AMBIGUITY, MULTI-STABLE STORYWORLDS, AND STORYWORLD POSSIBLE SELVES IN ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY'S GHOST STORY «HARRY»[1]

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ABSTRACT

In this study I analyse the ghost story «Harry» (Timperley, 1955) within the paradigms of embodied cognition (Gallese, 2005, 2017), cognitive ambiguity (Zeki, 2006), and storyworld possible selves theory (Martínez, 2014, 2018). My aim is to find out which storyworld possible selves, or «imagings of the self in storyworlds» (Martínez, 2014: 119) are likely to be projected by readers, and the extent to which these interact with the ambiguity that characterizes ghost narratives. The findings suggest that, in «Harry», ambiguity (Zeki 2006) contributes to the mental construction of two alternative, equally certain, storyworlds, which I call *multi-stable storyworlds*, respectively connected to uncanny and rational meaning constructions. The storyworld possible selves projected in these mental scenarios seem to predominantly involve emotional responses associated with fear, family relations, and ethical perceptions of social justice.

KEYWORDS: embodied cognition; cognitive ambiguity; storyworld possible selves; ghost stories; multi-stable storyworlds.

AMBIGÜEDAD, UNIVERSOS MULTIESTABLES, Y AUTOESQUEMAS POSIBLES DE FICCIÓN EN EL RELATO DE FANTASMAS «HARRY», DE ROSEMARY TIMPERLEY

Resumen

El presente estudio analiza el relato de fantasmas «Harry» (Timperley, 1955) dentro de los paradigmas de la cognición corporeizada (Gallese, 2005, 2017), la ambigüedad cognitiva (Zeki, 2006), y la teoría de autoesquemas possibles de ficción (Martínez, 2014, 2018). El objetivo es averiguar qué autoesquemas posibles de ficción, o «imágenes de uno mismo en universos de ficción» (Martínez, 2014: 119) es probable que proyecten los lectores, y explorar la interacción de estos autoesquemas con la ambigüedad que caracteriza las narraciones de fantasmas. El análisis sugiere que en «Harry» la ambigüedad (Zeki, 2006) orienta la construcción mental de dos universos de ficción, alternativos e igualmente ciertos, que denomino *universos multi-estables de ficción*, y que se relacionan, respectivamente, con construcciones de signficado siniestras y racionales. Los autoesquemas posibles de ficción que se proyectan en estos escenarios mentales del universo de ficción parecen estar predominantemente relacionados con respuestas emocionales relativas al miedo, las relaciones familiares, y a percepciones éticas de justicia social.

Palabras clave: cognición corporeizada; autoesquemas posibles de ficción; historias de fantasmas; universos multi-estables de ficción.

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1. Introduction

Ghost stories are found in most cultures and play a crucial role in the fabric of collective cognition. Folklorists see them as reservoires of ethical values and social awareness, strongly connected to a community's belief systems. As Thompson (2019: 43) explains, ghosts haunt communities for their ethical failures, so that «by examining how ghosts operate in various cultural settings, we can better understand what it means to be human and behave ethically». The strong demands imposed by ghost narratives on our bodily and emotional resources suggests that their study can be successfully approached from the standpoint of embodied cognition (Gallese, 2005, 2017; Gallese and Goldman, 1998; Gallese and Sinigaglia, 2011), which moves away from the Cartesian view that mind and body are separate, and that meaning-making originates only in the mind, to consider meaning as situated «within a flow of experience that cannot exist without a biological organism engaging its environment» (Johnson, 2007: 10). This involves both somatosensory representations based on physiological conditions such as temperature, pain, physical fitness, hunger, or

thirst, and the environmental circumstances of these representations, which include socio-cultural and historical settings and our interaction with other human beings (Barsalou, 2010; Gallagher, 2018; Newen, 2018).

In this study I use the framework of storyworld possible selves (Martínez, 2014, 2018) to analyse Rosemary Timperley's «Harry», a ghost story originally published in Cynthia Asquith's *The Third Ghost Book* (1955), and since then a regular in ghost story collections such as *Roald Dahl's Book of Ghost Stories* (1983), and Otto Penzler's *The Big Book of Ghost Stories* (2012). «Harry» has also been adapted to the television screen as a chapter in the Canadian series *First Person* (1960-1961), and has more recently been made into a short film entitled *Twice Removed* (2003). Storyworld possible selves, or SPSs for short, allow the scrutiny of the parts of an individual's self-concept activated by a narrative experience, and may therefore illuminate current understandings of the processes of meaning construction observed in engaged readers (Miall and Kuiken, 2002; Kuiken et al., 2004; Martínez and Herman, 2020). In the case of ghost stories, these processes are made even more complex by the presence of multiple meanings (Reeve, 2012) based on cognitive ambiguity (Zeki, 2006). In this essay I introduce the concept of *multi-stable storyworlds*, or the multiple mental scenarios of the fictional world prompted by narratives which rely on ambiguity and connect them to the activation of readers' relevant storyworld possible selves.

My study focuses on «Harry» as a cultural instrument, a carrier of closely interwoven value systems which still heavily challenge our ethical concerns, with the aim of finding out how its multiple meanings can be addressed using the framework of storyworld possible selves. First, I review some of the features of the ghost story genre with a bearing on the analysis. Then, I briefly comment on cognitive ambiguity, and introduce the concept of multi-stable storyworlds. This is followed by an overview of storyworld possible selves theory, and by an SPS discussion of «Harry». My main argument is that this ghost story has fascinated generations of readers and ghost story editors for decades because of its vivid denunciation of social injustice, artfully disguised under the projection of both an uncanny and a rational mental scenario. These two multi-stable storyworlds are fed by an assortment of emotional issues likely to activate readers' relevant self-schemas and possible selves: fear of loss and death, blood versus foster family, maternal love, the lonely wife, or male-dominated rationality versus supposedly female oversensitivity, to enumerate just a few. My point is that, while the narrative keeps readers busy, emotionally coping with this emotional carousel, entrenched in

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its two multi-stable storyworlds lurks a powerful denunciation of social injustice towards the underpriviledged, as invisible to most as Harry's physical body, and similarly not to be overlooked, for our own good.

2. Ghost stories, the uncanny, and the embodiment of social change

2.1. *The uncanny and the perceiver's mind*

A subgenre of gothic fiction, ghost narratives tell about uncanny experiences, with the aim of provoking heightened emotion through fear (Li, 2021). In 1919, Sigmund Freud made a memorable incursion in the realm of aesthetics—understood as «the theory of the qualities of feeling» (Freud, 1919: 219)—in order to identify the common core «which allows us to distinguish as "uncanny" certain things which lie within the field of what is frightening» (Freud, 1919: 219). In his discussion, this common core includes uncertainty whether an object or being is animate or inanimate, recurrence, and a feeling that the animistic beliefs entertained by our primitive ancestors and by our own child selves may not, after all, be so out of order. In his famous essay «The Uncanny», originally entitled «Das Unheimlich», Freud (1919) extensively justifies his use of the German word *unheimlich* to refer to «that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar», and draws on one of the meanings of *heimlich* as «homely» (1919: 1-2) to call attention to the circumstances in which «the familiar can become uncanny and frightening» (1919: 2). He then presents the definition of *unheimlich* in Daniel Sanders' *Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (1860) as «uneasy, eerie, bloodcurdling», and often occurring in collocations with «ghostly», «horror», or «pale» (1919: 2-3).

More specifically, to Freud (1919: 241) the uncanny is «something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it through two main processes: the return of the repressed, and the surmounting of primitive beliefs». Recent views of the uncanny (Windsor, 2019, 2020) suggest that Freud's idea of surmounted primitive beliefs in magic and animistic phenomena can successfully account for what can be considered uncanny. Animistic beliefs include, for instance, that life may continue after death, that spirits continue to be among us, or that inanimate objects and beings can be endowed with life. Magic beliefs, on their part, basically involve the possibility that thoughts can have a direct effect on reality. According to Freud, although these primitive beliefs have been «surmounted», they are still somehow latent, so that any event or suspicion that they may, after all, happen is what brings about feelings of uncanniness (1919: 41-42). Primary among these supposedly surmounted primitive beliefs is our fear of death, suppressed by rationality, scientific discoveries, and religion (Freud, 1919: 241),

but still strongly present in our daily lives, and probably underlying the presence of ghost stories in most cultures.

The uncanny has been recently defined as «an anxious uncertainty about what is real caused by an apparent impossibility» (Windsor, 2019: 51). As Freud (1919: 14) puts it, «an uncanny effect is often and easily produced by effacing the distinction between imagination and reality, such as when something that we have hitherto treated as imaginary appears before us in reality». This is precisely, the kind of experience which Mrs. James, the first person narrator in «Harry», recounts for us to share, and her focalizing activity is crucial to narrative development and to the construction of uncanniness. The uncanny in literature is said to have been originally associated with the presentation of gloomy scenarios and unnatural deeds, with a merely observing protagonist (Reeve, 2012; Li, 2021: 343). However, the consciousness of the perceiving character gradually gained in importance, first simply as an active participant in the depicted events, and then increasingly as the very source of uncanniness, as in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw* (1898). Access to details of narrators' sensory experience forces readers to share the former's system of cognition, «sometimes faulty and untrustworthy» (Li, 2021: 347), subject to errors in perception and judgement which may raise suspicions of narratorial unreliability and further erode the boundaries between the fictional and the real. In other words, the narrator is no longer the observer of danger, but the origin of danger, and horror is no longer in the outside world, but in the narrator's own consciousness (Li, 2021: 350).

2.2. *Ghost stories and socio-historical situatedness*

This increased attention to the mental activity of a perceiving, often homodiegetic narrator matches an early association of the Gothic with artistic transgression and with «new codifications of class, political persuasion, gender, and sexuality» (Reeve, 2012: 240). Social and historical embeddedness is, therefore, not at all alien to the ghost story. For instance, Bissell (2014) explores Charlotte Riddell's «mild spectres» (2014: 73), who, «despite their liminal position between life and death—are feeble indeed in comparison to the far more distressing horror that shadows non-spectral Victorian subjects in her stories: the knowledge that they can be instantly ruined by the caprices of the highly unstable financial system in which they are inextricably immersed» (Bissell, 2014: 73). In this sense, social and historical embeddedness, so strong-

ly present in «Harry», turns the ghost into a metaphor for collective memory used by the narrator to access the past, which «also inevitably means that he can manipulate it» (Kunz, 2016: 108).

In fact, folk studies underscore that ghosts are «the wronged souls that haunt our present lives» (Thompson, 2019: 42), to remind us of our ethical failures so that we can learn from them and evolve as a community. It is no wonder, then, that present-day ghost stories are a reflection of contemporary concerns with dramatic changes to the world as we know it, which our rational minds cannot fully grasp, and which cast their looming shadow on an uncertain future. Among these are cyborg-ghosts (Thompson, 2019) and the «uncanny valley» (Mori, 1970), a term which «refers to the perception of things which are human-like in appearance, but not human» (Thompson, 2019: 41), particularly androids, and which blatantly challenge our ethical system. The historical embeddedness and situatedness of ghost stories is also reflected in a noticeably renewed attention to female voices in ghost narratives (Fu, 2019; Zheng, 2020; Snailham, 2021). As Fu (2019: 645) puts it, ghost stories are «a Gothic mode that offers the marginalized groups, especially women, the opportunity to re-inscribe their voice and subjectivity into a fictional history through the motif of the returning ghost», as a way to give visibility to their «similarly ghosted condition and their often-suppressed fears and desires» (Fu, 2019: 646).

Last but not least, special attention needs to be paid to the ghost child motif in «Harry», and to the way in which it highlights the story's social embeddedness. «Harry» is a ghost story about a five-year-old girl, Christine, with an imaginary friend who tells her that he is her fourteen year-old brother, and who, Peter Pan-wise, urges her not to start school—not to grow up—so as to stay with him forever. Becher (2016) underscores the liminal space between ghost and child and its emotional contradictions, explaining that children «are themselves symbols of life and thus oppose death» (Becher, 2016: 92), and that «child ghosts represent the denial of life and opportunity itself» (Becher, 2016: 96). This is, precisely, the case with Harry, Christine's (imaginary) older brother, whose short life tragically came to an end at fourteen, on the threshold of adolescence, but whose death in life had begun long before, when his family's bad luck and financial straits deprived him of a future among the happy-go-lucky youngsters of a thriving post-WW2 British generation (Sandbrook, 2006). In the story, told by the little girl's foster mother, Mrs. James, Harry comes back—or so does Mrs. James think—to claim his beloved sister Christine, adopted by the Jameses when she was just a baby, shortly af-

ter the loss of her blood family. The boy's undeserved tragedy may explain why, in an uncanny reading of the story, we might feel relieved at Harry's redemption and his passing on, hopefully to a better afterlife, even though this means tragedy for Christine's foster parents. In other words, although having Christine's foster mother, Mrs. James, as homodiegetic narrator pushes readers into perspectival alignment with the bereaved parent, it is likely that empathy equally runs with the ghost boy and his right to some sort of undoing of the violence exerted on him by an unfair socio-economic system which had invisibilized and disabled himself and his family long before their actual, physical death.

As to Christine, her building Harry as an imaginary friend also fully falls within the tradition of child ghost stories: children are still in the process of finding out about their bodily limitations and about the boundaries between the real and the imaginary. This makes them ideal mediators not only between the world of the living and the world of spirits, but also between past and future (Becher, 2016: 103).

3. Embodiment, ambiguity and multi-stable storyworlds

Since the representation of the narrator's sensory experience and system of cognition is a recurrent feature of contemporary ghost stories, theories of embodied cognition can contribute to a better understanding of the effects that the ghost story genre may have on audiences and readers. As Becher (2016: 95) puts it, during a ghost story narrative experience «we are in the grip of the narrative, the heartbeat speeds up, the skin sweats, or prickles». The use of metaphorical language to refer to the familiar feeling of being «in the grip of the narrative» points to the widespread embodied metaphor READING IS CONTROL (Stockwell, 2011). But the other bodily sensations reported by Becher—heartbeat, sweat, prickle—seem to be genre-specific, occurring during narrative experiences which invite readers to share the uncanny perceptions of fictional characters and narrators.

Embodied simulation is defined as the use by perceivers of their own mental states as proxies for other minds, in a process through which we «might imagine experiencing the same constellation of events, predict what we ourselves would subsequently think and feel, and infer that another person would experience roughly the same states» (Mitchell, 2009: 1310). Furthermore, narrative psychologists highlight the social simulation function of

literary fiction (Mar and Oatley, 2008: 173) as the reason why «we humans spend much time engaged with carefully crafted narrative products such as films, novels, plays, and TV dramas», not to mention other contemporary narrative forms such as video-games, animes, and graphic novels.

Studies into the psychology of engagement (Miall and Kuiken, 2002; Kuiken et al., 2004; Oatley, 2016), actually underscore its idiosyncratic nature, with individual readers not only constructing characters in personal ways (Culpeper and Fernández-Quintanilla, 2019), but also showing widely differing emotional responses to the same narrative (Martínez and Herman, 2020). Moreover, the possibility that readers and audiences construct varied mental scenarios from the same narrative cues is enhanced when the narrative work exploits ambiguity as a narrative technique, as has been increasingly the case with ghost stories and Gothic narratives at large (Li, 2021).

The neurobiologist Semir Zeki (2006) explores the connections between ambiguity and the areas of the brain activated during visual perception, and the ways in which these areas respond to «situations or views that are open to more than one, and sometimes to several, interpretations» (Zeki, 2006: 244). On the basis of the physiological and neuroimaging experiments which he discusses, Zeki argues that «there is no separate site specialized for perceiving as opposed to processing» (2006: 250), and defends «the neurological basis of ambiguity, for it implies that some categories of ambiguity at least are generated and possibly resolved by activity in given areas, without recourse to other, or higher, areas». These experiments lead Zeki to propose a neurological definition of ambiguity, «namely that it is not vagueness or uncertainty, but rather certainty, the certainty of different scenarios each one of which has equal validity with the others» (2006: 263). In other words, in a scenario in which several options can be envisioned, such as a narrative with multiple possible interpretations, the brain simply acknowledges that «there is no correct answer, because all answers are correct» (Zeki, 2006: 263). This certainty makes Zeki (2006: 260) refer to the stability of ambiguity, in the sense that «the brain does not have much choice in the multi-interpretations that [this] organization makes possible. The ambiguity, in other words, is stable».

Regarding the connection between embodied cognition and ambiguity, Zeki repeatedly insists that the areas of the brain involved in the perception of multiple interpretations are often physiologically those also involved in perception at large, claiming that «a processing site is also a perceptual site» (Zeki, 2006: 255, 259), and that «it is the brain that constructs what is perceived» (Zeki, 2006: 255), so that «the capacity to give multiple interpretations

is not a separate faculty invented or used by the artist. It is instead tied to a general capacity of the brain to give several interpretations, a capacity that is important for it in its role of acquiring knowledge» (Zeki, 2006: 263). With these views in mind, it can be claimed that narratives of the uncanny prompt readers' construction of more than one potential storyworld, each of them equally plausible, but mutually exclusive, so that the only certainty with which the reader or audience member is left is the cognitively demanding possibility of mentally constructing several, even contradictory, storyworlds, usually involving rational and uncanny scenarios.

Storyworld is the term used by the cognitive narratologist David Herman (2002) to refer to narrative experiencers' mental representation of a fictional world. As all mental representations (Bartlett, 1932), a storyworld is a mental scenario of a state of affairs. In Herman's words, «storyworlds are mentally and emotionally projected environments in which interpreters are called upon to live out complex blends of cognitive and imaginative response» (Herman, 2002: 16-17). While fictional worlds are counterfactual possible worlds emanating from a work of fiction (Ryan, 1991), storyworlds are mental constructs (Herman and Vervaeck, 2019: 162-163), and therefore prone to idiosyncratic construction by readers, as these utilize higher-order brain capacities such as memory, inference, and background knowledge (Zeki, 2006: 264) to fill in the gaps not made explicit by the text. I use the term *multi-stable storyworlds* to refer to the alternative and mutually exclusive mental scenarios of the fictional world built by readers and narrative experiencers at large upon interaction with a narrative, particularly in, but not necessarily restricted to, cases in which narrative technique addresses the capacity of the brain for multiple interpretations. However, the issue still lingers of the grounds on which the mental projection of multi-stable storyworlds might be made. In the rest of my study I argue that this depends on criteria of saliency connected to the emergence of personally relevant storyworld possible selves.

4. Storyworld possible selves

4.1. *Internal structure of a storyworld possible self blend*

Narrative scholars underscore several key features of narrative engagement, apart from its idiosyncratic nature (Miall and Kuiken, 2002) and its connection to personal relevance (Kuzmiková and Bálint, 2019). Engagement is

also associated with feelings of empathy and identification (Oatley, 2016), although it is frequent to find readers who develop feelings for characters or narrators who strongly differ from themselves (Eder *et al.*, 2010), and who experience what Miall and Kuiken (2002) call «fresh emotions», or feelings for oneself. Above all, narrative engagement seems to be connected to feelings of self-transformation (Miall and Kuiken, 2002), or a «cognitive and emotional re-schematization of categories, including those relating to oneself» (Djikic *et al.*, 2009: 25). Although these phenomena are broadly acknowledged, few studies have attempted to develop methods of analysis which go beyond the empirical confirmation that this is what happens, to focus on the scientific scrutiny of how and why. The framework of storyworld possible selves (Martínez, 2014, 2018) is a notable exception.

Storyworld possible selves, or SPSs for short, are defined as the imagings of the self in storyworlds which result from the conceptual integration, or blending, of the mental representation which individual readers entertain for a narrator or a focalizing character, and the mental representation which those readers entertain of themselves, or their self-concept. According to blending theory (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002), two or more mental spaces, or *inputs*, become conceptually integrated through matching relations across some of their internal features. Matching features, together with other features selectively activated in each of the spaces on the grounds of contextual relevance, get projected into a new mental space, or *blend*. The blend additionally contains novel features which emerge from the blending process, and which were not present in either of the inputs. Conceptual integration can, therefore, offer illuminating perspectives on human and artificial intelligence creativity (Cámara Pereira, 2007).

The two inputs to a basic SPS blend (Martínez, 2014: 219-220; 2018) have a mental space format: in cognitive narratology a *character construct* is the mental representation built by readers for a character or narrator (Emmott, 1992; Margolin, 2012), and varies in internal topology from reader to reader, as it draws on personal and socio-cultural experience. In social psychology, the self-concept is a network of two types of interrelated mental representations of the self: self-schemas and possible selves. In the same way as schemas are cognitive structures that we entertain to acquire and store knowledge about the world (Bartlett, 1932), *self-schemas* (Markus, 1977; Cervone, 2021) are schemas about ourselves, built on the basis of social experience, such as the «good-parent» self or the «beach-lover» self. *Possible selves* (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Dunkel and Kerpelman, 2006; Turner and Hooker, 2022), on the

other hand, are more private mental representations of the self with strong effects on behaviour and motivation, as we tend to behave in ways that approach us to desired images of the self, while avoiding behaviours conductive to undesired ones. Some examples of possible selves are the «loved» or «successful» desired self, and the «unemployed» or «betrayed» undesired self. Past selves—the «good student» past self, the «abused child» past self—are also considered possible selves due to their equally powerful influence on current and future behaviour.

A storyworld possible selves framework benefits from the affordances of both self-schema theory and blending theory in its exploration of narrative engagement. Within self-schema theory, it is the dynamic interaction of what we think we socially are—our self-schemas—and what we wish or are afraid of becoming—our desired and undesired possible selves—that determines behaviour and motivation. To begin with, having a certain self-schema or possible self, that is, being schematic in a given aspect of the self, increases attention to related information. Furthermore, approaching a desired self is associated with positive emotions, while negative emotions are prompted when approaching an undesired image of the self. Additionally, changes to an individual's core self-schemas are strongly resisted, and are accompanied by feelings of anxiety. In this sense, narrative storyworlds can be said to function as emotional simulation environments for the trying out of behaviours relevant to readers' self-schema or desired/undesired possible selves (Martínez, 2014, 2018). This explains the generation of fresh emotions, or feelings about oneself, observed in engaged readers, regardless of whether empathy with perspectivizing narrative entities is reported or not.

The analytical power of storyworld possible selves is also connected to their blending nature. According to blending theory, features in an emergent blend, whether projected from the input spaces or creatively engendered during the process of conceptual integration, can be projected back into any of the inputs in a blending network, even if they were not originally there. In other words, features in an emergent SPS blend, whether imported from the character/narrator input, from the reader input, or appearing as a result of blending, can now be projected back into either of the inputs, enriching their internal topologies. This explains both idiosyncratic character construction and feelings of self-transformation, as features in the blend are projected back into individual readers' character constructs and self-concept networks, respectively.

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4.2. *An SPS typology*

According to Martínez (2014, 2018), the storyworld possible selves projected by a reader during an engaging narrative experience can be of several types, depending on four criteria: a) the nature of the perspectivizing fictional entity, b) the nature of the reader's self-concept subnetwork, c) the nature of the blending process, and d) degrees of cultural predictability (Table 1). Depending on whether the character construct input space involves a focalizing character or a narrator—also conceptually conceived as a character construct, or mental representation of a fictional entity (Martínez, 2018: 21)—SPS blends can be of three main types: *character-focalizer SPS*, *narrator SPS*, and *author SPS*. The latter is a multiple blend (Fauconnier and Turner, 2002) which may emerge in readers familiar with an author's biographical circumstances (Martínez and Sánchez-Pardo, 2019) or in cases of narratorial unreliability, as in the case of «Harry», in which the character construct built for the narrator imports features from readers' mental representation of the real world author, or author construct.

Depending on the part of the self-concept network activated by a narrative in schematic readers, SPS blends can be of five types: *self-schema SPSs*, such as the «good parent» or the «rational» SPS in «Harry»; *desired possible self SPSs*, such as the desired «loved» SPS in romantic stories; *undesired possible self SPSs*, such as the undesired «haunted» self in ghost stories; *past possible self SPSs*, such as the «teenage» self in cross-over narratives; and *past SPSs*, incorporated in the self-concept upon interaction with a previous narrative experience, and activated by a new one to intervene in meaning construction based on intertextuality and genre-based expectations (Martínez, 2014: 125-127; 2018: 132-133).

Depending on the type of blending operation (Fauconnier and Turner 2002: 120-135), SPS blends can be of three main types: mirror SPSs, double-scope SPSs, and multiple SPSs. *Mirror SPS blends* (Martínez, 2018: 139-140) involve input spaces with similar internal topologies, as in the case of readers of «Harry» schematic in the undesired «worried» parent possible self, who construct Mrs. James as a worried parent herself. In *double-scope SPS blends* (Martínez, 2018: 140-141), the inputs have clashing internal topologies, as in a reader of «Harry» schematic in the «easy-going parent» self-schema, who may engage in double-scope SPS blending with Christine's overanxious mother. Finally, *multiple SPS blends* have more than two input spaces (Martínez, 2018: 142-148), as in the case of author blends and, in general, of the mega-blends containing all the

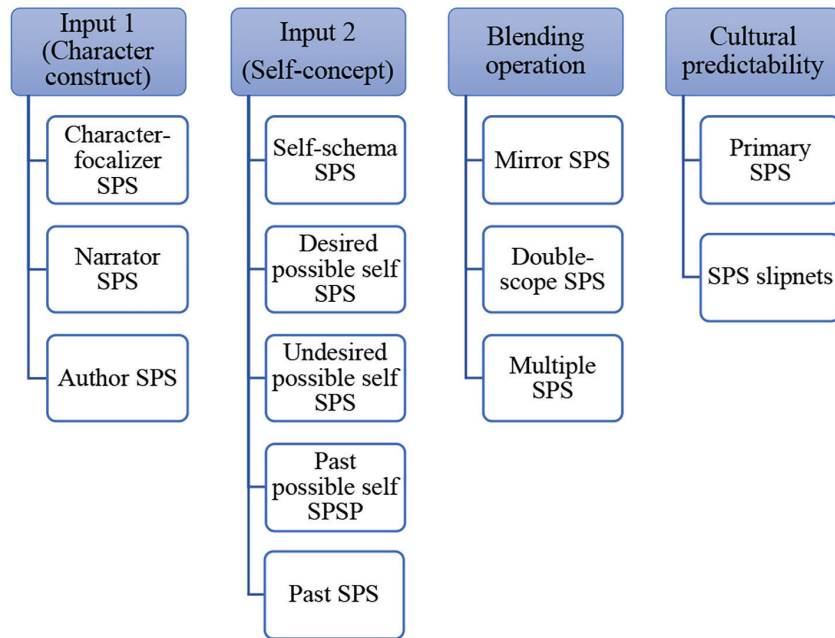| Input 1 (Character construct)	Input 2 (Self-concept)	Blending operation	Cultural predictability
Character-focalizer SPS	Self-schema SPS	Mirror SPS	Primary SPS
Narrator SPS	Desired possible self SPS	Double-scope SPS	SPS slipnets
Author SPS	Undesired possible self SPS	Multiple SPS	
	Past possible self SPSP		
	Past SPS		

Table 1. An SPS typology.

input spaces and SPS blends involved in an individual's narrative experience with a given narrative, whose dynamic interaction confers global insight into the narrative itself (Martínez, 2018: 142-148).

A final relevant criterion for the classification of SPS blends is their degree of cultural predictability. Blends likely to be shared by a large number of readers are called *primary SPSs*, while those likely to emerge in just a few, even just one reader, are called *SPS slipnets* (Martínez, 2018: 170). Primary SPSs are, therefore, those traditionally accounted for in mainstream literary criticism, while SPS slipnets can contribute to a better understanding of real readers' idiosyncratic narrative meaning construction and emotional responses.

Every SPS blend can be described according to these co-occurring features. It is possible, for instance, to classify one of a reader's SPS blends with Christine's anxious mother in «Harry» as a narrator / undesired / mirror / primary SPS, if that reader is schematic in the «anxious parent» undesired possible self. It is also possible, however, to envision an equally likely narrator / self-schema / double-scope / primary SPS in readers with a «rational» self-schema, who engage in disanalogical matches with their character construct of Mrs. James as an oversensitive, overanxious, delirious woman. As can be ob-

served, by drawing on socio-cultural aspects of narrative engagement from a cognitive perspective, storyworld possible selves are deeply connected to grounded cognition, not only in their socio-cultural embeddedness, but also in their sensorimotor underpinnings: many desired and undesired possible selves, such as the undesired «injured», «filthy», or «sick» selves, and the desired «well-being», «fit», or «financially secure» desired selves, involve physical experiences of perceptual, motor, and inner-body sensations. Additionally, these mental structures can be associated with the linguistic expression of hybrid mental reference (Martínez, 2018: 41-88). The rest of my essay presents an analysis of «Harry» along these lines.

5. Primary storyworld possible selves and multi-stable storyworlds in «Harry»

5. Initial SPS projection

Narrative progression is closely connected to the storyworld possible selves which readers are initially invited to project (Martínez, 2021). «Harry» begins with this short paragraph, packed with expressions of narrated perception: «Such ordinary things make me afraid. Sunshine. Sharp shadows on grass. White roses. Children with red hair. And the name — Harry. Such an ordinary name» (Temperley, 1983: 33). This invites readers to enter the storyworld through the activation of an undesired «afraid» possible self which performs several narrative functions. First, it announces the narrative experience as a fearful one; secondly, it activates readers' past ghost story SPSs, likely to raise genre expectations; third, it prompts readers' embodied experience by grounding the narrator's disturbing fear in common everyday perceptual phenomena—sunshine, beautiful flowers, red-haired children—rather expected to produce aesthetic pleasure and physical well-being. In other words, these initial lines defamiliarize the familiar by suggesting the presence of the uncanny in these otherwise innocent, «ordinary» things.

Immediately after this short opening paragraph, the story is told in flashback from the day when the narrating mother, Mrs. James, first notices that her five-year-old daughter Christine is constantly engaged in happy conversation with an invisible boy whom she calls Harry, and who claims to be her fourteen-year-old brother. At first, the narrator presents herself as an ordinary loving mother, delighted by the sight of her little daughter lying in the grass in their sun-bathed garden, happily making daisy chains. This is likely

to prompt the activation of readers' «loving», «proud parent» self-schemas or desired possible selves, strongly contrasting with the recently projected «afraid» undesired SPS. These two conflicting SPS blends—an undesired «afraid» SPS, and a «loving parent» self-schema or desired SPS—provide the basis for meaning construction. Moreover, readers' emotional response can now be connected not just to feelings of empathic attachment to Mrs. James in her fear, but rather to our own fear of losing what we most value. Key to this «fresh emotion» are the lessons for the self to be learned from the narrator's coping—or failing to do so—with the dangers ahead.

5.2. *Multi-stable storyworlds and further primary SPSs in «Harry»*

As the narrative progresses, readers are led to engage in a variety of further predictable, primary SPS blends, which seem to prompt the construction of two multi-stable storyworlds, or alternative and equally certain mental scenarios for what happened: an *uncanny* one and a *rational* one. These are closely connected to ghost story narrators' presentation of overlapping arguments feeding both rational and uncanny scenarios, and finally criss-crossing at an ambiguous ending (Li, 2021: 348-349). In multi-stable storyworld 1, the events and situations in the fictional world are mentally constructed as uncanny: Harry is Christine's brother's ghost, who has come to take her with him, and Mrs. James is right in her fears and obsessions. In multi-stable storyworld 2, the same events and situations can be mentally constructed within the norms of the real world as we know it; namely, little Christine has an imaginary friend whom she calls Harry, probably subconsciously remembering the name of her deceased older brother, who died when she was a baby. In this second, rational mental scenario, Christine's foster mother is a mentally unstable woman, terrified at losing the girl, and overanxious at the latter's starting school, growing up, and moving away. Accordingly, both Mrs. James's husband and Christine's doctor, who firmly believe that Harry is an imaginary friend, and that this is something completely normal in an only child of Christine's age, are right in their masculine, patronizing rationality. The paradox with these two multi-stable storyworlds is that they are equally supported by the narration, so that readers have to resort to their cognitive capacity for ambiguity in order to construct a mental image of what might or might not have happened.

Several highly predictable storyworld possible selves are likely to function as further attractors prompting readers' engagement in this part of the

narrative. After the desired or self-schema «loving parent» SPS prompted by the narrator's contemplation of her daughter at play in the garden, readers now learn about Christine's constant chatting with an invisible companion, her keen insistence that he is her older brother Harry, and her wish that he accompanies her everywhere. This is likely to prompt the strongly embodied projection of an undesired «worried parent» SPS in schematic readers, as the narrator constantly associates her own growing concern with bodily sensations and physiological processes such as «I felt myself going cold as I stood there in the kitchen» (Temperley, 1983: 35); «My hands were trembling as I put on my hat and gloves» (35-36); «I trembled when I heard Christine's voice prattling away in the garden» (36); or «the house so strangely cold in this hot weather» (39). The «worried parent» SPS is reinforced when readers discover that Christine is an adoptive child.

In spite of her preoccupation, Mrs. James tries to dismiss her worries rather than share them with her husband, explaining that «I knew he'd only scoff as he'd done before» (36). This may make readers blend with Mrs. James in a «patronized individual» self-schema or undesired SPS, particularly within a patriarchal frame reinforced by Christine's visit to Dr. Webster (37-39), who equally dismisses the mother's concerns about the girl's imaginary companion, and accompanies his reassurance with a patting on the woman's shoulder and a careless laugh. It is possible that readers with a "rational individual" self-schema will project here a double-scope blend with the narrator, which may involve a simultaneous mirror self-schema SPS with the characters of the husband and the doctor. Character SPSs are not acknowledged in previous versions of SPS theory, but may be worth further consideration, especially as intensifiers of relevant narrator SPS blends.

To make things worse, the narrator is starting to perceive scorn and hostility in her daughter's voice at the mere mention that Harry is just a fantasy: «"There is no one there", I said. Chris gave me a glance of unchildlike scorn» (38). This may prompt the emergence of a «parent with growing offspring» self-schema or possible self SPS. This SPS has evident opportunities for behavioural training, since one's offspring inevitably drift away as part of their healthy growing up. However, this just adds to Mrs. James's distress, making her dim perception of Harry's shadow next to the girl's even more vivid and uncanny: «Chris ran ahead of me. She looked up as if at someone beside her. For a brief, dreadful second, I saw a shadow on the pavement alongside her own—a long, thin shadow—like a boy's shadow. Then it was gone» (39).

These mirror SPS blends with the narrator dynamically shape her mental construction by readers, which is now likely to incorporate features of loneliness prompting the projection of «lonely wife/love partner» self-schema or undesired SPSs in schematic readers who construe Christine's mother's nervous state and overanxiety as a result of her husband's indifference and absence. Similarly, the father is never presented next to the girl, as if he were not spending time with his daughter. This can also explain Christine's resorting to Harry as alternative male figure, who cares for her, plays with her all the time, and wishes to accompany her everywhere. Moreover, this undesired «lonely love partner» SPS may, in turn, prompt the emergence of a connected undesired «sexually dissatisfied» SPS which fits the foster mother frame of the narrative, fed by fairy tale representations of hideous women envious of their young daughters, whom they see as rivals. In «Harry»'s foster mother frame, Christine is the undeserving victim to be saved by love, and Harry the handsome, loving prince, so that the young lovers' eloping can be seen as salvation rather than as a curse. But the «patronized», «alienated» SPS is there to prompt ambiguity in readers' conceptualization of the mother as a perpetrator or as a victim herself, complicating still more the possibility of scenario disambiguation, and offering enticing opportunities for the activation of a variety of self-schemas and possible selves perceived by readers as personally relevant.

All these primary SPS blends have two significant common features: they are predominantly mirror blends, in which readers build the narrator as similar to themselves, and they draw on basic emotions such as fear, parental and romantic love, patriarchal domination, or loneliness, and on everyday family roles such as parent, daughter, romantic partner, or sibling. Socio-cultural predictability makes them function as attractors for reader engagement, as they can provide useful behavioural training and emotional learning, particularly by making readers resort to their capacity for ambiguity in the cognitively demanding task of simultaneously constructing both rational and uncanny multi-stable storyworlds.

5.3. *Double-scope SPS blends: Undermining the narrator's reliability*

The unsettling visions of Harry's shadow next to Christine, whether real or hallucinatory, eventually make Mrs. James decide that she has to learn the truth about the girl's past, so that she becomes what Fu (2019: 653) calls «the historian who excavates the ghost» and who «bridges the gap between

the lost voice of the past and the memory of the present, yet it also inevitably imparts into the final product—the history of the ghost—something of the mediator's own conscious or unconscious desires and fears» (Fu, 2019: 653). In other words, as Gothic scholarship underscores, what is at stake is the possibility that the narrator herself is the source of the uncanny. As opposed to the smooth emergence of mirror SPS blends in the first part of «Harry» with a fictional entity which we are invited to construct as entertaining mental states similar to those we ourselves would experience in the same environmental circumstances, constructing the narrator as the source of the uncanny requires an emotional and evaluative distance which narrative theory commonly associates with narratorial unreliability (Phelan, 2017). Within storyworld possible selves theory, this distance is prompted by the simultaneous emergence of double-scope SPS blends with the narrator, and mirror SPS blends with the author.

Although the narrator's wish to excavate Harry's ghost is still likely to prompt the projection of readers' mirror «curious» self-schema SPSs, or desired «smart detective» SPSs, the upcoming revelations can be expected to trigger the projection of two double-scope SPS blends which undermine the narrator's reliability and set the grounds for further narrative insights. These are a double-scope/narrator/«caring parent» self-schema or desired possible self SPS, and a double-scope/narrator/«socially sensitive» self-schema SPS. The first is likely to occur when Mrs. James starts her quest, on Christine's first school day. That morning, the mother acknowledges «a sense of loss at parting with her» (Temperley, 1983: 41), but readers with a «caring parent» self-schema may raise their eye-brows when, just after leaving the little girl, who «held my hand tightly» (41), the narrator confesses: «I felt quite light-hearted as I walked away, knowing that Chris was safe and I didn't have to worry» (42). Here, the narrator's failure to read the emotions embodied in that desperate child gesture, and her light-hearted walking away to pursue her own doings, might prompt features of selfishness in the character construct built by readers with a «caring parent» self-schema, who have experienced the day-long distress and chest oppression felt when first leaving one's anxious little child among strangers.

Of course, readers who felt calm at their children's first school day, or who never lived through the experience, may not include these features in their character construct for Mrs. James. However, «Harry» has several further opportunities for double-scope blending in store. The next is found in the two embedded narratives which ensue, told to the narrator in the course of

her search. These perform both a dramatic and a thematic function (Nelles, 2008), as they not only throw light on the course of the embedding narrative, but also exploit significant contrasts and analogies. The first is told by Miss Cleaver, the officer responsible for Christine's adoption five years before. Miss Cleaver tells Mrs. James how Christine's family had died in a terrible tragedy when the desperate father, after losing his health and his job, decided to take his own life and his family's. When they were all sleeping, huddled together in the tiny filthy room that they shared in the poorest quarters of town, he sealed door and windows, turned on the gas, and lay down next to them. The police believed that the fourteen-year-old son—Harold—woke up and jumped through a window to the yard below, with his baby sister in his arms. The girl was saved, but the unfortunate boy lost his life. The father and mother were also found dead in the room above. This embedded narrative not only explains the main one, but also presents a striking contrast between the living conditions of Christine's blood family and those of her affluent foster parents, and is thus likely to activate readers' «socially sensitive» self-schemas and/or their «sick», «unemployed» undesired possible selves. However, none of these seems to be triggered in Mrs. James, the intradiegetic addressee, so far so fond of linguistically representing her emotions.

But, although the narrator now reports no feelings of her own, her rushing to the address reluctantly given her by Miss Cleaver is, in itself, the embodiment of an emotion, further feeding readers' «curious», «intrigued» SPS blends, and sustaining engagement. Christine's former house is an old building which pays due homage to the Gothic tradition of haunted houses that mirror the decay of dead bodies, as a metaphor for collective memory (Thiele, 2016). The building is described as a deserted house, «filthy and derelict» (Temperley, 1983: 44), in a «poor sad street» (45). Only an old woman, hovering between life and death, inhabits it now, and warns Mrs. James that «This place isn't for you. It's for the dead who aren't dead, and the living who aren't alive» (45). And in the tiny, abandoned garden, there is a bush of white roses, perhaps a symbol of innocence, pure love, and eternity, whose sight and smell readers are once again invited to experience through the expression of narrated perception: «They bloomed gloriously. Their scent was overpowering» (45).

The old building becomes the location of the second embedded narrative, now told by the old woman, who recounts for Mrs. James the brother's—Harry—love for the little girl and his death among the roses, by which he used to sit with the baby for hours. She also tells her that the house is said to be haunted, and that all the other neighbours had left right after the tragedy,

but that she had stayed because she has nowhere to go. The old woman also confesses that she can see Harry: «He still comes back. I see him. He won't go away until he gets her» (45). These revelations have a strong effect on Mrs. James, which readers are also invited to bodily experience: «[I] tried to hurry across the hard hot pavements although my legs felt heavy and half-paralysed, as in a nightmare» (45).

The old lady's episode significantly contributes to narrative meaning construction for several reasons. First, it makes liminality—between the living and the dead, between self and other, between the affluent and the underprivileged—explicit. Christine is in a liminal position not only because of her age and her hovering between the real and the imaginary, but also for having lived both in a world of affluence and a world of outmost poverty. The old woman, on her part, is in a liminal position regarding life and death, but is also clearly a social «other» to Mrs. James, who constructs her as dishevelled, mad, and frightening: «The crazy eyes staring at me beneath the matted white fringe of hair frightened me. Mad people are terrifying. One can pity them, but one is still afraid» (45). Mrs. James not only does not seem to be moved by the sad story of Christine's blood family, but even attempts to drag readers into blending with her in a mirror «Other» SPS, strongly anchored by her use of pseudo-deictic, inclusive *one*—a powerful SPS linguistic anchor (Martínez, 2018: 61). This aloofness may make readers with a «socially sensitive» self-schema construct her as a selfish, unempathetic individual, only concerned with herself and her obsessions. The resulting double-scope SPS may cast further doubts on the reliability of the narrator, particularly if the real world author is simultaneously construed as intentionally embedding this message of social unfairness in her writing, and readers engage in mirror author SPS blending with her.

Mrs. James just rushes off and stumbles along the streets in a numb state, until a clock striking the hour suddenly makes her realize that Christine must be leaving school by then: «Where was I know? How near the school? What bus should I take? I made frantic enquiries of passers-by, who looked at me fearfully, as I had looked at the old woman. They must have thought I was crazy» (Temperley, 1983: 46). At this point, a growing feeling that the girl is in real danger further adds to the suspicion that Mrs. James may have been biasing her flashback narrative to justify her failing to be there in time to pick Christine up on her first school day—something which readers schematic in the «good», «loving» parent self, skilfully triggered by the narrative beginning, will surely not fail to notice—and to downplay readers' certainty that

she is eventually responsible for the girl's disappearance, whether taken away by a ghostly Harry, or kidnapped by a red-haired young pervert.

In fact, the second part of «Harry» seems to prompt a multi-stable storyworld other than the uncanny and the rational, where what is at stake is not so much the certainty that Harry can be either a ghost or an imaginary friend, as the certainty that there was once a boy who had the bad luck to be born in a family hit by social injustice and financial inequality, and who undeservedly lost his place in his generation. If ghost stories function as reservoirs of ethical values and social awareness, and ghosts haunt communities for their ethical failures, «Harry» contains a powerful ethical message of social unfairness form which one cannot look away.

6. Conclusion

This study of Rosemary Temperley's ghost story «Harry» uses the framework of storyworld possible selves, or SPSs, to explore the role of embodied cognition and ambiguity in the construction of the multiple narrative meanings which characterize ghostly narrative experiences. More specifically, my aim was to explore the reasons why this ghost story has become a cultural object. The study suggests that «Harry» relies on the timely prompting of an assortment of primary storyworld possible selves, predominantly connected to family relations and social injustice, likely to drag readers into the embodied simulation of basic emotions and related behavioural training, while simultaneously coping with narrative ambiguity. This ambiguity, and the emotions that it may trigger, makes «Harry» a rightful exemplar of the uncanny, in Freud's sense of how easily the familiar may become nightmarish through uncertainty about the firmness of the boundaries between what is real and what is imaginary, all within the domain of domesticity and family life.

In my analysis, I introduce the term *multi-stable storyworlds* to refer to the mental scenarios prompted by the ambiguous prompting of both an uncanny and a rational interpretation of the events and situations in the storyworld. Additionally, the research highlights the role of author SPSs, or mental constructions of the real world author, in the perception of narratorial unreliability, particularly in cases in which this is accompanied by the simultaneous projection of double-scope, ethically clashing SPS blends with the narrator. In «Harry», the result is a powerful message which confirms folklore scholars' claims that ghosts come to remind a community of its ethical failures, and that

ghost stories function as reservoirs of collective cognition. Further research might involve the empirical study of real readers' SPS projection in «Harry», to find out, first, if the primary, culturally shared SPSs predicted in the present research are actually the most frequently projected by flesh-and-blood readers, as previously investigated in other narratives (Martínez and Herman, 2021); and, secondly, which SPS slipnets, or extremely idiosyncratic SPS blends, may additionally emerge in specific individuals.

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