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The notion that 'our life and the life beyond the grave are equally incomprehensible and horrible' hearkens back to the 'medieval' peasant truths about collective death that Tolstoi explores, and which Turgenev and Chekhov touch upon. With advances in science and medicine, death may be deferred, but ultimately remains a constant terminus for each life. While this nineteenth-century clash between 'old' and 'new' worlds evokes the Gothic in and of itself, in the end both 'old' and 'new' succumb to terror. As illustrated in 'Bezhin

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Meadow' and 'A Dead Body', the unknown is frightening but, as Chekhov's provocative story makes clear, there is terror in living and in dying. Just as Turgenev's peasant boys try to negotiate the boundary between their world and the spirit world, so too does Chekhov's pilgrim come face to face with his own existential fear when confronted with a corpse.

Dmitrii Petrovich initially sets the Gothic and realism in direct opposition; 'terrible, mysterious, and fantastic' stories draw their material not from life as they do in realism, but from 'the world of ghosts and of the shadows beyond the grave', the unknown. His conclusion that life is incomprehensible gets at the heart of realism and simultaneously exposes the Gothic's potential as a literary mode that depicts the incomprehensible and folk belief's ability to categorise, ritualise, and explain the unknown. The realist Gothic frames and their folkloric interiors in 'Bezhin Meadow' and 'A Dead Body' help mediate the tension between the irrational and the prosaic, the abject and the mysterious. However, as in folklore and the Gothic, both works ultimately leave their ruminations on death open to the reader's interpretation.

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¹ ‘Наша жизнь и загробный мир одинаково непонятны и страшны ... страшны видения, но страшна и жизнь.’ Chekhov, A. P. (1974–1983: 130–1). Translated by C. Garnett (2006: 69–70). All quotations from Chekhov are this edition followed by this translation.

² ‘Жизнь и действительность в их истине.’ Translation my own.

³ Vinitsky (2009) presents Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin’s *The Golovlev Family* (1875–1880) as an example of a text that resonates with both spiritualism and Gothic, pp. 113–15.

⁴ ‘Без естественных наук нет спасения современному человеку, без этой здоровой пищи, без этого строгого воспитания мысли фактами, без этой близости к окружающей нас жизни ... где-нибудь в душе остается монашеская келья и в ней мистическое зерно, которое может разлиться темной водой по всему разумению.’ A. I. Herzen (1919–1925: XII. 106). Translated by C. Garnett (1982: 88).

⁵ ‘В бесконечном времени, в бесконечности материи, в бесконечном пространстве выделяется пузырек-организм, и пузырек этот подержится и лопнет, и пузырек этот – я.’ L. N. Tolstoi (1935: XIX. 369). Translated by C. Garnett (2000: 891).

⁶ Scholars have studied these authors’ fascination with illness and their own mortality. On Turgenev’s preoccupation with death, see Utevskii (1923), especially p. 7; for a broader discussion of death’s thematic importance for Turgenev, see Vinitsky (2015). On Chekhov’s relationship with his illness, see Finke (2005), pp. 99–138 and Finke (2007).

⁷ Turgenev, I. S. (1960–68: 94). Translated by Richard Freeborn (1967: 101). All quotes from Turgenev derive from these editions.

⁸ ‘В ней было немо и глухо, так плоско, так уныло висело над нею небо, что сердце у меня сжалось.’ p. 94; p. 101.

⁹ ‘Покойников во всяк час видеть можно ... Но а в родительскую субботу ты можешь и живого увидеть, за кем, то есть, в том году очередь помирать.’ p. 104; p. 111.

¹⁰ ‘Своей судьбы не минуешь.’ p. 111; p. 118.

¹¹ ‘А вот что я слышал. ... вот пошел я мимо этого бучила, братцы мои, и вдруг из того-то бучила как застонет кто-то, да так жалостливо, жалостливо: у-у... у-у... у-у! Страх такой меня взял, братцы мои: время-то позднее, да и голос такой болезный. Так вот, кажется, сам бы и заплакал ... Что бы это такое было? ась?’ p. 111; p. 118.

¹² ‘В этом бучиле в запрошлом лете Акима-лесника утопили воры,’ заметил Павлуша, ‘так, может быть, его душа жалобится.’ ‘А ведь и то, братцы мои,’

возразил Костя, расширив свои и без того огромные глаза... 'Я и не знал, что Акима в том бучиле утопили: я бы еще не так напужался.' pp. 107–8; pp. 114–15.

¹³ 'Я, к сожалению, должен прибавить, что в том же году Павла не стало.' p. 113; p. 120.

¹⁴ On the Gothic's function in this story, see Komaromi (1999). For a reading of the story as an example of the Gothic-fantastic, see Whitehead (2007). For a comprehensive overview of additional scholarship on the subject, see Poliakova and Tamarchenko (2008), pp. 239–49.

¹⁵ 'Вдруг в лесу раздается протяжный, стонущий звук. Что-то, как будто сорвавшись с самой верхушки дерева, шелестит листвой и падает на землю. Всему этому глухо вторит эхо. Молодой вздрагивает и вопросительно глядит на своего товарища.

"Это сова пташек забирает," говорит угрюмо Сема.' IV, p. 127; X, p. 133.

¹⁶ 'Всю дорогу в потемках покойник будет мерещиться...' IV, p. 129; X, p. 136.

¹⁷ 'Не боюсь ни волков, ни татей, ни тьмы, а покойников боюсь. Боюсь, да и шабаш!' IV, p. 129; X, p. 137.

¹⁸ 'Тихая августовская ночь. С поля медленно поднимается туман и матовой пеленой застилает всё, доступное для глаза. Освещенный луною, этот туман дает впечатление то спокойного, беспредельного моря, то громадной белой стены. В воздухе сыро и холодно. Утро еще далеко.' IV, p. 126; X, p. 131.

¹⁹ 'Парень поднимается и идет с ряской. Через минуту их шаги и говор смолкают. Сема закрывает глаза и тихо дремлет. Костер начинает тухнуть, и на мертвое тело ложится большая черная тень.' IV, p. 130; X, p. 137.

²⁰ "'Господа, ветер поднялся, и уже начинает темнеть. Не убраться ли нам подобру-поздорову?" Ветер прогулялся по желтой листве старых берез, и с листьев посыпался на нас град крупных капель. Один из наших поскользнулся на глинистой почве и, чтобы не упасть, ухватился за большой серый крест.' III, p. 75; XI, p. 275.

²¹ Physiognomy is my amendment of Garnett's translation; she uses the more romantic word 'countenance' for the Russian 'fizionomiia'.

²² "'А вот под этим памятником лежит человек, с пеленок ненавидевший стихи, эпиграммы... Словно в насмешку, весь его памятник испещрен стихами... Кто-то идет!" С нами поравнялся человек в поношенном пальто и с бритой, синевато-багровой физиономией. Под мышкой у него был полуштоф, из кармана торчал сверток с колбасой.' III, p. 75; XI, p. 275.

²³ 'Гуляем мы здесь только два часа, а при нас уже третьего несут... По домам, господа?' III, p. 77; XI, p. 80.

²⁴ ‘Почему это, когда мы хотим рассказать что-нибудь страшное, таинственное и фантастическое, то черпаем материал не из жизни, а непременно из мира привидений и загробных теней?’ ‘Страшно то, что непонятно.’ ‘Наша жизнь и загробный мир одинаково непонятны и страшны. Кто боится привидений, тот должен бояться и меня, и этих огней, и неба, так как всё это, если вдуматься хорошенько, непостижимо и фантастично не менее, чем выходцы с того света. ... Что и говорить, страшны видения, но страшна и жизнь. Я, голубчик, не понимаю и боюсь жизни.’ VIII, pp. 130–1; IV, pp. 69–70.