

Hand Signals from Beyond

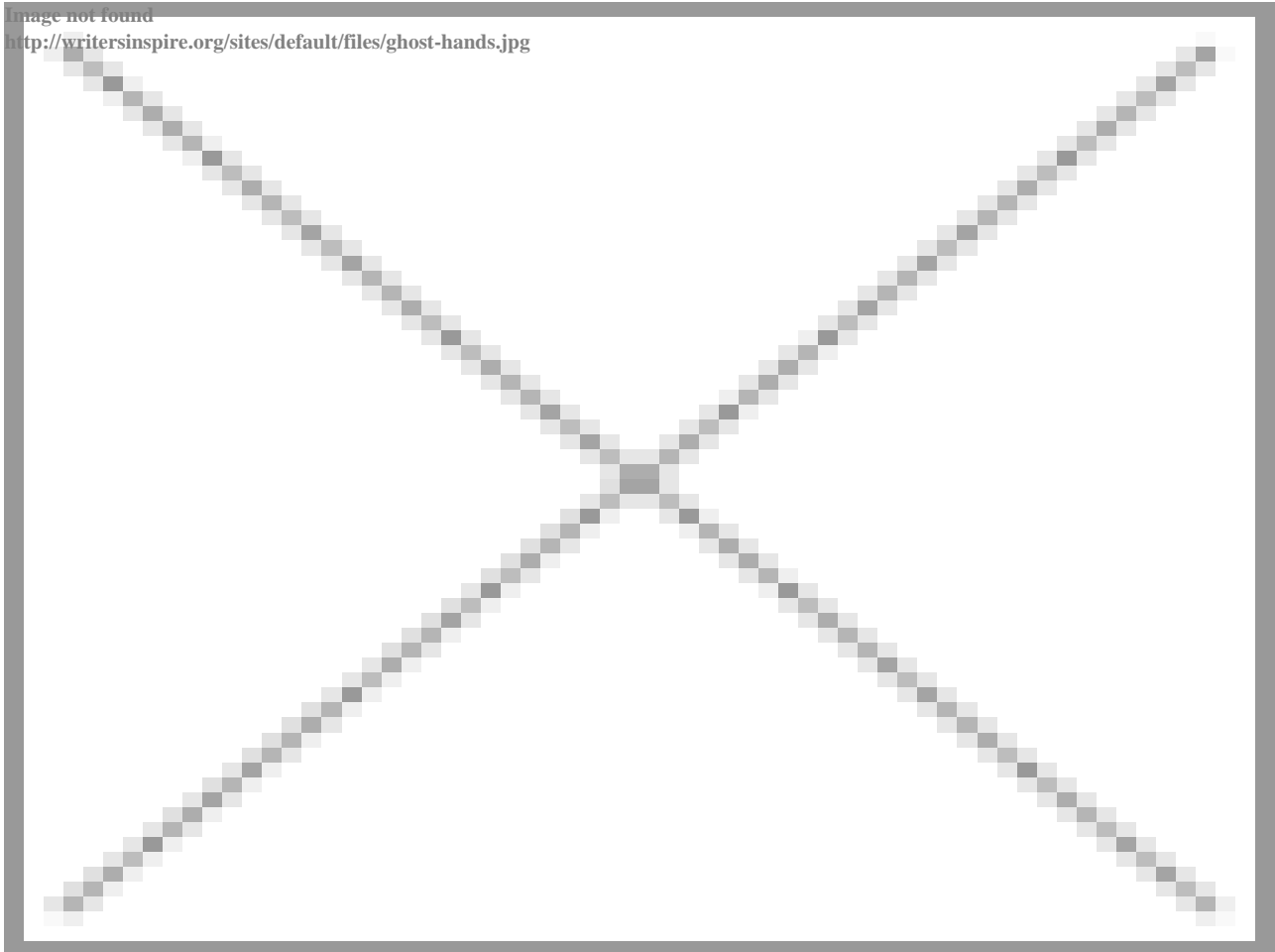


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What is the attraction of ghost hands, for so long a staple of our 'Gothic' culture? They play on our fears of what body parts can do if we lose control of them. They are 'tangible'. They seem to 'touch' us from another world. And, like all the best Gothic, there is something faintly ridiculous about them.

The greatest story about a ghostly hand was written by the Anglo-Irish writer, J. Sheridan Le Fanu. It is a self-contained episode in his 1861 novel *The House by the Churchyard*, which chronicles life in a Dublin suburb before the Act of Union. Mr and Mrs Prosser are eminently respectable members of the Ascendancy bourgeoisie, with an army of servants, and have done nothing obvious (apart from being Anglo-Irish) to attract a ghost. But the ghost hand that plagues them incorporates (if a ghost hand can do that) all the

elements of the classic phantom hand: you can't see the body it belongs to, but it might be there, controlling from beyond the grave. This hand is as wittily malevolent as any ghost can be. It is of human origin, and may even recently have been human, so it knows its way round our world, and how to impact upon it to maximum effect. At first it terrorises the servants, appearing in the orchard, then on window-sills, then looking for weak-places in the glass, at one point sticking its forefinger through an augur-hole in the pantry window. Soon after it is rapping at the back-doors with its knuckles, as if it commanding the servants to let it in, for, like all good ghosts, it needs an invitation. Operations then move to the front of the house, and the assault is now on the gentry. The Master prepares fire-arms, swords and canes, and unbolts the door, ready for Satan and all his legions. Instead the ghost, clearly enjoying the sport, jerks his arm 'up oddly, as it might be with the hollow of a hand, and something passed under it, with a kind of gentle squeeze.' A gentle squeeze, eh? All the best ghosts have a sense of humour.

Ghost hands usually appear disembodied, as this one. This is also their preferred appearance in horror film. Maurice Renard's 1920 novel *Les Mains d'Orlac*, where the severed hands of a concert pianist are replaced with those of a guillotined murderer, generated three screen versions in reasonably rapid time (1924, 1935 and 1960). Similarly malevolent disembodied hands, whether joined to a new body, as in *Orlac*, or spookily concealing their own, as in Le Fanu, are a resonant feature of French art-films in the 1940s: the animated torches in Cocteau's *La Belle et la Bête* (1942) and the white hand doing talisman duty in Maurice Tourneur's *La Main du Diable* (1943). A potent one glides (rather than crawls) out of a cupboard in that masterpiece of Spanish surrealism, Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel* (1962) delivering a slap in the face to the Spanish ruling class. There are many more, sometimes technologically challenged by special effects, but suggesting an enduring celluloid myth, right down to the days of CGI, where they often develop a wicked sense of humour, just like Mr Prosser's tormentor, in comic-horror shows like the Addams Family franchise (1991ff), in the gross-out teen-flick *Idle Hands* (1999), and in the cult comic shocker *Evil Dead 2* (1987). This last includes an appalling literary joke when the AWOL hand gets trapped under a copy of Hemingway's *A Farewell to Arms*. The most notorious ghostly hand film of all, *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1946), depends on a 1919 story by W.F. Harvey. The film rather plays down the malevolence and inventiveness the hand possesses in the story, in which it is capable of automatic writing and quoting from *Hamlet* awhile still attached to its owner. When that troublesome appendage (inevitably a saintly old man) dies and departs to the churchyard, the hand returns to its old domicile, 'invited in' with the evening post, soon escaping from its box to clatter about the library, keeping the living occupants honest by nipping them with its thumb and forefingers, like a crab.

If ghost-hands tend to repeat a bit on film, they are positively free agents in modern folklore. They make handprints in undusted attics or scruffy window-sills, as if rivalling the threatening footprint in *Robinson Crusoe*. They act independently of the rest of the body they are attached to, with malevolent or subversive purpose (the so-called 'alien hand syndrome?'). They often appear in crowds to mob the living in Victorian spirit photographs. Today they appear in photographs posted on *Twitter*, without an obvious owner, sometimes apparently threatening grievously sick relatives, more often children. And there are the 'hairy hands' of Dartmoor, which take hold of the handlebars or steering wheel on a gloomy stretch of the B3212, sometimes with fatal consequences.

The phantom hand, then, is an image of fear, loss and longed for freedom, not straightforwardly evil, but certainly subversive, forcing us to confront large questions of mortality, as in the Bible. It has the free agency of the human body without the restrictions of conscience or size. In one chilling late Victorian ghost story, 'Fingers of a Hand' by Mrs H.D Everett, the hand is pruned to its essence, a 'thumb and two fingers'. After all, that is all the hand in the Book of Daniel needs to put the 'Writing on the Wall' at Belshazzar's Feast (Daniel 5:5). Tennyson, not usually associated with Gothic, frequently introduces ghostly hands into his major poems about grief and loss. 'The touch of a vanished hand?', as the poet put it in one of the great poems on the death of his young friend Arthur Hallam, 'Break, break, break' (1833), is a tangible signal of physical survival in another world, and as such it is no surprise that modern culture is smattered with touches from the beyond. The resurrected Christ in John's Gospel orders Mary Magdalene

not to touch him (John 20:17), as if the vision is not quite perfect, and might compromise, or fracture, if she does. Tennyson himself equates in *In Memoriam A.H. H.* (1850) the hands of God, reaching through darkness and 'moulding man?', with those of his dead friend, which reach through the gloam of a garden at evening and 'touch him' from the past.^[1] Kipling's greatest ghost-story, 'They?', is also about the excited touch of a loved one from another world. At first the narrator of the story, the first in our literature to make thorough use of a veteran car, drives rather awkwardly down a green drive and into the garden of an Elizabethan house. It is kept by a 'blindie' lady, queen of a world super-sensitive to 'feeling?', though, as she says, it 'isn't quite the same thing.' The driver lays out the 'glittering shop' of his tool-kit as a 'trap for childhood' and sure enough the little ones come, showing themselves in flashes of frock and glimpses of faces, albeit with fingers pressed tight to their lips. The elusiveness is not surprising: the children who walk in this wood and play in the house are the lost (i.e. deceased) boys and girls of this remote Sussex Community. The climax of the story comes when the narrator feels, not just sees, the presence of his own 'daughter that was all to him.' The identifying signal is a kiss a busy man shares with a much-loved daughter. And the little ghost with soft hands knows daddy's secret code:

I felt my relaxed hand taken and turned softly between the soft hands of a child. So at last I had triumphed. In a moment I would turn and acquaint myself with those quick-footed wanderers. . . .

The little brushing kiss fell in the centre of my palm?as a gift on which the fingers were, once, expected to close: as the all-faithful half-reproachful signal of a waiting child not used to neglect even when grown-ups were busiest?a fragment of the mute code devised very long ago.

Then I knew.

He knows that the little hand is reaching him from beyond the veil. She can touch him, but he cannot see her, and recognising her as one of the child-shades that haunt the House Beautiful means he can never touch her again. The misfiring car, the taunts at early motorists, the top-heavy topiary bring into this as into so many Gothic stories a touch of the absurd. But the poignant finality of that gentlest of kisses in the palm is beyond laughter and tears.

Mr Lockwood has a much stormier confrontation with a ghost-child's hand in chapter 3 of *Wuthering Heights* (1847). He has been snowed up for the night, and his sleep is unruly, because a fir-bough is apparently pattering at his bedroom-window. But when he smashes the window to silence the tapping, his grip closes not on the fir branch, but on 'the fingers of a little, ice-cold hand'. What he does next is the most brutal act in a novel filled with studied brutality. He can't get free of the ghost-clasp, so 'pulled its wrist on to the broken pane, and rubbed it to and fro till the blood ran down and soaked the bedclothes.' We do not know if the normally effete Lockwood succeeded in severing this ghost-hand from its body, but he certainly failed to scotch it. Even after all his cruelty, the little hand still seems to be still scratching at the window aperture between the worlds, now patched with a pile of books.

Like Lockwood we are disturbed not just by the 'caprice' of the supernatural, but by the vestigial humanity of these hands, by the terrible difference of their seeming resurrection, and also, in Brontë and Kipling, by the apparent unfairness of children dead before their time.. Susan Hill picks up all these motifs in her recent novel *The Small Hand* (2010) where a small cold hand creeps into the hand of the narrator, 'as if a child had taken hold of it'. The novel, which is self-consciously a little stuffy in construction (the hero is a middle-aged antiquarian bookseller) functions as a kind of homage to two hundred years of disembodied hands in myth and literature. Hill's child-ghost is relatively benign (though the revelations he makes are anything but). He belongs to the mannerly tribe of Kipling and Tennyson, where the faint but chilling touch from nowhere leads us 'beyond the veil.'

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[1] *In Memoriam*, section XCV.

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