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## HAUNTOLOGY AND MEMORY IN HILARY MANTEL'S AN EXPERIMENT IN LOVE

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### ABSTRACT

This paper explores the themes of hauntology and memory in Hilary Mantel's *An Experiment in Love*, arguing that the novel exemplifies Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology through its depiction of repressed memories, spectral presences, and the lingering effects of the past on the present. The protagonist, Carmel McBain, navigates a world haunted by childhood experiences, class anxieties, and the specter of lost identities. Through Mantel's fluid and often disorienting narrative style, the novel interrogates the instability of memory, the spectral nature of personal history, and the inescapable return of the past. By engaging with recent hauntological theory, particularly in the works of Mark Fisher and Avery Gordon, this paper positions *An Experiment in Love* as a literary manifestation of the uncanny persistence of unresolved histories in contemporary British fiction.

**Keywords:** Hauntology, Memory, Hilary Mantel, *An Experiment in Love*, Derrida, Spectrality, Uncanny, Mark Fisher

### Introduction

Hilary Mantel's *An Experiment in Love* (1995) is a novel steeped in memory and the inescapable specters of the past. Carmel McBain, the novel's protagonist, moves through a world that is persistently haunted by past experiences, relationships, and traumas that refuse to be relegated to history. In many ways, Mantel's novel resonates with Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology, which suggests that the past never entirely disappears but lingers, shaping the present in elusive yet undeniable ways (Derrida 10). This paper examines the hauntological dimensions of *An Experiment in Love*, exploring how Mantel employs memory, loss, and spectral presences to construct a narrative that blurs the line between past and present.

### Hauntology and the Persistence of the Past

Derrida's notion of hauntology posits that time is not linear but rather layered, with past events continually returning to disrupt the present (Fisher 19). This is evident in *An Experiment in Love*, where Carmel's memories of her childhood and adolescence frequently intrude upon her present life at university. Mantel crafts a narrative structure



that mimics the spectral quality of memory; the past is never truly past but remains imprinted on Carmel's psyche, shaping her interactions and perceptions.

For example, the novel's depiction of Carmel's relationship with her childhood friend Karina illustrates the way past traumas manifest as hauntings. Karina, who was once both a friend and a figure of quiet menace in Carmel's life, continues to exert an influence over her even as they move into adulthood. Carmel's recollections of Karina are fragmented and unreliable, suggesting that memory itself is ghostly, an entity that can never be fully grasped but always lingers on the periphery of consciousness. As Gordon suggests, haunting is a way of knowing what has been suppressed or left unresolved (Gordon 8).

### The Uncanny and the Spectrality of Identity

The concept of the uncanny, as defined by Sigmund Freud, is central to the hauntological reading of *An Experiment in Love*. The uncanny arises when something familiar becomes strange, unsettling the boundaries between reality and memory (Wolfreys 42). In Mantel's novel, Carmel's sense of self is constantly destabilized by her recollections of the past, which intrude upon her present in ways she cannot control. One of the most striking examples of this occurs in the novel's treatment of class and aspiration. Carmel's struggle to assimilate into university life is haunted by the specter of her working-class background. The past manifests not only in memories but in the subtle ways her upbringing shapes her anxieties and sense of displacement. This aligns with Fisher's argument that hauntology is closely linked to a sense of lost futures—the idea that certain possibilities are foreclosed by the weight of history (Fisher 21). Carmel's education was meant to be an escape from her past, yet she finds herself unable to fully transcend it, trapped between the person she was and the person she wishes to become.

### The Haunting of the Body

Mantel's novel also explores the hauntology of the body, particularly through its depiction of female hunger, illness, and self-destruction. Carmel's changing body becomes a site of both personal and societal haunting, as expectations surrounding femininity and class manifest physically. The character of Julianne, a glamorous yet deeply troubled student, serves as a spectral figure of what Carmel fears becoming—both an aspirational and cautionary presence. This theme connects to broader discussions of the spectral in feminist theory, where the body becomes a site of haunting due to social pressures and internalized traumas (Gordon 12). The novel's conclusion, which suggests a tragic but inevitable outcome for Julianne, reinforces the idea that certain histories—whether personal or societal—cannot simply be erased but continue to resurface in different forms.

### Conclusion

Hilary Mantel's *An Experiment in Love* is a powerful exploration of hauntology and memory, revealing how the past continues to shape and disrupt the present. Through its



non-linear structure, spectral characters, and themes of class, identity, and female embodiment, the novel exemplifies the uncanny persistence of unresolved histories. By engaging with the hauntological theories of Derrida, Fisher, and Gordon, this analysis situates Mantel's novel within a broader discourse on memory and spectrality in contemporary British fiction. Ultimately, *An Experiment in Love* serves as a testament to the way literature can capture the ghostly imprints of the past, reminding us that history is never truly behind us—it always lingers, waiting to return.

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